

# Jorge Méndez Blake: Reading, spatiality, and (re)writing in relief.

## Jorge Méndez Blake: Lectura, espacialidad y (re)escritura en relieve.

DOI: 10.32870/sincronia.v30.n89. e0676

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Received: 30/10/2025 Reviewed: 18/11/2025 Approved: 26/12/2025

**How to cite this article (APA):**

In paragraph:

(Trejo, 2025, p. \_).

In reference list:

Trejo, S. (2025) Jorge Méndez Blake: Reading, spatiality, and (re)writing in relief. *Revista Sincronía*. 30(89). 1-25

DOI: 10.32870/sincronia.v30.n89.e0676

**Abstract.**

The work of Mexican artist Jorge Méndez Blake is part of a contemporary movement that links three-dimensional media with text. Literary references are fundamental to his work, as are the materialisation and spatialisation of text, generating a textual presence whose composition and effects I analyse in this article. To this end, I use intermedial methodology, which aims to establish the degrees and functions of the links between media; some concepts from Gumbrecht, Nancy and Parret, such as presence and materiality, are also present, as well as categories from literary theory for the purpose of making comparisons.

**Keywords:** Jorge Méndez Blake. Intermediality. Writing. Materiality. Contemporary art.

**Resumen:**

La obra del artista mexicano Jorge Méndez Blake forma parte de las creaciones contemporáneas que vinculan soportes tridimensionales con texto. En ella, las referencias literarias son fundamentales, tanto como la materialización y espacialización del texto, generando una presencia textual cuya composición y efectos analizo en este artículo. Para ello utilizo metodología intermedial, cuyo objetivo es establecer los grados y funciones de los vínculos entre medios; también están presentes algunos conceptos provenientes de Gumbrecht, Nancy y Parret como la presencia y la materialidad, así como categorías de la teoría literaria con el fin de establecer comparaciones.

<sup>1</sup> Postdoctoral fellowship completed thanks to the Postdoctoral Fellowship Programme at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (POSDOC), Elisa Acuña Fellowship Programme, with the guidance of Dr. Susana González Aktories.



**Palabras clave:** Jorge Méndez Blake. Intermedialidad. Escritura. Materialidad. Arte contemporáneo.

Currently, communication mediation occurs between image, audio and text in an almost indistinguishable manner<sup>2</sup> and, even so, we deal with it with ease. When it comes to contemporary arts, we are faced with objects or experiences that also involve various media, appealing to a practically simultaneous reception, as these are practices in which links between discourses, media and materialities are deployed. So, in an era where the arts are shaped by the unspecific<sup>3</sup> and the multiple, delving into the mechanisms and effects of these creative expressions allows us to orient ourselves in the face of indeterminacy, providing us with tools to negotiate between the perception and readings of a work, to make decisions regarding the levels of interpretation we constantly undertake, not only in the face of art, but also in the face of information.

It is in this context that I highlight works in contemporary Mexican art that conceptually and technically draw on writing and reading. In these works, text is integrated as the main theme and subject matter and, unlike other artistic objects, operates as a textuality that exceeds the page. In some cases, they offer us materialisations or remediations of reader interpretations. In this article, I present a case study in which I find these characteristics: the work of Jorge Méndez Blake,<sup>4,5</sup> in which the text unfolds, versatile, in material mediation. The artist shows in his work a sustained interest in transferring elements of text, literature, and books to a less usual medium in a three-dimensional way.

<sup>2</sup> For example, memes and reels, originally digital content that "express ideas common to individuals of a certain culture, with easily recognisable linguistic and visual metaphors" (Castañeda, 2020, p. 17)

<sup>3</sup> I am referring here to Florencia Garramuño's essays on the non-specific in art.

<sup>4</sup> Although I will later contextualise this artist's work within a recent national panorama, I think it is important to point out that the choice is due to the corpus of artists whose work I analyse within the framework of my current project. In addition to artists who work with literary genres mediated in other media, such as Jorge Méndez Blake and Daniela Bojórquez Vértiz, I also analyse writing in three-dimensional materialities. In this regard, I highlight the contemporary Mexican artists Mayra Silva, Blanca González, Guadalupe Alonso Vidal and Frida Sofía Vázquez.

<sup>5</sup> Born in Guadalajara (1974), the city where he lives and works, he is one of the most renowned contemporary Mexican artists today for his use of text in visual art. And this is not just a popular idea among a certain circle of people or local audiences; Méndez Blake is presented in certain contexts as an international reference. This is demonstrated by the variety of countries in which he has exhibited his work: Belgium, the United States, Lebanon, Switzerland, Spain, Greece, among other countries listed in the "Recent" section of his website, where his latest solo exhibitions in Mexico stand out: "Proscenios literarios" at MARCO, Monterrey, 2024, which was initially shown at the Museo Cabañas in Guadalajara between 2023 and early 2024. (Méndez-Blake, n.d.).

The reflections I share below are based on a description of the salient features of the artist's work, with the aim of showing the links between text and art, emphasising how the change in materiality has the effect of creating a textual presence that results in a particular reading experience for viewers. The order of these reflections is as follows: first, a brief commentary on interdisciplinary studies in the arts, followed by the selection and analysis of some of Méndez Blake's works based on three themes: reading, spatiality, and (re)writing in relief.

