



Ping-Pond Table, 1998

Gabriel Orozco The Subtle Gestures

Angélica Abelleira*



I Wish I Could See All Insects at Once, 1998.

Inverting the use of nicknames, Martínez is a miniature greyhound, and “The Bird” is an artist named Gabriel Orozco.

Martínez is Orozco’s grey pet whose tiny size and playful spirit create a commotion on the streets of New York and Mexico City.

“The Bird” is a 38-year-old Mexican artist, born —to be more exact— in Xalapa, Veracruz, whose work breeds both “philes” and “phobes.” It is full of subtleties, obviousness, surprises, acci-

dents, irrelevance and meaningless acts —just to mention a few of the attributes ascribed by the critics and the general public to his installations, photographs, videos and sculptures. Some pieces are priced at up to U.S.\$200,000.

Known in the galleries, museums and biennials of Europe, Asia and the United States, Orozco has now come to a contemporary art venue in Mexico, his native country, where he has been discussed less. The floor, roofs and walls of the Rufino Tamayo Museum of International Contemporary Art in Chapultepec Park are covered with dozens of pieces offered up to viewers’ trepidation, complacency, indignation, enthusiasm and rejection.¹

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Models, detail, no date.



Four Bicycles-There Is Always One Direction, 1994.

Here, placed as if by mistake, lies an empty shoe box; there, a one-of-a-kind ping-pong table with a basin in the middle stands near a chess table with no pawns, bishops or castles, but only knights; at the center are a compressed Citroën, a shortened elevator, fans with their blades festooned with toilet paper, a skull with quadrangles drawn on it in graphite and billiard balls hanging like Foucault's pendulum.

These pieces were created from 1990 to 2000 in Germany, Holland, South Korea, England, France, Mexico and the United States. They are presented in the museum without regard to chronological order, inviting the viewer to wander at will.

TAKING OFF

Although Gabriel dislikes emphasizing his origins and the mark that his father may have left on him—his father was muralist Mario Orozco Rivera, a man of the left with a weak body of work—we should say that he studied at the UNAM National School of Visual Arts (1981-1984) and the Fine Arts Circle of Madrid (1986-1987) and was artist in residence at the DAAD Gallerie, in Berlin. But what really had a profound effect on him was the workshop he directed for four years, from 1987 to 1991, in

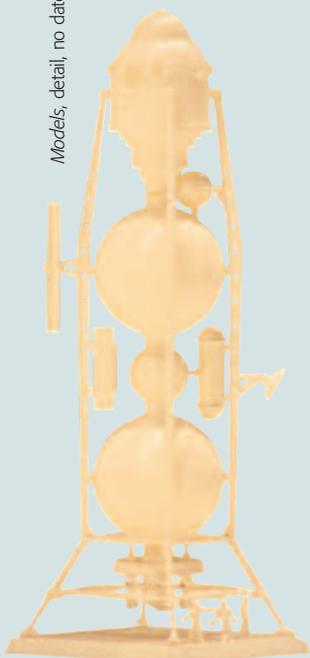
his own home with four other young people, all art students, musicians, sketch artists or tattoo artists: Gabriel Kuri, Damián Ortega, Abraham Cruzvillegas and Jerónimo López.

According to Cruzvillegas, the workshop was notably different from a formal space and was a far cry from aspiring to be an artist's atelier. With sessions every Friday, Orozco never gave instructions to work in any particular way or deal with particular topics. The collective effort consisted in criticizing others' work and discussions about artistic questions of the moment, plus music, beer and fiestas.

It was the beginning of the 1990s, and many alternative spaces were opening up in Mexico to present the public and the critics with ephemeral art, installations and object-art. Several foreign artists' studios in Mexico's historic downtown area were venues for exhibitions, as well as houses and vacant lots.

Orozco, together with Mauricio Maillé and Mauricio Rocha, had already won the first prize for "Alternative Spaces" given by the 1987 National Art Salon organized by the National Institute of Fine Arts for their wooden structure simulating a house on the point of collapse being shored up (a frequent sight in Mexico City after the 1985 earthquakes). Later Gabriel participated in the collective piece "On Purpose," a kind of homage to Joseph Beuys made

Models, detail, no date.





