



**Retablo**, plasticine and mixed media on wood, 2011-2012: This is an amalgamation of shantytowns from around the world. Each house has been built brick by brick from plasticine. Different artists worked on different sections, but the entire work blends together to form a universal shanty town that highlights the inequality and injustice in our society and the need for change

# Mould of the human condition

**Mondongo, a collective of seven artists, uses folklore, literature, film and modern-day icons in its sculptural creations to make profound comments about today's society. Their aim is to bring about positive change**

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—Manuel Mendanha,  
spokesperson, Mondongo

Mondongo is a unique concept. It is an art collective comprising seven artists who work together to create stunning sculptural works. The materials they use are also unusual, such as plasticine, slabs of meat, burnt toast, cookies and trinkets. The Argentine group gets its name from the traditional tripe stew that is one of the most popular dishes in South America.

Mondongo is made from cheap and simple ingredients, but it is delicious and everybody likes it. Similarly, we use a blend of ordinary materials to create our artworks and we hope that everybody will connect with them and also enjoy them,” says Manuel Mendanha, the group's spokesperson.

The group began as a threesome comprising Mendanha, his wife and a friend and has gradually grown.

“My wife is half Japanese and has brought her knowledge of Asian culture to the group. Similarly, every member has enriched it with their own ideas, skills and experiences, and this wonderful mix is reflected in our work. Working as a group is

not easy and we argue all the time. But I can say that although we were initially like a rock band, after 13 years of working together we now play like an orchestra. And we believe that working together is the way to build a better society,” Mendanha says.

Mondongo is showing three recent artworks at their exhibition in Dubai. The beautiful pieces, made from plasticine on wood, are filled with detailed miniature models of people, flowers, animals, buildings and many other objects. Each piece is an amalgamation of various themes, with references ranging from folklore and classical art, literature, films and mythology to pop art and modern-day icons. The artworks are fun, witty and irreverent, yet they make profound comments about modern society, the history of mankind and the human condition.

## Universal appeal

The largest piece in the show is a recreation of a shantytown spread across a hill slope. Every tiny house in this massive slum has been carefully moulded by hand from plasticine and the details are a delight — the individual bricks in the walls,

the grills on the windows, the corrugated tin roofs, and the satellite dishes and antennae on the rooftops. A closer look reveals words written in Hindi on some of the houses.

“This work is inspired by the big and ever-growing shantytown in Buenos Aires. But this is a problem that exists everywhere in the world. So we have mixed shantytowns from different countries such as India, the United States of America, and Bolivia to create this fictional slum,” Mendanha explains.

It took the seven artists seven months to make this piece. “Today artists can create digital art with the click of a finger, but our work is painstaking and time-consuming. Each house is constructed brick by brick and the colours we use are handmade by us,” Mendanha says.

Many messages have been subtly incorporated into this stark shantytown through features such as a broken-down car with a Nike logo on it, a boy playing with a football and a big fluorescent moon on the back of the cabinet in which the artwork is enclosed.

The logo alludes to our consumerist society and also the aspirations of slum dwellers. And the footballer is Mondongo's tribute to Maradona, who grew up

in a shantytown. The moon is a poignant reminder that unlike the inequality in our society, the moon shares its light equally with every being on the planet.

“We want our work to talk to every strata of society and we hope that it can bring some change in our society,” Mendanha says.

## Container of all humanity

The other two pieces on display are from Mondongo's famous Skull series, which was started in 2008. Both feature huge skulls crammed with a plethora of plasticine sculptures. “The skull is a popular symbol in classical as well as pop art. We see it as a container of all humanity through which we can talk about the history of our species,” Mendanha says.

The skulls are based on multiple concepts, but the beauty is that all the individual stories told by the artists combine to trace the history of the human race.

