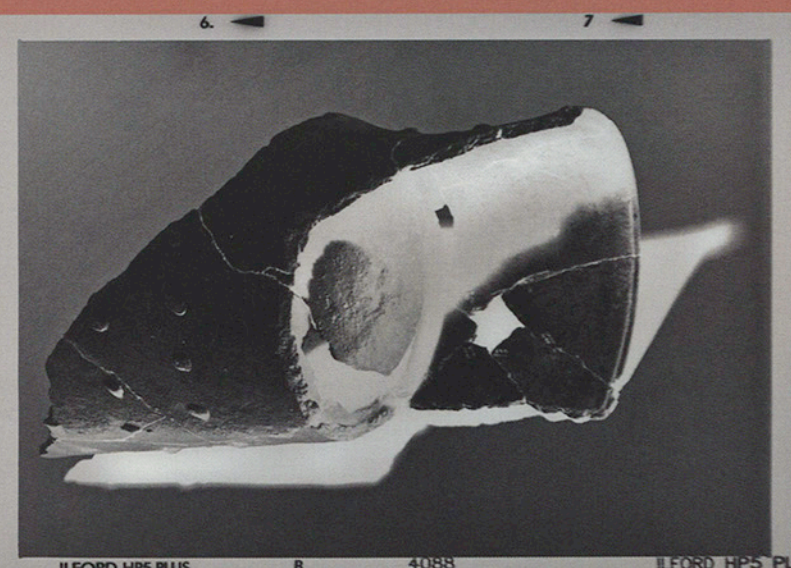


# Iñaki Bonillas A Heap of Broken Images

BY THOMAS McDONOUGH

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats [. . .]  
— T. S. Eliot  
The Waste Land

Mexican artist Iñaki Bonillas has long found inspiration in archival materials, and is best known for the various works and series that have been mined from the vast store of photographs kept by his grandfather, one J.R. Plaza. Over the past decade, Bonillas has derived seemingly endless permutations on the image, transforming the archive from a space of preservation into one of procreation. This impulse is a recurrent theme in recent art, and Bonillas, like others working within this mode, can be understood to be gathering fragments of a disappearing, analogue representational world. There is more at stake, however, than some melancholic disposition to-



ALL IMAGES: *A Heap of Broken Images, Where the Sun Beats* (2012)

