THE NEW YORKER

EXQUISITE DREAMS

The transforming eye of Gabriel Orozco.

By Peter Schjeldahl November 25, 2001

Gabriel Orozco, with a show entitled "Fear Not," at the Marian Goodman gallery, confirms that he is the leading conceptual and installational artist of his generation. He is also very good. The type of art that he espouses seems to me quite played out, and yet I adored this deft, breezy show of sculptures, drawings, photographs, and a video. It makes me want to wrest the artist from the arms of curators and theorists who have made him a star on the weary international circuit of biennials that, with their endless variations on themes by Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, and the like, please only the organizers. Orozco, who is thirty-nine years old, is a cool, silky strategist. A decade ago, when he was an obscure artist in Mexico City, he worked out winning approaches to a European establishment that was avid for brainy, elegant art with multiculturalist bona fides. What lifts him above the run of conceptualists is a personal vein of lilting poetry. Orozco's infectious, refined enthusiasm for the real world distinguishes him from such intimidating forebears as Bruce Nauman and Robert Gober. He has long stood out in the biennials with the charm of someone who is good at devising indoor fun for clever children on rainy afternoons. At this point, he seems primed for popular discovery.

The first thing that one encounters in "Fear Not" (the title may be a soothing injunction to New Yorkers) is clothes-dryer lint. Fluffy, flimsy swaths of the stuff are draped with meticulous care on fishing lines that stretch from wall to wall, just above eye level; the ensemble is called "Lintels." Orozco says that he collected the lint from a year's worth of his own laundry, augmented with contributions from friends and a laundromat. He seems to believe that it is both beautiful and interesting. It is, as I realized when I got over my initial resistance to yet another flogging of readymade aesthetics. Duchamp or no Duchamp, the intricate, exceedingly clean debris that accumulates in clothes dryers merits attention for its compound of human and textile filaments and dust. There is no end of painting-like subtlety in its textures and vestigial colors. When one starts looking at it with respect, its fragility stirs surprisingly tender feelings. Orozco—whose past works include an oval billiard table and an X-shaped Ping-Pong table with a lily pond in the middle—treats creaky avant-gardish tropes as games whose only aim is pleasure.

Each of the show's abundant drawings and photographs is a gentle detonation of idea and technique. Many of the drawings are mélanges of nature and culture. Their elements include smudgy prints of the artist's hand (the back of his hand, in one case), impressions of leaves, pretty Japanese decorative stencils, and passages of lacy geometric designs that lend a Cartesian clarity. Imagine a post-minimalist Paul Klee.

Most of the show's photographs are droll rejiggerings of the ordinary world: a pay phone with a slice of lime stuck into the coin slot, a curving concrete stairway with a complementing slice of cake on each triangular step. Several are poignant closeups of dying leaves amid a rain forest's riot of life. A good many of the drawings and photographs are in a room whose air is busy with offhand, flowerlike mobiles: bamboo leaves sprouting from rubber balls. In an adjacent room you come upon photographs of hard-edged abstract paintings that could be the breakthrough of an unknown modern master; in fact, they are cunningly altered images from the catalogue of an Ellsworth Kelly show. None of these works seem more than a graceful bagatelle. It's when you get the hang of Orozco's consistent, exacting discipline that something substantial happens. We have the sense that, no matter what outlandish moves the artist makes, he will not fail to be direct and honest with us.

Orozco was born in Jalapa, Veracruz, in 1962, into a leftist family that frowned on anything that had to do with the United States, including the English language. As a teen-ager, he spent summers in the Soviet Union and Cuba. In the late nineteen-eighties in Mexico City, he led a group of studious young artists who rejected the local reigning movement of *neo-mexicanismo*—a gaudy, market-driven mishmash of national stereotypes in international neo-expressionist style (Frida Kahlo meets Francesco Clemente)—in favor of conceptual and installational art. Orozco hit the road. Among peripatetic conceptualists, he carries one of the more visa-crazed passports. Typically, he will live somewhere for a spell, incorporate elements of the local landscape into his work, and move on. In Paris, he trisected, lengthwise, the body of a Citroën DS automobile, discarded the center part, and joined the outer ones, producing a perfect, nonfunctional icon of racy French industrial design. In Berlin, he memorialized his obsolescent yellow East German motor scooter by photographing it in the company of every scooter of the same make and color that he encountered. Orozco is a global flaneur.

His first solo gallery show in New York, in 1994, consisted entirely of four transparent plastic Dannon-yogurt lids, date-stamped and price-labelled; each had a wall to itself. I look more kindly on that painfully precocious riff on consumerism now than I did then. (If you don't think that such a trifle could generate reams of footnoted theoretical prose, you've been out of touch with academe.) In "Fear Not,"

artist's roots. One, an installation called "Mixiotes," consists of five balletic hanging sculptures, each made from the fibre of a cactus leaf, a clear plastic bag, and a child's rubber ball. The cactus fibre, which is ordinarily used as a food wrap, stirs thoughts of the inconspicuous richness of Mexican deserts; the bag and ball evoke the frugal profusion of Mexican street markets. But particular associations are incidental to Orozco's art. Like Richard Tuttle's slight, profoundly sweet assemblages, these unpretentious works are pure songs to the world's infinitude of humble beauties. They may look easy, but to succeed with such economy requires something like spiritual perfect pitch.

Orozco is at his most magical in the video, a half hour long, which documents the sport of kite-flying in India. Indian kites turn out to be small and nearly square; lacking tails, they are tough to fly. The video's wordless soundtrack captures the noisiness of populous towns from which swarms of the brave toys struggle aloft. There are shots of streets lined with siblings of Charlie Brown's nemesis, the kite-eating tree. Kites and buildings share astonishing yellows, pinks, greens, indigos, and electric blues, which glow with an effulgence of damp heat. Zooming and panning, the camera hungrily goes after the colors as if they were food. At one point, it lingers on a young girl as she tries repeatedly to launch a kite from a walled back yard. Her practiced motions become a dance of dedicated effort—she is an artist at work. On a technical level, the video might have been made by any able tourist, but it moved me to the point of gasping. I had the kind of feeling that a poem sometimes engenders—not so much that of the world made new as of myself suddenly opened to its torrential novelty. ♦

Published in the print edition of the December 3, 2001, issue.

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