#### Historical context of how we view the link between the arts

The link between the arts is an ancient condition and we could consider it indissoluble – most of the authors in the bibliography cited also think so. We have historically catalogued and studied the arts separately. However, some theorists argue that this division responds to a condition external to the artistic fact. For example, William Condee, in conducting a historical review of the notion of interdisciplinarity in the study of the arts and humanities, asserts that this current, multiple and linking vision is a position that, on the one hand, responds to the new configuration of universities and, on the other, is due to the consequences of postmodernism in the production of cultural objects. He points out that, although during modernity the particular classification by disciplines brought about great technological and epistemological advances, the truth is that it does not seem 'natural' to separate them; (Condee, 2016) points to dance and opera—areas in which she works—as examples of multimedia arts that have been inseparable for centuries, showing that the "holistic" behaviour of the arts is part of their "naturalness" (2016, p. 15).

Disciplinary divisions have responded to the social or political needs of creative guilds. The editors of the book *Vocabulario crítico para los estudios intermediales. Hacia el estudio de las literaturas extendidas* (*Critical Vocabulary for Intermedia Studies: Towards the Study of Extended Literatures*) also affirm this:

[...] the organisation of cultural activities and artistic creation in different disciplines responds to specific historical moments in which these have been grouped in various ways based on what were recognised as their similarities and differences. <sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In a review of the division of disciplines, the editors of the *Vocabulary* recall that Gotthold Lessing proposed in the 18<sup>TH</sup> century a comparison between "spatial arts" and "temporal arts"; we find another example in the separation between the liberal and mechanical arts (from the Middle Ages), and many others that even date back to antiquity and have sometimes responded to the technique of each art, but in others, it would have to do with the conceptions of each era.

W. J. T. Mitchell mentions something similar when constructing the theoretical framework necessary for his observations on image and text:

[...] the clear separation of "faculties" (bodily and academic) based on a sensory and semiotic division is becoming obsolete and is being replaced by an idea of humanistic or liberal education that focuses primarily on the field of [...] representational activity. (2018, p. 14)

Thus, we could find various reflections of this type in the thinking of other authors, especially those who delve into interdisciplinary studies, intermediality, and other theoretical perspectives that focus on viewing the world in terms of the relationships that are established to create a worldview—at least in terms of representations—and communication, as Mitchell points out.

However, this does not mean that materialities and production techniques do not respond to specific characteristics. Both in creation and when viewing artistic works or processes, the perceptual effect responds to the participating media. In other words, we cannot ignore the existence of crafts, techniques, or the sensory consequences of the work. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht says, substance is a matter that theory assumed to be something unserious, something rather "separate" (2005, p. 43) from the sign and its meaning; however, we recently observe corporealities and materialities as indispensable subjects of study, because they also intervene in the construction of meaning and in the aesthetic experience, including the vital and social ones.

Jérôme Lèbre, in conversation with Jean Luc Nancy, says that "art never ceases to speak to us about what technology has turned man into, about internalising and expressing technical procedures, about confronting technology in general with its own techniques, the so-called artistic techniques" (Lèbre, 2020, p. 86), that is, art becomes an experimental field where technique is put to the test, exhibits its mechanisms, and highlights its effects both in everyday life and in humanity's most complex decisions.

In this sense, it is relevant to consider the act of writing from its physical and technical circumstances, alongside semiotics. Mainly as an element of interest and agency for current artists because, as Florencia Garramuño points out (2015, p. 13), writing (beyond literature) reappears constantly in Latin American artistic practices.

Specifically, Jorge Méndez Blake is one of the creators who explore these characteristics. The scope of his investigations is international, as shown by his inclusion in books dedicated to text in art,

such as *Vitamin Txt: Words in Contemporary Art* (2024);<sup>7</sup> emphasises the spatial resolution of Méndez Blake's work, which derives not only from the text used but also from its literary intertext. For Allie Biswas, who comments on the artist's work, he stands out on the Mexican scene because his creative process maintains a close relationship with literary tradition in reciprocity with, generally, some architectural or spatial process (Moffitt, 2024, p. 162).

The Mexican artist is part of a tradition of artists who produce and circulate artistic objects in a local *field*<sup>8</sup> in which writing and text are paramount. We can see this in *La palabra como lenguaje artístico. Textual Practices in Mexico*, a study by Eloísa Hernández Viramontes. In it, Hernández highlights the ongoing interest of some artistic producers in text, recognising antecedents in a genealogy that, although ancient, she traces in greater detail in her book from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Méndez Blake is one of these artists who "show the ongoing dialogue between literature and the visual arts" (2023, p. 120) and who seek not only current readings, but also mediations that dialogue across time and materiality.

We can therefore speak of a creative community around the off-page text, shifting between mediations. We look at technical tools that are gradually consolidating themselves as rewritings based on other technical learnings, on corporealities involved in the passage of the letter through the hand, but which are not necessarily generated with a pencil or pen, or where the scale is foreign to the body, sometimes becoming illegible, but still evoking textuality. This is where Méndez Blake's practice is contextualised, and it is therefore important to consider both the intertextual and material and spatial aspects of a textual presence that, although traditionally thought of as immaterial, has for some decades now been invited us to examine from the perspective of literary criticism and the history of the book.

### Reading and rereading

<sup>7</sup> This volume brings together the work of artists whose use of text stands out as an element that not only contributes to or depends on the particularities of visuality, but also fulfils a function alongside the image (or other media). Published by Phaidon, *Vitamin Txt* is a compendium of recent work (no more than fifteen years old) by creators whose work circulates through international channels of artistic validation. The selection includes two Mexican representatives: Jorge Méndez Blake and Stefan Brüggemann.