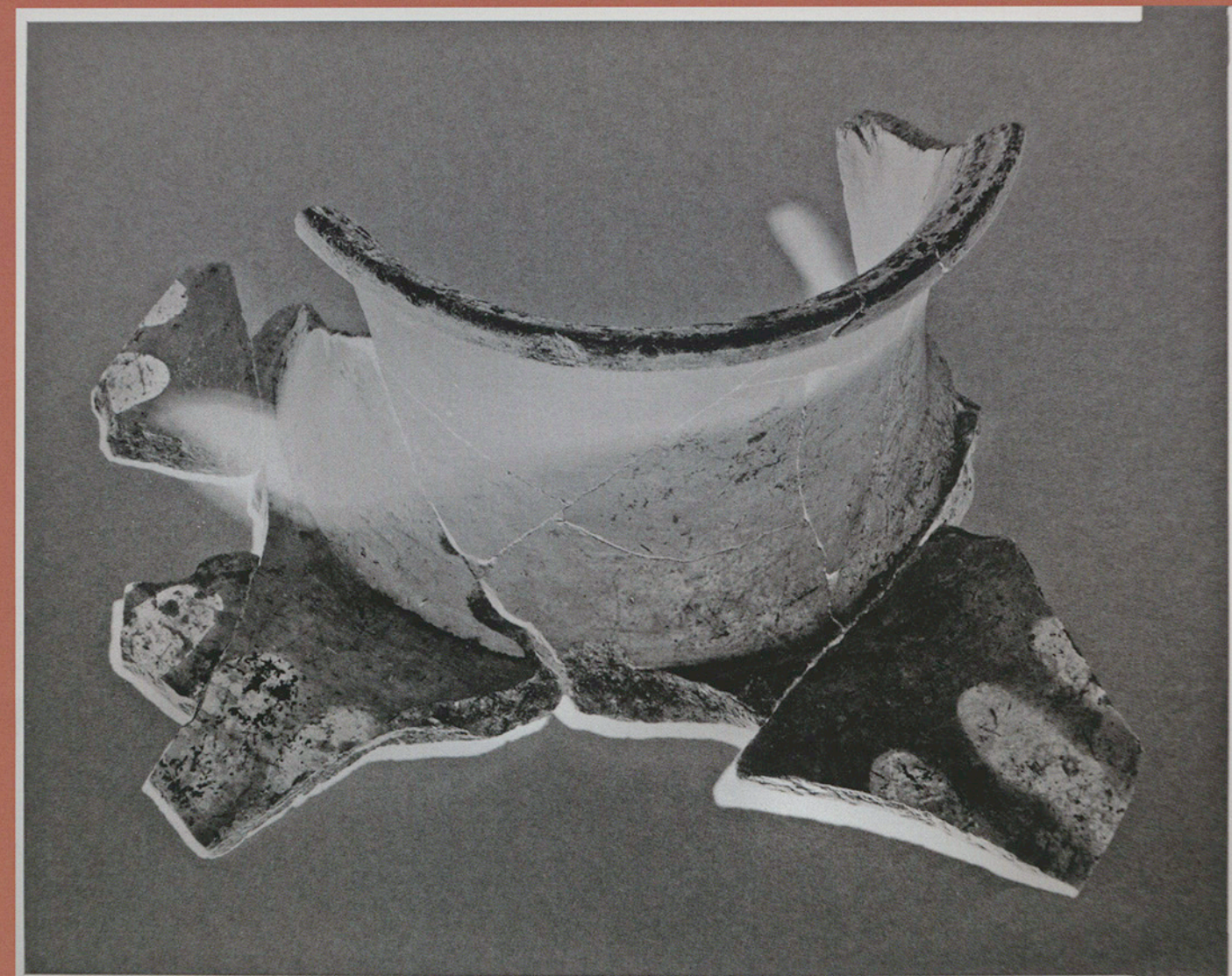
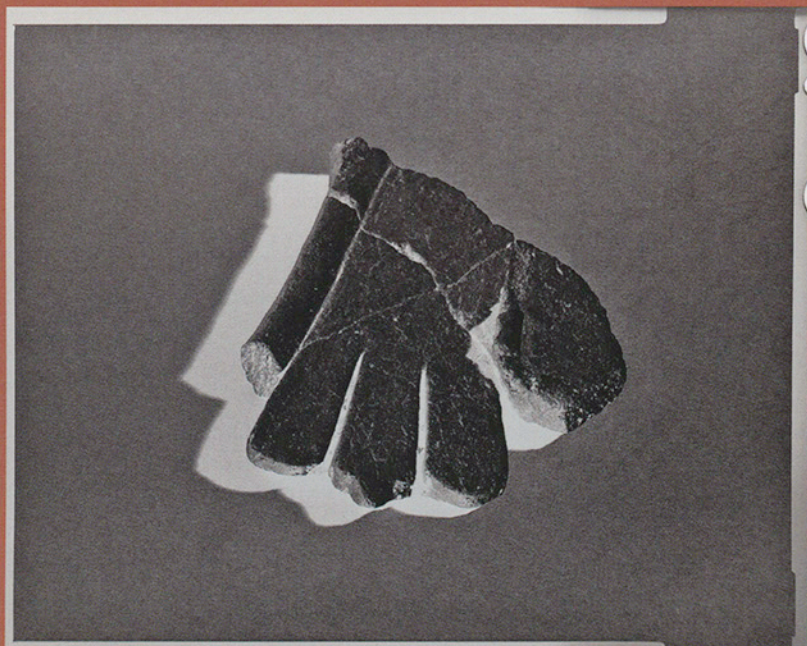
ward the inevitable obsolescence of a medium. His archives expose notions of essence or origin (whether considered in aesthetic, or biographical terms) as impossibilities; Bonillas has worked not to shore up the proper realm of the photographic or the familial, but to find within each the structural potential for proliferation and multiplication. Something similar is at stake in his recent series *A Heap of Broken Images, Where the Sun Beats*, even as his collection moves from the personal to the public, and from the individual to the collective, national past.

I want to describe the ancient earthenware fragments we find photographed here as “archival residue,” the inevitable supplement called into existence by the very protocols of compilation and classification that order the archive. They are *tepalcates*, a Mexican term for potsherd, or piece of junk, derived from Nahuatl, the surviving tongue of the pre-Conquest Aztecs. These pieces might have found themselves incorporated as spolia into a wall, kept as a curio, or simply tossed over the shoulder, but the logic of archeological excavation requires meticulous cataloging, regardless of significance—

who knows if later exploration might uncover new finds that would allow the reconstruction of that pot or this plate? In the meantime, these forlorn parts sit in drawers, bereft as they are of aesthetic or scientific value. Bonillas finds a peculiar poetry therein, freeing them from oblivion and worthlessness.