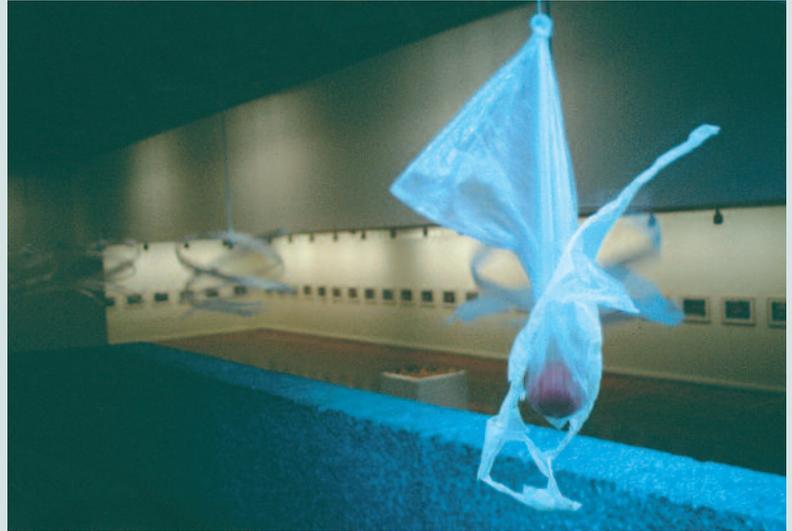
The D. S., 1993.

up of installations in the museum situated in the former Desierto de los Leones Convent.

In the early 1990s he would start to take off. “The Bird” began to travel. Once settled in Manhattan, he received an invitation from New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) to present a project. He occupied the garden, the escalator, a few columns and many of the museum’s exterior windows for his objects: hammocks, an interminable phone book and insecticide container tops. But the part that stirred the most enthusiasm was his involving the museum’s neighbors by asking them to put one or more oranges in their home or office windows every day.

This made Gabriel one of the three only Mexicans who have had individual showings at the MoMa: Diego Rivera was the first in the 1930s, followed by Manuel Alvarez Bravo six decades later. Orozco’s show was in 1993, when he was only 30, which prompted a series of both favorable and unfavorable comments, but above all, a variety of questions: What do people see in his work? Is this art or just publicity? Why is there an Orozco phenomenon?

And it is this phenomenon that has been analyzed, praised and reviled at exhibitions as prestigious as those at Paris’ Modern Art Museum, Amsterdam’s Stedelijk, London’s Institute of Contemporary Art, Chicago’s Museum of Con-



Mixiote, 1999.

temporary Art and Kortrijk, Belgium’s Kanaal Art Foundation; or international biennials in Venice, São Paulo and Kassel, Germany’s Documenta X; or private collections in Spain, Paris, London, Florida, Guadalajara, Mexico City, Los Angeles, Athens, Munich and New York.

NON-REVOLUTIONARY ART

The cover of the Rufino Tamayo Museum exhibit catalogue displays Gabriel as a child on horseback, dressed in a traditional Mexican *charro* cowboy outfit, a typical Sunday-outing photograph, while inside, several art historians try to dilucidate his work and answer the questions it engenders.

Alma Ruiz, the curator of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and organizer of this exhibit, underlines his work’s most outstanding characteristics: “his fondness for recording daily life, the relation of objects to his own body and his ongoing interest in movement.”² Ruiz says that his work “does not attempt to be revolutionary” nor does it introduce novel techniques or use innovative materials. What is interesting about it, she says, is the multiplicity of objects used, thus favoring unexpected associations and conceptual linkages that go beyond the formal ones in a “multifaceted” body of work and



Cats and Watermelons, 1992.

“an analytical mind, an intellectual curiosity that relishes what is unassuming, novel and undiscovered.”³

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, for his part, centers on the formal and conceptual changes in sculpture in the last 30 years, situating Orozco in a hybrid trend and at an “aesthetic, geopolitical and historical distance”⁴ with regard to the experience of the object.

Art history professor Molly Nesbit looks at the links between Orozco and the work of composer John Cage and writer Jorge Luis Borges. Between Orozco and Cage, she sees the common-

ality of their idea of unifying life and art; between Orozco and Borges, the idea that knowledge does not necessarily make for progress. “The center everywhere, the circumference nowhere, the perfect labyrinth is the desert.”⁵ This is Orozco a faithful admirer of Borges, quoting him; Orozco, an enthusiast of subtle gestures and the wake that people and things leave behind.

Former Orozco workshop members Gabriel Kuri and Abraham Cruzvillegas both wrote for the catalogue, along with colleague Damián Ortega, who contributes a comic strip.

VAGUENESS AND EVASION

A lot of ink has been used in newspapers and magazines to deal with the Tamayo exhibition. The critics have focused on the series of polemical objects and installations.⁶

Analyst Cuauhtémoc Medina comments that Orozco’s work shows “an inclination to more or less circumspect good taste that suggests a state of melancholy grace that seduces the eye with fleeting moments of passiveness.” But he also chides the artist for “evading definitions” and for his “vagueness,” explaining that his success is



Black Kites, 1997.



Toilet Fans, 1997.

partially due to “the fetishization of the receiver” and the tendency to idolatry the artist as “the Latin American whose proximity with Cage’s methodology and Borges’ spirit may be able to dissipate the ‘baroque-izing,’ noisy ‘bad taste’ of the American Latino in the 1990s.”