Part of the publisher's *Vitamin* series,

<sup>8</sup> Understanding field as José Luis Brea would propose it for the exercise of sculpture, broadly speaking: an expanded but finite series of related positions for an artist to occupy and explore (Brea, 2013).

Moby Dick designates different entities: a novel (whose author is Herman Melville), a whale (character) and some works of art<sup>9</sup> one of which is an installation (by Jorge Méndez Blake). Derived from that name, we also find the alias of an American musician: Moby.<sup>10</sup> We know that words can refer to various elements of the world, and it is true that proper names are assigned more arbitrarily than other types of words.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding proper names, Saul Kripke analyses some of their characteristics and states that instead of viewing the inability to replace a *particular* description with a name as "a defect of language" (2017, p. 35) , it can be considered an important feature that "what we actually associate with the name is a *family* of descriptions" (p. 35) . So, when we hear "Moby Dick," the image of a whale named that way in the literary text may come to mind (whether we have read it or not, it is part of the collective imagination).

In order to relate the Guadalajara artist's installation to the literary work, I will point out some elements of the novel. During the first chapters, the characters only refer to "a white whale". We read its name for the first time when three of the characters react to a description given by Captain Ahab: "<sup>12</sup> " "una ballena de cabeza blanca, con la frente arrugada y la mandíbula torcida; [...] con tres agujeros pinchados en la aleta caudal a estribor... [...] esa misma ballena blanca" (Melville, 2018, p. 266) .

To confirm that it is the same animal, other characters add a series of characteristics in the form of questions:

Does it fan its tail curiously before diving, sir? [...] And does it also have a curious spout, asked Dagoo, very thick, even for a sperm whale, and tremendously fast, Captain Ahab? [...]

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that this is not the only piece of contemporary Mexican art with this name. In 2004, Damián Ortega performed a piece in which he and some colleagues struggled with ropes and pulleys with a white sedan on an oily floor, while a live band played Led Zeppelin's song *Moby Dick*. The action was recorded on video. It is also true that it is not the only work that takes up the idea of extension through a whale. Garbriel Orozco's piece *Mátrix Móvil* is a whale skeleton covered in graphite that is suspended in the Vasconcelos Library in Mexico City (Ricardo Pohlenz called it "The Mexican Moby Dick" (2010, p. 74) ). There are certain legends surrounding it, such as the one that claims that a copy of Melville's *Moby Dick* is strategically placed on the library shelf, from where there is a particular view of Orozco's work.

<sup>10</sup> His name is Richard Melville Hall; in an interview, the artist claims that his family considers themselves descendants of the writer Herman Melville. Furthermore, his father affectionately called him "Moby" since he was a child, which is why the musician chose his stage name ("Moby Interview", 2024) .

<sup>11</sup> For example, if we have a noun, we know that convention makes us think of similar references to it: think of 'whale'. In proper names, the image varies according to other variables, such as context: think of 'Jorge'.

<sup>12</sup> Main character of the novel. Captain of the ship called Pequod, where almost the entire story takes place.

And it also has one, two, three... oh, many and very good irons in its skin, Captain. (Melville, 2018, p. 266).

From these dialogues, the characters conclude that they are all talking about the same animal.

From that moment on, the whale, in addition to being monstrous because it represents a great danger, as well as being a challenge in the journey of all sailors (not just the crew of the Pequod), consolidates its greatness and extent as a legend: "One of the most senseless insinuations that has been alluded to [...] was the supernatural presumption that Moby Dick was omnipresent; that he had actually been found in opposite latitudes at the same moment in time".

Thus, throughout the novel, this family of descriptions – the proper name according to Kripke – refers to an unusual and tangible monstrosity, a certain oceanic extension that gives it ubiquity and repeated presence in the voyages of sailors who agree in their testimonies: it exists and can cause harm.

Barbado Mariscal also points this out in his analysis of the metaphysics in this novel, asserting that presence is an important element: "it is not intangible, a Platonic idea; rather, we are dealing with a real entity, an existing monster"<sup>13</sup>. Barbado argues that it also represents origin and creation. For now, I am interested in presence, entity, as Jorge Méndez Blake transfers this quality to a work of art: *Moby Dick* (2003-2004), an installation whose technical specifications are: inkjet on paper, pencil, 651 prints measuring 28 x 21.5 cm each; silver coin [one Mexican ounce], nail (Fig. 1).

In *Moby Dick*, Méndez Blake 'de-leafs' and positions the novel as a covering for the boundaries of a space; he takes copies of the pages of the novel (English edition), frames them and then places them on the walls of the exhibition space<sup>14</sup> contiguously and in a grid pattern. At one end, we see the coin nailed in place.

In this version, instead of leafing through the book to read, we must walk through the room. Although the novel in its various editions may seem extensive (due to its thickness), in the Mexican artist's piece it physically envelops people.

<sup>13</sup> The original: "it is not an intangible, one platonic idea, but instead, we are dealing with an actual entity, an existing Monster".

<sup>14</sup> It varies depending on the conditions of the exhibition space. For example, at the Jumex Collection headquarters in Ecatepec, it was exhibited on three of the four walls of a space, while in other exhibitions, such as at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Monterrey, it has only occupied one wall, which is extensive, but ultimately does not generate the same immersive experience.

Figure 1. *Moby Dick*, 2003-2004. Installation view of "Skipper at the Bottom of a Well".



Source: Jumex Collection, Mexico 2006.

Photo: Francisco Kochen (all rights reserved, reproduced with the artist's permission).