*Broken Images* was first exhibited at last year’s São Paulo biennial. Six beautifully crafted wooden light tables presented a careful arrangement of black-and-white negatives of pottery fragments that appear singly, or sometimes as partly, reassembled items, such as bowls or plates or vessels. The clarity of the negatives, coupled with the light box display, gives the work a forensic air, as if we had stumbled upon the lab of an archeologist attempting to piece together the meaning of these fragments of the past—which, in fact, we had. Attentive viewers would notice the tiny, neat letters and numbers painstakingly painted onto many of the potsherds, telltale indications that Bonillas’s subject matter has been catalogued in some elaborate manner. This particular stony rubbish was found at Chichén Itza, one of the great Mayan ritual temples of the Yucatán.





Exploration and archeological excavation since the nineteenth century uncovered more than just the great monuments of this site—the ball-court, the Castillo, the colonnades, the Temple of the Warriors—but also thousands of pottery shards and stone fragments that *could* not be satisfactorily restored to some semblance of their original state. These are kept in a laboratory where Bonillas, together with the resident archeologist, photographed them.

The stakes of his operation are suggested in the work's title, which is taken from a passage of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

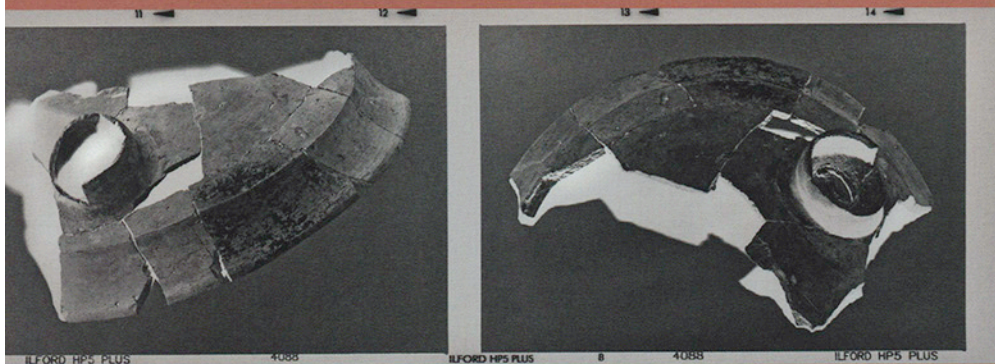
"[. . .] Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water."

We are definitively east of Eden, in a world whose wholeness has been rent asunder, but out of these fragments, these broken images, Eliot would compose a cinematic montage that conjoins biblical and mythical pasts with the present. Working with his poetic inheritance, the poet derived new effects by employing it in new relations.

This strategy is literalized by Bonillas, who in the act of photographing these worthless *tepalcates*, elevates them into meaningful wholes. The broken images are, if only provisionally, mended, not under the beating sun of the plain of Chichén Itza, but under the light tracing of the camera. Hence the significance of their display as negatives—a fiction, since they were photographed digitally, then printed, then re-photographed in analogue—with their suggestion of infinite reproducibility. The fragment is no longer the end point of the object's life, and Bonillas is not the melancholic archeologist-photographer poised over the ruins of an ancient past. Instead, he resurrects the object from its museal grave, restoring it to fecundity through the act of photographing it. Photography itself is a kind of fragment, and *Broken Images* is, in the end, as much about the future of this apparatus as it is about the earthenware archive of the Mayan past.

The potsherds themselves are not inert, but should be understood as full of potential: They are archived precisely because they could become parts of a greater whole. Bonillas has spoken of these small





clay fragments wanting to become part of something greater, even if they cannot arrive at a complete, final form. The negative, too, desires to become positive, to move forward, to change, an appropriate structure to represent what the artist calls “the desire of memory,” the dream of an impossible restitution, the unattainable return to some original state. The Nahuatl derivation of the term *tepalcate* assumes its significance in this regard: A culture naming its own ruin, surviving into the present. Photographic negative and potsherd are brought into unsteady alignment on this ground.

A final element of *Broken Images* to consider: Bonillas’s evocation of Eliot’s great poem. His interest was spurred less by *The Waste Land*’s content, than by the history of its composition. While we attribute the work to Eliot alone, the publication of a facsimile edition of the manuscript revealed the contributions made by the poet’s wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood, and Ezra Pound; the final version conceals these three identities under the singular author. Bonillas has long been fascinated by the possibilities of multiplying authorship and the collaborative nature of all creativity, from his work on the J.R.Plaza archive and onward. *Broken Images* also questions the place of the author: Bonillas subsumes his prerogatives under the guise of forensic photography. The fragments themselves are the products of other, lost hands, and have been reconstructed by generations of archeologists. From these manifold origins, *Broken Images* assembles a paradoxical record, one no longer oriented simply toward preserving the long dead past, but rather toward the future, towards the potential contained within “this stony rubbish,” this archival residue.

