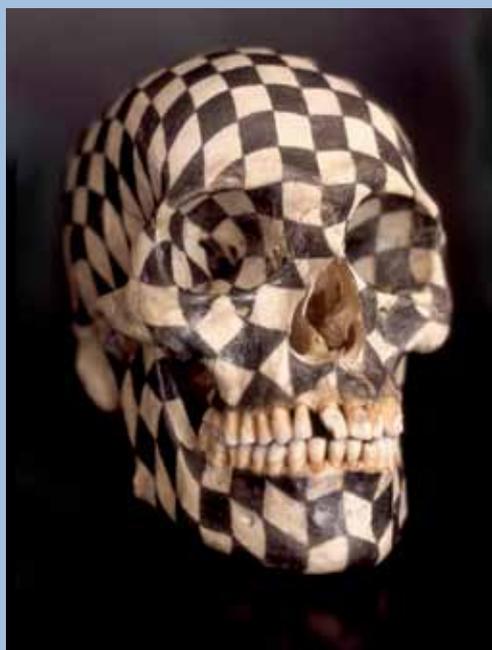


Gabriel

Recovering the Invisible

Antonio Luna*



Black Kites Perspective, 40.6 x 50.8 cm, 1997 (graphite on skull).

The recent publication of the book *Gabriel Orozco*, which is actually a catalogue of a retrospective exhibited between 2009 and 2011 at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Georges Pompidou Center, London's Tate Modern, and Basilea's Kunstmuseum, is indispensable material in Spanish for understanding Gabriel Orozco's work. More than a retrospective in time, the book brings together the artist's work through certain key pieces that speak to each other. It should be underlined that this volume had already been published in German, English, and French, but surprisingly, not in Spanish. Fortunately, it finally came out in our language in April 2013, launched at Mexico City's Fine Arts Palace, where Gabriel Orozco (Veracruz, 1962) had an individual showing seven years ago in 2006. For that exhibition, he filled the museum's rooms with more than 150 pieces: sculptures of polyurethane foam, circular designs, and other emblematic pieces.

The museum opened up two rooms for the book launch so everyone who went could get in: one room where the actual launch took place and another that simultaneously

broadcast what was going on in the first, so that everyone could see from where they were sitting. Both rooms were filled. As I waited for the launch to begin, I remembered an article I had read in the Argentinean daily *La Nación* (The Nation) about the myth of Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño in the United States. The article's author, Horacio Castellanos, said that, based on a series of misunderstandings by the publishing industry, Bolaño had been positioned on a par with García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, or Fuentes, as a perfect example of what was, or should be, a Latin American writer.

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All photos are courtesy of the Jumex Collection and the Kurimazutto Art Gallery.

Prozce



Pinched Ball, 23 x 33.5 cm, 1993.

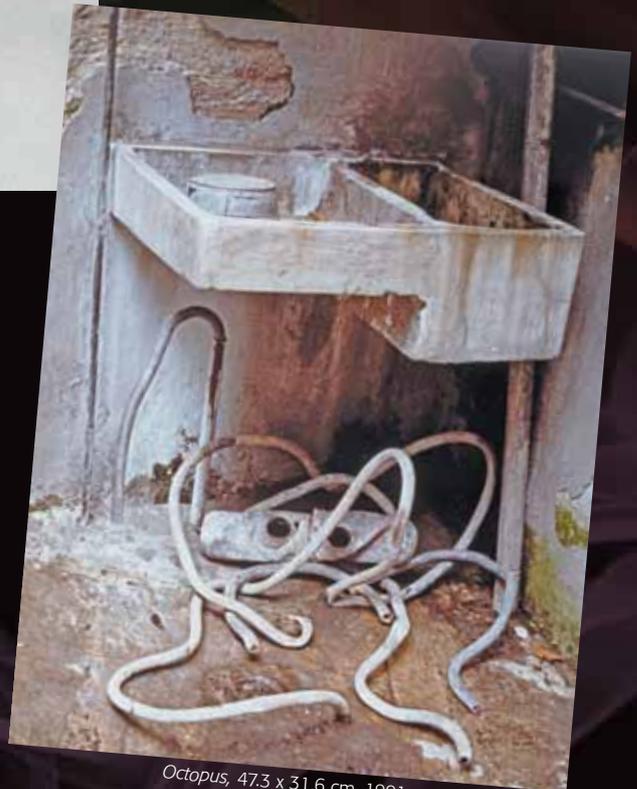


Yielding Stone Image, 40.6 x 50.8 cm, 1992, printed 2009 (plasticine).



Empty Shoe Box, 1.4 x 33 x 21.6 cm, 1993 (cardboard).

Orozco responds to questions about his identity saying, "I never remember I'm Mexican, although I never forget either."



Octopus, 47.3 x 31.6 cm, 1991.