Some theorists of the materialities of reading, such as Roger Chartier, Bill Brown, and Néstor García Canclini, remind us that size, weight, and colour are important when approaching printed material. They also remind us of the impact of the printing press and how it has changed book production and the book industry. All of this affects the way we read. In other words, the technologies modify our perception. Chartier and García Canclini have conducted studies on these changes and assert that, currently—since 2007 or so—thanks to digital devices, we read by writing. They also highlight that digital media: "No longer allow us to conceive of texts, images and their digitisation as separate islands" (García et al., 2015, p. 4) . In other words, the *screen* interface somehow homogenises the media: multiple windows, constant audiovisual material, text that is image, image that is read, and so on.

In the case of the *Moby Dick* installation, our reading becomes unexpected when faced with the pages of the book arranged in space. From the outset, it forces us to read while standing and moving. It implies an extension that surpasses us, becoming a multiple reading interface, all those maracas offering us words and small reading marks left by the author (underlining, marginalia). The gaze jumps from one page to another. We recognise that following the original order of the literary

text involves conditions that are difficult to meet.<sup>15</sup> The text, like the whale, is everywhere. And we seek to approach it in an instant, for we feel it tangibly, just as the crew of the Pequod feels Moby Dick. The material presence forces us to recognise the notion of technique in reading, as Georges Perec (another of the writers whose work is a reference<sup>16</sup> for Méndez Blake) says:

[reading is] a precise bodily activity, involving certain muscles, various postural arrangements, sequential decisions, temporal choices, [...] and which means that we do not read in just any way, at any time, or in any place, even though we read anything (2008, p. 81).

Now, I would like to reflect on the white whale. In Melville's novel, a chapter is devoted to what it represents; the narrator begins by describing its pleasant and subtle qualities. However, the awareness of the absence<sup>17</sup> of colour and the immensity of the fearsome begins to emerge as he describes other characteristics and associates them with Moby Dick:

Is it that, because of its indefiniteness, it reflects the ruthless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us in the back with the idea of annihilation when we observe the white depths of the Milky Way? Or is it that, by its very essence, whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour, and at the same time the synthesis of all colours? [...] And the albino whale was the symbol of all these things. (Melville, 2018, p. 314)

Méndez Blake not only draws on immensity through the sheets placed side by side on the walls of the exhibition space, but also alludes to this characteristic of the whale: its absence of colour. He decides to make copies of the pages of the book and reproduce them on white sheets, leaving the text in high contrast, in black (the opposite non-colour). And only if we come closer to read carefully can we notice some irregular lines with less density: these are notes that the artist made in pencil.

<sup>15</sup> Attempts have been made to read the novel in its entirety, as Sandra Contreras points out in an article on the extension of works in film and theatre, recalling that "in December 2003 [she attended] the reading-performance of the complete text of *Moby Dick* by actors Emilio García Wehbi and Luis Cano, who took turns but performed without interruption for just over twenty-four hours" (2013, p. 358).

<sup>16</sup> This article focuses mainly on works by American writers, but I also mention the Mexican poetic tradition, the French writer Georges Perec, ancient Greece and Franz Kafka. It is important to note that Méndez Blake's library spans several geographical areas and time periods.

<sup>17</sup> Let us remember that white is not a colour, as it is not one of the waves in the visible spectrum; from the point of view of light, white is the sum of all those waves, of all colours. Whereas, from the point of view of pigment, it is usually defined as an absence of colour; the bases of canvases, unstated paintings, are usually white, like the walls of a modern museum.

In the context of the history of images, there is an opposition between Catholicism, replete with representations, and the white wall of Calvinism, according to Victor Stoichita: "The 'beauty' of the anti-image is one of the paradoxes of the modern era, a paradox we owe to the Reformation" (2000, p. 97). If we think of Ahab's whale and the myth of origin in this context, it is understandable that the immense and immaculate should terrify us. Derek Jarman, too, in his historical search for colours, asserts that white, despite its absence of colour, is opaque: "White screams, it is opaque, it does not let you see through it. White is obsessed with power" (2017, p. 42). He says this in material terms, referring to the pigment titanium white, but also in symbolic terms: brides wear white veils, the White House, among other examples in which the function of white is to conceal.

<sup>18</sup>In the novel, the whale conceals a series of human conditions. In Méndez-Blake's installation, white paradoxically conceals the white wall; it densely evens out the space, transforms the page into a wall, and offers us an omnipresent reading guide, even if it is almost impossible to follow. However, it communicates its personal reading through form, materiality, and presence; it chooses some of the characteristics of Moby Dick to dialogue with them. And finally, it offers us one more description to add to that proper name.

<sup>18</sup> It also takes away the colour from the gold ounce that Ahab promises his crew. Méndez Blake alludes to that reward, but it is a silver ounce, closer to white.

## Spatiality

Reading is an action in which we generally imagine a text involved. It also involves investing a moment of our lives to engage with the content and time of the writing. Before proposing the following example, I will continue with *Moby Dick* because, in terms of space, 'entering' the text could be considered less concrete than actually walking into any place. Strictly speaking, we are not part of the Pequod's crew. However, we do not doubt the consistency and solidity of Moby Dick's tail. We do not doubt that it is a ferocious and enormous white whale, so unusual and amazing that many artistic versions of it have been made,<sup>19</sup> including that of Méndez Blake himself.

