

SURVIVING THE RETROSPECTIVE

As this year's featured Conversations series artist, Gabriel Orozco explores what it means to add to an already celebrated body of work. BY CAROL KINO



Since the Art Basel Conversations program began, a highlight has been the Premiere Artist Talk—an event that sets the stage for all that is to come. These days it more often consists of a discussion between an artist and a curator, with the aim to illuminate some surprising aspect of the artist's oeuvre. Previous participants have included Vik Muniz, Chuck Close, Ai Weiwei, and Michelangelo Pistoletto.

This year, the honoree is the famously nomadic Mexican-born artist Gabriel Orozco, who makes his widely varied work in an equally diverse range of locales, primarily Mexico City, Paris, and New York, where he has been based since the early 1990s. As Mexico's best-known living artist, he seems a particularly apt choice for ABMB, especially given the importance of Latin American art to the show.

Born in Jalapa, Veracruz in 1962, Orozco grew up in an artistic milieu: his father, a painter, moved the family to Mexico City so he could work with the muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. Although Orozco was steeped in the creative world of the Mexican muralists as a child, he soon bucked that tradition, abandoning painting and opting for a peripatetic life without a permanent studio, making work that frequently explored the boundary between seemingly opposite forces such as form and the void, or art and everyday life.

Orozco made some of his earliest photographs in Mexico City after the 1985 earthquake, when he took long walks and took pictures of his chance encounters with debris. After moving to Madrid in 1986, he began traveling widely, often photographing objects he saw on the street, like bricks or planks of wood, which he sometimes



Gabriel Orozco
La DS, 1993

PHOTOGRAPH BY ENRIQUE BACULESU (OROZCO); COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE CHANTAL CROUSEL, PARIS (ART)

arranged into temporary sculptures. Sometimes he made work with his hands, as in the photographic diptych *My Hands Are My Heart* (1991), which shows him squeezing a piece of clay and then revealing a heartlike shape. Other times he used automatic processes: For *Yielding Stone* (1992), he rolled a huge ball of plasticine around New York City until it acquired a patina of random dirt.

"Mexico at the time was very isolated from the rest of the art world and also was a very conventional art world itself," Orozco says. "But I was somehow able to show what I was trying to do in Mexico, and then I had the opportunity to show it outside [the country] as well."

Asked to name the most important shows of his career, he mentions 1993, the year of his first solo museum exhibition—a project show at the Museum of Modern Art that many remember best for what he showed outside the building: oranges arranged in the windows of neighboring apartments. That same year, he surprised visitors to the Venice Biennale by placing an empty shoebox on the floor of *Aperto '93*, an exhibition of contemporary art at the biennale. And at Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris, he debuted *La DS*, a silver Citroën sliced open and reduced to two-thirds its normal width. In 1994, for his first show at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, he highlighted the void of the white cube by pinning four Dannon yogurt lids to the walls.

Still, "I would not say that it was one particular exhibition, but a combination of shows," he says. "They generated a good representation of the spectrum of my work and gave people an idea of what I was capable of doing."

Soon he was also fabricating sculptures, like the oval billiard table and other Dada-esque games he designed for "Empty Club," 1996, an Artangel project installed in an old London gambling den. He has made sculptures and installations with synthetic materials, like polyurethane foam, as well as found materials like dryer lint, bicycles, desert plants gathered in Mexico, and phone numbers lifted from the phone books of New York and a city in Mexico. More recently, Orozco has worked on a massive scale—as with *Mobile Matrix*, 2006, a reassembled gray whale skeleton inscribed with overlapping graphite circles—and, confounding some of his early fans, has also begun making paintings.

About the only way to characterize his work is to say it is un-characterizable. "I think it's still the same today [as in 1993]," he says. "I do many different things and I travel to many different places." The full range was on view in his recent retrospective, which opened at New York's Museum of Modern Art in December 2009 and traveled to the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Tate Modern in London before closing on April 25.

When I spoke with Orozco in October in New York, it was towards the end of his ninth show at Marian Goodman. Called "Gabriel Orozco: Corplegados and Particles," it consisted of the work he had made since 2008, in response to what he called "the situation of the retrospective."

"We have all heard about artists having a huge impact in their production during [the retrospective]," he says. Not only is it hard to produce a new body of work while a retrospective show is being put together, but afterwards "it's probably not



Gabriel Orozco
Ping Pond Table, 1998



Gabriel Orozco
Mobile Matrix, 2006



Gabriel Orozco
Four Bicycles (There is Always One Direction), 1994

so easy to come back to the regular rhythm of work."

His solution was to avoid gallery shows while the retrospective was traveling. He also sought to find "a private, experimental space that was flexible enough for me to develop a project," which led him to create his *Corplegados*—six-foot-high works on paper that he could fold into squares, store in a box, and take with him as he traveled. Densely layered with ink and gouache, sometimes covered with writing and collages with photographs, "they became an extension of my notebook," he says, "a kind of travel map."

Working on this project also led him to develop his *Particle Paintings*, a new photo-based painting series. Based on widely varied sources, including news photographs, Orozco's own snapshots, and paintings by Piet Mondrian and Gustave Courbet, each image was enlarged and digitized into gridded dots, on which he then applied acrylic dots with Q-tips. "I think it's a little bit of a continuation of the grids and dots and circles and axels that have been in my work since the beginning," he says.

He is now working toward several shows, including exhibitions at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Kunsthau Bregenz in Austria. Having emerged from his retrospective moment, Orozco is satisfied with how he handled it. "At the end, I managed to have a whole new body of work that somehow feels different and like a new project," he says. "For me, that is important." **ABMB**

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALLERIA KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO CITY (MOBILE MATRIX)