At the book launch, Gabriel Orozco dealt with a similar topic when he talked about the use of clay or a skull in some of his first pieces and how that created ideas about a certain kind of Mexican-ness in his work. Might it not be the case that abroad, Orozco is thought of in a similar way as the Chilean writer? As Mexican or Latin American as the observer might want to see him.

A UNIVERSAL IDENTITY

Because of the way that Orozco deals with the topic of skulls, clay, or this supposed Mexican-ness, it seems that he has never liked the idea of being pigeonholed in a category. In any case, these opinions remain only on the surface. Haven't skulls and clay objects been found in other excavations around the world belonging to other cultures far from Mesoamerica? In an interview published in the same Argentinean newspaper, reproduced on the Kurimanzutto Gallery website, Orozco responds to questions about his identity, saying, "I never remember I'm Mexican, although I never forget either."¹

Along these same lines, in his essay "Muerte súbita. Fosas de arena, prados y el juego" (Sudden Death. Sand Pits, Meadows, and Play), Francesco Bonami states,

We live in a subtle world of segregation, where the concept of what is "Latin" is more linked to immigration than to the language the Romans used to build their empire and dominate the world. However, Gabriel Orozco, as a "Latino" is more closely linked to the language than to his status as a foreigner inside an ordinary society.²



Matrix Mobile, 10.5 m (length), 2006 (bone).

THE FIRST PIECES

Orozco's work is perhaps the best known internationally of any living Mexican artist, and he is considered a true spearhead for contemporary artists. He is said to have been the one who led the way for the generation of artists who followed him: Abraham Cruzvillegas, Gabriel Kuri,

and Damián Ortega, among others. His influence has partially been due to a workshop he gave in his home to younger artists, "The Friday Workshop," a flexible space, without stiff institutional rigor, where ideas flowed swiftly, inoculating participants.

His artistic style was consolidated after having worked in different fields: exploration, moving around, and remembering his daily life, as well as the changes in the spaces where the artist moves. Based on an attitude of manipulating things—an act of boldness—Orozco's work recreates our wonder at what is around us. This ephemeral—and at the same time renovating—will is expressed in Orozco's own words when, in Juan Carlos Martín's simply titled film *Gabriel Orozco*, he answers a comment that in the beginning his pieces could have been done by anyone, saying that even if that were true, no one had had the courage to make them before.

Yielding Stone Image (1992) is one of his early works. It is a photographic log of a nearly 150-pound Plasticine ball (equal approximately to his own body weight) pushed through the



Home Run, various sizes, 1993 (oranges).

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streets of New York City, picking up all kinds of items embedded in the surface of this malleable material. So, the ball was molded by the vicissitudes of the road, thus providing the title of the piece.

Orozco exhibited *Empty Shoe Box* at the Venice Biennial in 1993. This action was later known in the artist’s imaginary as a simple sculptural gesture, a wink that would eventually serve as a catalyst for a series of greater actions. In that same year he presented *La DS*, a Citroën DS automobile cut in half and meticulously reassembled so that, even if the viewer infers that the car can no longer move as it did before, it creates the feeling that it cuts through the air more dynamically than if it were able to move through the streets (see *Voices of Mexico* 54, January-March 2001). This work refers to a sensorial symmetry that he would later refer to again formally for the pieces in the 1996 series “The Atomists.”

In *Home Run* (1993), Orozco asked the neighbors of New York’s MoMA to place an orange on a glass in the windows facing the museum, creating yet again a series of small changeable sculptures based on a small act of will. The title evokes a joyful allegory: if the balls were oranges, what could be said of the bats or the baseball players in this imaginary game. . . ?

When you first look at Orozco’s work, his practices of recovery, improvisation, or actions that recall the Fluxus group or *Arte Povera* become clear. Based on the artist’s inquiries, you get the impression that he focuses more on objects and their contexts, on their possibilities and functions, than on the works themselves. It is as though Orozco is asking himself when the objects stop being objects and turn into sculptures. This inquiry into two concepts unleashes a reaction in the inanimate objects. Have they gotten tired of being immobile? Has their function ended?

In his essay “Rechazo y refugio” (Rejection and Refuge), historian and art critic Benjamin Buchloh, who has studied Orozco’s work in depth, includes an epigraph in which Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias refers to the period when Mexican art had reached maturity. That historical moment, presumably before the 1940s, was replaced by a “hegemony of

an aesthetic made of objects forced into silence.”³ Thus, when Orozco photographs an object and what surrounds it, he shows us a place where some things —perhaps very few— rest. When both context and object awaken and dialogue, Gabriel’s work is created. Once the function of the objects has worn out, and therefore they have been deciphered, the artist’s work imbues them with a significance that makes them continue to be interesting. His work underlines the importance of everyday things and their permanence in our memory.