The references and the connections are fascinating. For instance, the three medieval ships on the forehead of one of the skulls are the ones in which Christopher Columbus sailed to America, marking in essence the beginning of globalisation and

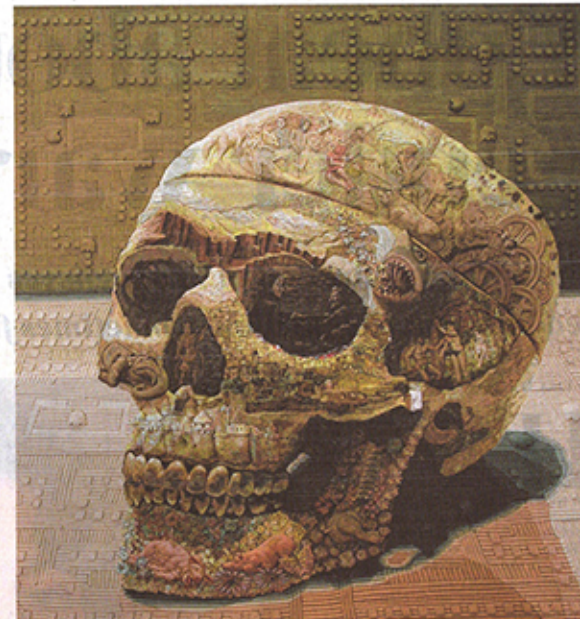
consumerism. But interestingly, the ships are shown sailing into Dubai's Atlantis hotel, suggesting that the city is now the glittering new world that everybody wants to come to.

There are many other features on this skull that connect different periods in human history.

An old man moves the wheel of time that bears candles as a symbol of the life of our species. And just above him you can see the ancient Maya calendar, which predicts the end of the world in 2012. A huge wave in the background is actually a replica of Japanese artist Hokusai's famous painting and perhaps a symbol of the present economic and political turbulence in the world.

And a dinosaur reminds us where all the oil came from.

References to our materialistic society include dollar notes growing on a tree, a billboard advertising the earnings guaranteed by a bank, a graph of the Bloomberg index, a Monopoly board and the mythological character Gargantua greedily devouring piles of money. The figure of Van Gogh lying in a wheat field right next to a Sotheby's auction also tells a similar story. Other figures in this narrative include Marlon Brando as the Godfather, Pinoc-



**Spiritual imagery** This piece dwells on spiritual and moral issues with references to folk tales like Red Riding Hood and the Three Little Pigs, films such as Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times and Ingmar Bergman's The Seventh Seal and artworks by Bharti Kher, Walton Ford and Paul McCarthy. A mountain of McDonald's hamburgers and a panorama of New York were connected through their reference to German immigrants to the US because New York was the gateway for immigrants and the hamburger got its name from the German city. The statue of Christ the Redeemer, Japanese and Hindu mythological figures, the ancient Mayan city of Tenochtitlan, the crown of Espinillo, which is a thorny tree and Tiziano's painting of Adam and Eve are part of the spiritual imagery here



**Skull**, plasticine on wood, 2011-2012: This piece highlights the materialistic aspect of our society and the problems arising from our mindless pursuit of wealth through references to historical events, comics, art, films, political ideology, pop culture and mythology. It traces the origins of our materialistic attitude in the past connecting it with the way things are today. Medieval ships, the Mayan calendar, the Sphinx in Egypt, the legend of Atlantis and traditional South American musics are some of the references to the past. Dubai's Atlantis hotel, the fluctuating market index, art auctions, film and comic characters link the narrative with the present. The wheel of life turned by 'Time' reinforces the link between past and present asking us to pause and learn from our history.

chio, Marie Antoinette, Mao Tse Tung, Leo Tolstoy and the Latin American saint who helps job seekers.

## Modern times

The other skull on show is based on moral and spiritual themes and deals with issues such as love, human suffering, migration, death, racism, unemployment and the environment.

The figures seen here include Charlie Chaplin from his film Modern Times, Hitler, Michael Jackson, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, Andy Warhol, Banksy, the famous statue of Christ the Redeemer, the shark from the film Jaws, Gollum from Lord of the Rings and a recreation of a scene from an Ingmar Bergman film showing a medieval knight playing chess with Death.

The artists have also recreated several landscapes including New York City, the gateway for immigrants and a

financial centre, the Leaning Tower of Pisa with its weak foundation, the fairytale castle at Disneyland, and primitive Inca huts.

Some of the portions are inspired by famous paintings such as Tiziano's Adam and Eve and The Kiss by Brancusi.

There are also references to Indian, Japanese and South American mythology and to the weird aquatic life seen on the South American coastline after the tsunami in 2010.

The background in all the skull pieces is based on Pacman, the popular computer game released in the 1980s.

“This was the first ever computer game, and we feel that these Pacman characters who are trying to devour each other are apt symbols of modern society and the way modern technology is shaping our lives,” Mendanha says.

■ Mondongo will run at Art Sawa, DIFC, until October 28.