Regarding the entry into a text and the agreements we make with fiction, I would like to introduce some characteristics of space and materiality associated with a text. Luz Aurora Pimentel discusses in her writings some of the "diverse discursive modes of *signifying space*" (2001, p. 9), and points out that these generate illusions of reality in the narrative text, in which constructed semiotic relationships (from artistic productions) with the semiotics of the natural world come into play (Pimentel, 2001, p. 9).

To connect this to the semiotics of things, I would like to bring Pimentel into dialogue with Herman Parret who, based on Bachelard's idea of "material imagination", mentions that there is "an imaginary force that gives life to a specific material cause" (2023, p. 188). Both Pimentel and Parret analyse how certain aspects of language and art generate this illusion of reality or effect of presence (material<sup>20</sup>). Among the discursive modes and their strategies are: the presumption of the prior experience of the viewing or reading communities (in this sense we have evocation), the organisation and detail of the objects or descriptions presented, the oppositions between elements, among others.

These relationships come and go between media and materials; Jorge Méndez Blake often works with what we might call *the effect of textuality*<sup>21</sup>, as he uses the tools already described, but instead of generating space through written text, the artist produces volume through material and space based on texts or literary themes of interest to him (in general, from book culture).

<sup>19</sup> In addition to those mentioned, a casual search in bookshops and online stores reveals the number of illustrated versions, graphic novels and even toys representing the whale.

<sup>20</sup> What I mean is that this effect of presence is not just a linguistic effect. Based on a series of experiences, simply seeing a piece of fabric is enough to predict how soft it will be (see Parret, 2023).

<sup>21</sup> From now on, I will leave it in lowercase. I am using italics this first time to introduce and highlight the category.

For example, based on the question: "Can a poem become a bookshelf?" (Méndez-Blake, 2020) he creates the piece *El iceberg imaginario* (The Imaginary Iceberg, 2020), which consists of producing several modules with a wooden structure (MDF) based on the silhouette of Elizabeth Bishop's poem of the same name and stacking them on tables (Fig. 2). In the spaces generated by this structure, a collection of books is placed<sup>22</sup> which, "having no fixed place, will constantly transform the sculpture as they are used by readers" (Méndez-Blake, 2020) . Although other artists such as Ulises Carrión had already formally synthesised a poetic text,<sup>23</sup> Méndez-Blake also creates a utilitarian space from which the interaction of readers is expected.

For the formal synthesis of Bishop's verse, the artist considers opposites: text and white space, which he materialises with a thick line that, through its superimposition, generates a spatiality. Although this work is not immersive—as *Moby Dick* is—it does exceed the individual human scale, as it is placed on a base of adjoining tables, adding up to several metres in length.<sup>24</sup>

Although the shape of the piece also extends upwards, we are actually dealing with a horizontal volume. Unlike a bookcase, the height does not dictate the number of shelves it has. And, based on the width, we cannot deduce how many books it can hold. The shape of the verse extends across the tables as it does across the sheet of paper. Only the minimum units of reading are modified: instead of containing words, it is capable of containing sets of words (books).

Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht asserts that when we encounter cultural objects, we analyse the discursive elements of the 'dimension of meaning' (2005, pp. 115, 120) but we always find a relationship of oscillation or tension with the 'dimension of presence' (2005, pp. 115, 120) , the substance, that which alerts our 'desire for tangibility' (2005, p. 112) and with which we share a space in the world. The textuality effect of book culture, which Méndez Blake has synthesised in several of his works, is made possible by the dimension of presence generated by the elements selected by the artist.

<sup>22</sup> The books vary according to the exhibition context: "The installation houses titles according to the context in which it is exhibited, that is, they vary depending on the space in which it is installed: it was first presented at the Campamento design fair (Guadalajara) and was exhibited there with the collection already available at the fair; on another occasion it was exhibited at the Mariano Azuela bookshop (Guadalajara) and it was the bookshop itself that selected the titles; the most recent was at the Hardcore Art Book Fair (Mexico City) where publications selected by the fair itself were used." Information provided by the director of the Jorge Méndez Blake Studio, Paola Pelayo, in an email communication on 30 September 2025.

<sup>23</sup> I am referring specifically to the section or chapter "Gráficas" in the book *Poesías* (Carrión, 2007) in which the artist takes a poem as a model and explores various forms based on its silhouette.

<sup>24</sup> Once again, the conditions of the exhibition space dictate how the elements of the work can be organised.

Consequently, thanks to the dimension and variation in height of the modules made of stacked silhouettes, this elaborate form of right angles has dynamism; it is an almost rocky volume, like an iceberg, formed of rough pinnacles, but seductive: "a sailor would give his eyes for this scene"<sup>25</sup> Here, too, we are crew members of a fiction and we want to get closer, to pick up a book. Fortunately, in this case, interaction is easier.

**Figure 2.** *The Imaginary Iceberg*, 2020, MDF, metal tables, mirror, books.



**Source:** Photo by Ana Quiñonez / Jorge Méndez Blake Studio

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Although Méndez Blake has worked with spatiality based on the work of a single writer, he has also done so based on library collections, as in the exhibition *Traslaciones topográficas de la Biblioteca Nacional* (MUAC, 2015). For this exhibition, the artist carried out several actions before and during the exhibition. All of them were documented.

Amanda de la Garza and Alejandra Labastida, in the document generated around the exhibition, point out that the artist "has devoted much of his career to discovering the secret lives of libraries as utopian devices for exploration, containment, classification, and accumulation" (2015, p. 6). Meanwhile, Roberto Cruz asserts that in Méndez-Blake's work, "r literary and book worlds occupy a central place [...] as an entity, as a concept, and as a metaphor" (2025, p. 224).