THE GAME

The notion of play is a constant in Gabriel Orozco’s work. *Home Run* is reminiscent of baseball. The checkerboard pattern on the skull of *Black Kites* (1997) evokes a chess board. Pieces like *Carambole with a Pendulum* (1996) and *Ping-Pong Table* (1998) present two elements as a game based on the game itself. The first piece is an oval billiards table from which a red ball hangs; on the table’s surface are two white balls. The basic rules of billiards have been adapted to a kind of metaphoric game with multiple —almost infinite— possibilities. The second work is made up of two Ping-Pong tables laid out in the form of a cross with a space in the middle occupied by a lily pond. So that, here, the game ends right after it begins. The only winner is the ball, which ends up placidly floating in the water. In the oval-shaped table we find eternity in an instant, and in the Ping-Pong-table cross is incompleteness, the impossibility of the game.

Another playful example is the work *The Atomists*, a work done on airplane tickets, photocopies, or currency from different nations. The artist combines the possibilities of geometry and the images of cricket, soccer, or rugby players. But, what does Orozco want to say? “Play is a way of knowing and perception. Of reality, of the landscape. Games, like sports, are cultural representations of conceptions of the universe and of landscape, of the mentality of an era.”⁴



Carambole with a Pendulum, 89 x 31 x 205 cm, 1996.

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ARCHITECTURE

Just as there are slight sculptural gestures, others are larger. In 1997, Orozco exhibited *Half-Buried Ferris Wheel* in Hannover, Germany. As its name suggests, it is a large steel structure, only half of which is above ground. *Mobile Matrix* (2006) is the skeleton of a grey whale, weighing more than 1 500 kilograms, hung from the roof of the Vasconcelos Library in Mexico City. The whale's bones are covered with circles and ellipses that simulate the wave action of the sea. This way, the immobile bones continue moving.

Around 2005, Orozco finished another large-scale project called *The Observatory House*, in which he expresses his conceptions about space and architecture. This work examines the notion of sculpture in the spaces we inhabit. Located on the coast of Oaxaca, built by Mexican architect Tatiana Bilbao, it is an idea the artist had planned based on the Jantar Mantar Observatory, built in New Delhi in 1724. The house juts out of a rocky headland whose observatory is a surface in the form of a cross. At the center is a circular swimming pool, and the house itself is below. Swiss art critic and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist interviewed the artist, and quotes him as saying, "A large part of my work is related to architecture because of the way it uses the specificity of the site. In the end, I think that architecture should function like a shoe box. . . . I think architecture should be a space that receives, that yields, not a space that imposes."⁵

▼ *Half-Buried Ferris Wheel*, various sizes, 1997 (installation).





Island within an Island, 40.6 x 50.8 cm, 1993.

Orozco's work deals with things that are barely suggested or whispered. It expands beyond the shoe box until it detonates memories, bringing to mind contexts and objects that stop inhabiting it at length.

Orozco's work deals with things that are barely suggested or whispered. It expands beyond the shoe box until it detonates memories, bringing to mind contexts and objects that stop inhabiting it at length. This is a personal sphere. In general, Gabriel shows us a city and some of the cracks in it where people defined more by their unusual habits—or obsessions—than their day-to-day activities live their lives. In this way, it recreates the interacting social flows, the result of which make up what we conceive as part of the fabric of society, a piece of the city.

Orozco is not a collector; he accumulates objects. The collector has a structured awareness of his/her acquisitions to create series, systems inside the collection. The accumulator groups objects in a non-systematic way and only later finds a dialogue among them, or simply never finds any. This artist's objects regularly insert themselves into a poetic category or a field of action located in a vacuum, in nothingness. However, these objects are more evocations than pieces; they lack a definitive order. At times, they find their place in Orozco's world, and at other times, they are out of place again. This movement, or lack of definition, surpasses the previously mentioned poetry of nothingness and lines up the objects to follow their path in their recovery of the invisible. ■■

NOTES

¹ Graciela Speranza, "En búsqueda del círculo perfecto," interview with Gabriel Orozco, "ADN Cultura," *La nación* (Buenos Aires), February 13, 2010, <http://kuri.dev.copyleft.com.mx/espanol/noticias/entrevista-a-gabriel-orozco-en-la-nacion.html>.

² Francesco Bonami, "Muerte súbita. Fosas de arena, prados y el juego," *Textos sobre la obra de Gabriel Orozco*, (Mexico City: Conaculta and Turner, 2005), p. 78.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ Elsa Fernández-Santos, "Trabajo con lo que me sucede en la vida," interview with Gabriel Orozco, *El país* (Madrid), February 6, 2005, http://elpais.com/diario/2005/02/06/cultura/1107644401_850215.html.

⁵ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Hans Ulrich Obrist entrevista a Gabriel Orozco en París," *Textos sobre la obra de Gabriel Orozco* (Mexico City: Conaculta and Turner, 2005), p. 208.