

Rare seeds: how Venezuelan artists are breaking the spell of oil

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Rare Seeds: How Venezuelan Artists are Breaking the Spell of Oil

Venezuelans who've lived through the dramatic oil booms and busts of Carlos Andrés Pérez's The Great Venezuela (1973-1978) and Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution (1999-2013), find themselves caught between grappling with the dysfunctional realities of everyday life in a [decaying petrostate](#) and yearning for the return of the fleeting oil-rich promised land, what anthropologist Fernando Coronil called the [Magical State](#). Whilst the nation seems unable to wean itself from oil, a number of contemporary Venezuelan artists in the diaspora are developing critiques of Venezuela's enduring cultural entanglements with oil. The works of Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck, Tony Vásquez-Figueroa, and Ana Alenso can be regarded, collectively, as attempts to break the spell of oil and dissolve the illusion that sowing oil will bring everlasting prosperity as if by magic.

The imperative "to sow the oil" (*sembrar el petróleo*) sits at the centre of a long history of ambivalence about oil in Venezuela. Coined by politician and writer Arturo Uslar Pietri in 1936, the phrase uses farming language as a didactic metaphor in which crude oil is akin to a rare seed, to propose that the financial and technological power of foreign oil corporations should be invested in Venezuelan development and modernisation under the rule of an elite leadership (the owners of the "seed"). The metaphor emphasizes the land where the seed is sown and riches harvested rather than the underlying complex technological, financial and political apparatus of crude oil. This clever semantic device is one of the enduring tricks of the Magical (petro) State. By 1945, in his essay *El Minotauro*, Uslar Pietri feared that oil was becoming a mythological devouring monster, joining a generation of 20th century intellectuals and writers who shared similar views about oil's magical and destructive powers.

[photo caption] Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck, *Last Oil Barrel*, (date postponed).
Photo courtesy Green Art Gallery and Carmen Araujo Arte.

Contemporary Venezuelan artists are working to dispel the myth of the Magical State to help envision alternative post-oil futures that will be more secure and sustainable. The hybrid art practice of Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck reveals the dynamic connections between socio-political phenomena, collective knowledge, and propaganda as a political strategy in modern history and aesthetics, which is particularly lucid when centring its attention on crude oil's global apparatus. His [Last Oil Barrel, \(date postponed\)](#), is [a decade long and ongoing performance. It offers](#) a miniature reproduction of a standard barrel of oil made out of sustainable wood stained with tar-ink. It is sold as an unnumbered, unlimited edition with its price pegged to the [Oil Future Index](#). Its miniature size points to notions of peak oil and exhaustion of reserves, the last drops of oil as a rare collectible "seed". However, this is a feigned barrel; rather than a literal to-scale reproduction made of steel and bitumen, Balteo-Yazbeck's biodegradable representation deceptively dismantles the illusion of everlasting oil abundance, tying its enduring political, social, and cultural value to the unpredictable fluctuations of global financial markets.

The indelible pervasiveness of oil dependency in everyday life, and the transient and destructive nature of oil wealth feared by Venezuelan intellectuals like Uslar Pietri, is directly confronted by artist Tony Vásquez-Figueroa. He combines crude oil (bitumen) and an oil ink of his own invention to produce drawings, prints, photography, oil inkblots, and three-dimensional objects; an oil-dependent archive of Venezuela's, and his own, collective memory and heritage. Vásquez-Figueroa's [Sowing the Oil](#) is a series of sculptures of a Greca coffee maker made of Venezuelan bitumen that the public is invited to touch. Each sculpture is named after historically significant oil fields in Venezuela (La Alquitrana, Mene Grande, Zumaque 1, and so on). Presented in the shape of an ordinary coffee maker, crude oil is revealed as a viscous, grimy, and prosaic substance, devoid of any mythical qualities. But there is a magic trick in store, as the solid-looking 90-inch-tall sculpture named La Alquitrana (after the first oil field discovered in Venezuela, in 1875) will gradually melt into a black puddle, to re-enact the decline of the Venezuelan oil industry. A disconcerting act of disintegration analogous to the elusiveness of sowing oil, underpinned by Uslar Pietri's pessimistic words from 2001: "We have nothing to hold on to here...an improvised and improvisational country."

A third Venezuelan artist confronting the mythologies of oil is Ana Alenso, whose work poetically invokes the apocalyptic landscapes brought on by the oil-based ruin of paradise. Her installation [Tropical Curse](#) "portrays the fragility of the current financial system, with a focus on Venezuela's historical and present dependence on oil, as well as its relationship with authoritarian regimes, and current cultural and economic discomfort." The industrial scaffolded assemblage is built from found and recycled objects, immersing the audience in a grimy oil refinery-like experience, complete with fetid smell, harsh lighting, and the sound of a broker at the Chicago Stock Exchange emanating from the oil barrel. Tropical Curse presents an allegory of the precarity brought on by Venezuela's relationship with oil, revealed as a curse disguised as magical spectacle. It presents a bleak landscape underlying Uslar Pietri's lost hopes of seeing the sowing of oil an accomplished reality, reinforcing Pérez Alfonzo's condemnation that oil is "the devil's excrement".

The enduring cyclical revival of Arturo Uslar Pietri's imperative "to sow the oil" is a palpable sign of how oil continues to structure our collective imagination and discourses. Not even Hugo Chávez's anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberalist agenda could wean itself from crude oil. The concessions given by the government of Nicolás Maduro to exploit the mineral resources of the Amazon basin further perpetuate the extractive logic of oil rentierism. Venezuela cannot cease to be a rentier state as long as political power and national identity are bound to the subsoil and its mineral resources. Like sentinel species, artists like Balteo-Yazbeck, Vásquez-Figueroa, and Alenso warn us through their poignant artworks of the underlying precarity of prolonged oil dependency.