<sup>25</sup> The silhouette of Jorge Méndez-Blake's piece is from Bishop's original poem in English. For this essay, I use González de León's Spanish translation.

This exhibition is an example that illustrates the diversity of the artist's conceptions of books and libraries. By considering more than a single literary work, Méndez Blake materially expands his field of action and maintains, for a period of time, the relationship between exhibition and bibliographic spaces. One of the pieces created during the exhibition was *El gran poema inexacto del siglo XX (Méjico)* (2015), described as follows:

Action, coloured pencil on wall, typewriter, paper, ink, 20th-century Mexican poetry books from the National Library of Mexico \*A person walks from the museum to the library, takes a book from the 20th-century Mexican poetry section, walks back and types it on the typewriter located in the exhibition hall (Méndez-Blake, 2015, p. 6) (Fig. 3).

In an interview, Méndez Blake explains:

One of the lines of research is that the library should not be a closed space, isolated from the city, but rather that it should open its doors, tear down its outer walls, and merge with the city [...] what a library does is distribute knowledge. (Sierra, 2013) .

So, one way to achieve this, to spatialise and link the collection, is to transfer it through memory, contextualised in the act of transcription. And it does so collectively, as it asks volunteers to complete this action.

**Figure 3.** *The great inexact poem of the 20th century (Mexico)*, 2015. Action, coloured pencil on wall, typewriter, paper, ink, books from the 20th-century Mexican poetry selection of the National Library of Mexico, variable dimensions.



**Source:** Studio photo by Jorge Méndez Blake

(all rights reserved, reproduced with permission from the artist)

Cristina Rivera Garza says that transcribing is "making other people's words pass through our own bodies in order to engage our memory, which is both past and future at the same time"(2025, min. 42:49") . Although these transcriptions are not based on a manuscript and people do not write them by hand when they arrive at the museum, as Rivera Garza does, the similarity lies in the understanding of the body, which consciously pursues its goal: to transcribe in order to remember that every so often, the readings and actions in the collections update our reading of the world. Thus, the work reveals that, as Cruz Arzábal points out, "literature, like the rest of the arts, is both the place where collective memory is kept and part of it" (Cruz, 2025, p. 227) , in the same sense that Yol Segura affirms in *El gran poema...* "a process of updating appears" (2018, p. 17) of the notion of literature as a shaper of national identity and, I would add, by extension of art in the same sense.

Now, let us return to writing. Roland Barthes says that it needs discontinuity (2003, p. 111) , alluding to the intervals between sounds, characters and words that are indispensable for accessing meaning. If we consider what Gabriel Villalobos says: "Through this project, architecture becomes language. The museum and library are revealed as more than just architectural volumes, but as resources for the production of experiences, fictions and readings"(2015) ; in the case of *El gran poema inexacto del siglo XX (Mexico)*, the semiotic function of that which lies "between" something

and shapes meaning is emphasised. In this project, Méndez Blake distinguishes that the meaning and function of each space are emphasised through distance and specific architectural attributes.

To conclude this section, I would like to return to Roger Chartier, who in his historical review of reading also explains how both spaces and reading practices have changed. In this overview, he reminds us that in the Middle Ages, both in libraries and reading groups, spatial behaviours and distinctions were established for those who wished to be an active part of them, for example: "In their regulations, it is stipulated that the place of reading must be separated from places where more mundane distractions take place, that is, where one can drink, talk and play" (2000, p. 53). Although, over the centuries, reading has been liberated from space and, according to Chartier, has reached squares and parks, libraries still carry with them rules and even clichés: delimited spaces accompanied by rules of behaviour (remaining silent, reading individually, not bringing in food, etc.). The same is true of museums. Therefore, the idea of transferring the bibliographic collection through reading as an explicit action also indicates a critical position<sup>26</sup> regarding the customs and traditions in both venues and the objects they house.

### (Re)Writing in relief

Luis Felipe Fabre says, "The poems written by poets are usually called poems. The poems written by Méndez Blake are usually called art" (2015, p. 47). In addition to writing poems, the artist has undertaken a defence of poetry – and other genres, as we have seen – by placing it at the centre of the exhibition space and showing the poet's activity through the use of durable materials, such as stone.

For example, the artist contextualises poetry in its place of origin through the fiction of the image. *Defend it (Poetry) II* (2024), a pencil drawing on paper, is part of a series that began around 2021 in which he depicts texts such as "defend it" "protect it" "defend the poets" engraved on stones that form part of the ruins of ancient Greece, such as open-air auditoriums, remains of Corinthian columns – with their acanthus leaves – and amphitheatres; structures that allude to orality. Here, literature is found not only in the word "poetry," but also in the effect of textuality generated by the representation of places built for the practice of speech.