Writer and critic Olivier Debroise parodies one of Orozco’s installations in Paris, “Clinton Is Innocent” (alluding to the U.S. president’s sexual affair or his questionable job as world leader or the corruption of his administration —take your pick, just as the U.S. public has), entitling his critique “Orozco Is Innocent.” Debroise reaffirms the artist’s strategy of “perturbing perceptions, giving objects not a significance, but an unforeseen function.” He also strenuously objects to the accolades signed by Gabriel’s colleagues in the catalogue.

Historian Teresa del Conde laments the catalogue’s emphasizing Orozco’s life more than his first years as a sculptor. She situates him as a “rag-picker” who deploys “a not-quite-so-free form of association with intelligent results. It seems to me that he proceeds more by metonymy than by metaphor, thus indicating a special ability to give names to his own objects.”

Another visual artist, Mónica Mayer, deems Orozco’s work “ingenious” and “cold,” saying that

on few occasions he does have poetic qualities (for example, the billiard table, the ping-pong table and the fans), and on others he offers no proposal at all, but rather the “god-like” posturing of a “genius.”

THE SILENCE IS ACTIVE

From Costa Rica, Gabriel Orozco responded to some of these observations.⁷ Any polemical work, he said, “is neither passive nor circumspect nor institutional nor vague. People get upset; they talk about what they see; they laugh; they don’t understand. If they were passive objects sunk in vagueness, people wouldn’t talk about them. Perhaps they could be described as silent objects. But the silence is active and can cause more discomfort and mystery than noise.” He also points out that the essays about his work are written by people qualified to talk about it. They are “perfectly professional individuals who represent other voices that are telling the history” of art.

Overall, he says about the critiques of his work, “The interesting thing about the articles is that many analysts feel uncomfortable about

the work and me as a person. They try to tear it down in the typical PRI fashion by disdain and belittling the person more than the ideas. The vagueness that they say my work suffers from is their own and their observations become personal, predictable and limited. None of them manages to come up with a serious critique. I feel sorry for them.”

FAITH IN THE SMALL THINGS

In different interviews,⁸ Gabriel has talked about his work. “I still have faith in the small things. Even when in sculptures you try to create a whole universe, I’m also interested in comets. I want to show how a simple gesture can sometimes have more repercussions than a monument.... My relationship with objects is first sensual, like with women or fruit, because of their color, their flavor or smell. Then there is the approximation to each object, but generally I’m slow and I never have an immediate solution. I can’t stand compulsive artists. I have everything in my head and then I retrieve it, or I replace it, or I redo it. I don’t care if they say I’m great with my hands or a great technician. I prefer they say that I picked what I do up off the sidewalk. I love that because it’s a way for an object to become a real thing, more than a language.

“I prefer small pieces that are integral, necessary parts of a large whole. And I like them because I choose subtle gestures. I don’t like grandiloquence and virtuosity. I’m looking for the connection between the artificial and the natural, the organic and the geometric, the new and the old, dust and shine. I act based on collapses, contrasts.

“What is the value in objects? It lies in the condition that separates them from language and a play of signs. In the thing that turns them into a stone on the street or into a puddle or into a bad building. Into something that separates them from art and brings them close to reality. What I do—which doesn’t even have a name because I don’t know if it’s installation or

sculpture—tries to get close to what is real and to establish a different relationship with space and with the body, just like what happens out there every day on the sidewalk.”

* * *

An eternal traveler, “The Bird” flew away again. He was in Costa Rica for a time. He went back to New York, and then he will go to Japan, where two museums have requested his work and his participation in the Yokohama Triennial of 2001. In addition, Manhattan awaits a public sculpture of his, and two other pieces will occupy spaces in France and Germany.

Not only sculptures and cities await him. Martínez, his miniature greyhound does, too, so it can run through the streets and perhaps help him find objects that will become pieces for galleries, a collector’s room, the wall of a museum or just to lie next to the pillows where Martínez jumps and sleeps. **MM**

NOTES

¹ This exposition was put together by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, where it was shown from June to September of 2000. The showing in Mexico City will last until February 4, 2001, after which it will be at the Monterrey Contemporary Art Museum from February until May 2001.

² Benjamin H.D. Buchloh et al., *Gabriel Orozco*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (Mexico City: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles/Conaculta/INBA/Museo Rufino Tamayo, 2000), p. 25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.156.

⁶ The opinions of Medina and Debroise are from *Reforma* (Mexico City), 25 October 2000 and 2 October 2000, respectively. Teresa del Conde’s comments are from *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 24 October 2000 and 7 November 2000; and Mónica Mayer’s from *El Universal* (Mexico City) 7 October 2000.

⁷ The author received these observations from Orozco by e-mail.

⁸ Quotes are taken from the author’s interviews with Orozco in October 1993, August 1998 and August and November 2000.