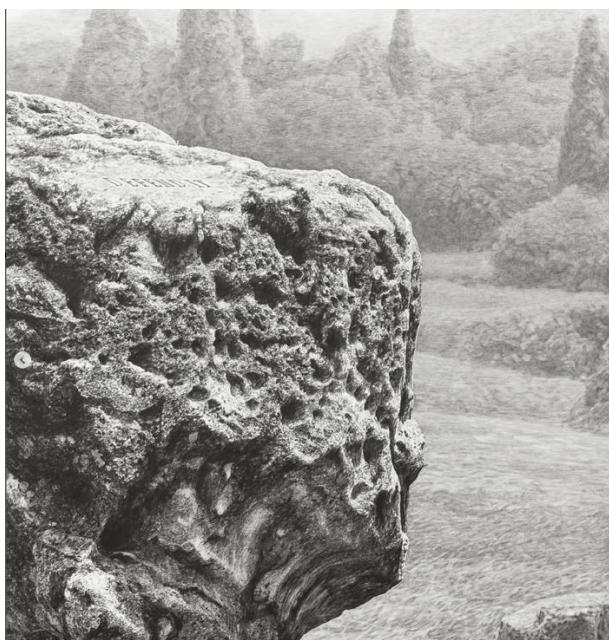
<sup>26</sup> Yol Segura devotes a section of reflections on this work in the article "".

Traditionally, stones (particularly marble) are the material of sculpture. A monument representing a goddess or a king could only be made of materials that would endure. As far as literature is concerned, unlike sculpture, preservation in memory did not lie in its material permanence, but in the continuity of its transmission (traditionally oral).

Méndez Blake takes minimal units of tradition that, in the right context, can be read almost immediately: the ruin is Greek, the poetry too; both are arts that date back to antiquity, and that is where we can begin our reading. The artist then uses these initial assumptions, derived from the classical era, to relate opposing characteristics that merge in his work.

Thus, to achieve the effect of textuality in the series to which *Defend Her (Poetry) II* belongs, there is a relationship with visual representation: these monochromatic drawings of ruins are realistic, the stone looks worn by time. However, the engraved word seems like a contemporary intervention (Fig. 4). Through the drawing, it appears that this area of the stone has been polished and then carved. This is something the artist could not do in reality, at least not on the original ruins. It is likely that this is why other pieces are already sculptural representations of these and other structures that allude to and promote orality.

**Figure 4.** *Defend it (Poetry) II* [detail], 2024, coloured pencil on paper, 200 x 140 cm.



**Source:** Photo by Ana Quiñonez / Jorge Méndez Blake Studio  
(all rights reserved, reproduced with permission from the artist)

As an example of these sculptures, let us look at *Poetas en acción (banca I)* (2022), composed of a set of 15 concrete benches, each with a letter in relief: P O E T A B A I L A N D O R A (Fig. 5). Placed in a circle, we continuously read and complete "poet dancing rap". It seems like an absurd action, but in fact it may be a variation of the Oulipian restriction or procedure called cylinder, in which a text "bites its own tail" (Oulipo, 2017) , something like a textual ouroboros.

**Figure 5.** *Poets in Action (Bench I)*, 2022, concrete, 15 pieces measuring 57.4 cm x 68 cm x 44 cm / Total: 550 cm diameter.



**Source:** Studio photo by Jorge Méndez Blake (all rights reserved, reproduced with permission from the artist) In addition to the circularity that the artist uses to position the benches and promote dialogue among those who use them, we have the physical act of creating the letters. In producing this particular piece, the engraving of the letters may result from a combination of industrial and artistic techniques<sup>27</sup> ; as Jérôme Lèbre said, technique in art can confront technique in general and thus remind us of the physical work with the material. If "writing is touching" (as Rivera asserts, 2025) and the written text, for Barthes, is linked to the "trace of the hand" (2003, p. 87) , to the advance of the

<sup>27</sup> It could be said that direct hand carving (as alluded to in the drawings in the series to which *Defiéndela* belongs) is not the most feasible option—although it could be done with great skill— it is surely done with a combination of techniques, either with prior moulding of each letter or with a high-precision cutter (a computerised numerical control machine that is programmed to obtain these precise, clean and exactly located cuts; In a review of the evolution of this type of machine, the authors define: "CNC machining is nothing more than the automation of machine tools (lathes, milling machines, grinding machines, etc.), which perform different and complex machining operations using computer numerical control (CNC)" (Solís-Santamaría et al., 2023) . It is very likely that the final finishes are done by hand, with tools that require more physical strength and effort.

hand on a surface with the help of a tool that leaves a gestural and meaningful trace, these benches by Méndez Blake exacerbate the discontinuity of matter through that word that passes through the body and is written with greater awareness than that of the pencil on paper (or the keyboard on the screen). Therefore, this writing implies a double learning process. Thus, the sculptor's action induces and evokes poetry on different levels: in its orality, its agency, and even as a tradition that prevails materially.

Finally, I would like to mention another piece with a subtle rewriting. In 2015, Jorge Méndez Blake created the piece *The Mountain That Took the Place of a Poem*. It is a rocky mound. Initially, the technical specifications indicate "stones," and pebbles of various shades can be seen. In its reworkings, for the OMR gallery<sup>28</sup> and for the Blue Project Foundation space, the piece has a metal structure and the stones are made of marble of various colours (which gives it consistency and reduces dust, so that more consistent bodies of small stones can be seen).

The title of the work is a play on words based on Wallace Stevens' poem "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain". The press pointed out that the piece is made with marble stone in three colours in accordance with three verses (Bosco, 2018) from Stevens' poem – although they do not specify which three of the fourteen. It has also been mentioned that the relationship between the poem and the work lies in the link that Stevens establishes between language and the physical world: "There it was, word for word / The poem that took the place of a mountain" (Méndez, 2015), as there is a relationship of equivalence between the minimal unit of the word and stone in the Mexican artist's piece.

However, the version for *Ventana poniente* (OMR gallery, 2016), a solo exhibition in which all the works were based on the poetry of Emily Dickinson, is particularly noteworthy. There, in the centre of the room, was *The Mountain That Took the Place of a Poem (for Emily)*, which on that occasion was dedicated to the poet, as indicated by the parentheses added to the title.

Let us recall the piece based on Bishop's poem, as I find some similarities. Both the mountain and the iceberg are natural elements, in a way, rugged, with irregular and pointed shapes. And, for both pieces, Méndez Blake synthesises the poetic form. While in the iceberg he does so through formal opposites, in the mountain he does so through substitution (as Stevens indicates, only in

<sup>28</sup> Here you can see images from the exhibition: <https://www.mendezblake.com/new-gallery-1/qtbkduc8kvodhwchhof3isdyl63ppf>.

reverse: stone by stone, the mountain took the form of the poem). If we consider the dedication, it is possible to see analogies with this poem by Dickinson:

The Mountains - grow unnoticed –

Their purple figures rise

Without attempt – Exhaustion –

Assistance – or Applause –

In Their Eternal Faces

The Sun – with just delight

Looks long – and last – and golden –

For fellowship – at night– (Dickinson, 1960, p. 371)

Both in the changing tones of the rocks, between purple and a dark golden, in the case of Méndez's work, Blake uses a light tone that turns brown, greyish and also ends in black. Furthermore, the colour makes its presence almost unnoticeable, despite its dimensions (compared to the colourful, large paintings that hung on the walls; in addition, the mound has tones present in the floor and columns of the gallery).

Consequently, in this volumetric rewriting, the artist has minimised the use of the literary. Once again, Méndez Blake takes advantage of the characteristics of the proper name<sup>29</sup> and the title. Only in this case, he generates a medial transposition (Rajewsky, 2020, p. 441), that is, he creates a new work, without literal/material content from the reference work, at least not directly in the work. Thus, the effect of textuality also participates in this example.

Finally, I would like to summarise the creative process through which the artist links text and matter. Let us consider the material dimension of the book: it preserves the temporal sequence of the text and frames the limits of fiction, which Matei Călinescu, Mieke Bal, Gérard Genette, among others, have described to explain its functions; among the most notable is that which "makes us

<sup>29</sup> Thinking about the names and titles, I would like to point out that a few years ago, on social media, the phrase "The Power of a Book" was circulated as the title of one of Jorge Méndez Blake's works (*The Castle*, in which the artist uses Kafka's book of the same title). This is an interesting phenomenon regarding these families of meaningful descriptions that are added to a work. It also speaks to how evocative and textual this artist's work is. The subject goes beyond the scope of this essay, as it was not an intentional action on the part of the artist. However, Veronica Cohen wrote some reflections on the current reception of the book as an object and of that particular work by the artist (Cohen, 2019).

believe" (( Călinescu that what is described in the literary text does indeed happen, that is, a pact of verisimilitude is achieved. I believe that, in a similar way, Jorge Méndez Blake constructs delimited spaces for these situated and shifting fictions and poetics. The artist projects elements derived from textuality, anchoring and relating that referent (whether the book itself, the title, some popular feature in the collective imagination, etc.) to a three-dimensional material substance with which he agrees on verisimilitude. Thus, the work appeals to the reader's body in a spatial and volumetric way, while the agreement promotes re-readings of the works in light of the new descriptions proposed by the artist.

### Conclusions

In an interview, Jorge Méndez Blake said: "The energy of certain moments in the history of literature cannot be duplicated in art, just as it is impossible to describe in words how art shows the world"<sup>30</sup> (Zymaraki-Tzortzi, 2019) . This reflection is a practice in his work. It is not that sculpture is "as if" it were poetry, nor does it attempt to illustrate the novels with which it works; they are not adaptations. This artist's work is based on a review of the mechanisms, techniques and processes of the arts that interest him, bringing the spatial and the textual into dialogue.

An important resource in the Mexican artist's work is the use of words that have families of meaning, such as proper names "for Emily" and titles *Moby Dick*, as well as the use of semantic fields, such as "poetry". Thus, the artist economises elements without losing the variety of readings and meanings, but maintaining synthetic textual units that he can link to spatial and material solutions according to the function they will have in the work. Giving body to the text implies, in the Mexican artist's work, an exercise in reading in which the context of the book is relevant and also part of the material, sculptural or architectural choice.

In other words, in Jorge Méndez Blake's work, writing is an act of reading and technical learning. However, what he obtains are not letters on a plane, but volumes, actions or installations from which the presence and (borrowed) substance of the synthesis of the linguistic component that the artist chooses in each Chapter<sup>31</sup> of his work emerge.

<sup>30</sup> From the original: "The energy of some moments in the history of literature cannot be duplicated in art, as the way art shows the world cannot be described with words".

<sup>31</sup> On the artist's website, the organisation of projects is divided into sections entitled Chapter. Chapter I corresponds to a series of murals about Jules Verne. Chapter LVII refers to his most recent exhibition, Inside the Law, in which he returns to Kafka, at the Meessen Gallery in Belgium.

In short, this textual presence is mediated by a material or space projected from each literary or bookish reference; and, without a doubt, the result effectively evokes the referent. It is interesting that, despite not requiring prior knowledge of the intertext, what we share in the collective imagination is sufficient to agree on the desire to sustain the experience in front of the work; and consequently, upon leaving the exhibition hall, to wish to consult the related literary work. We will realise later that the experience does not end there; it will be essential to revisit Jorge Méndez Blake's work in order to return to what we have read and thus continue the joyful, critical and extended cycle of rereading.

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