Gego’s Galaxies: Setting Free the Line

Though born in Europe, Venezuelan artist Gertrude Goldschmidt—known as Gego—created a body of highly refined abstract work that, by its formal rigor and uncanny inventiveness, places her firmly at the forefront of South American modernism.

BY ROBERT STORR

Fridamania has peaked. With the success of Julie Taymor's relentlessly colorful biopic devoted to the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), this once underrated painter has now become a refurbished symbol of the romantic artist, a feminist icon and an emblem of cultural vitality “South of the Border.” Although late in coming, Kahlo’s rise to stardom seems meteoric when one considers that as recently as the mid-1970s the only book on her that was readily available was a small catalogue published by the Museo Frida Kahlo, housed in her out-of-the-way but now famous Casa Azul in the Coyocán district of Mexico City. In the English-speaking world, at least, the artist's obscurity began to lift in 1982, with the Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. (The show traveled to the Grey Art Gallery, New York, in 1983, as well as to Berlin, Hanover and Stockholm.) The following year saw the publication of Hayden Herrera’s well-researched and widely read Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo, on which Taymor’s film is based. The rest, as they say, is history, although an account of the critical reception of Kahlo's oeuvre (and its oversimplification by enthusiasts) has yet to be written. Kahlo was so picturesque in life that she still tends to eclipse the thorny complexity of the pictures she made.

It is doubtful that there will ever be a dramatic film made about Gertrude Goldschmidt (1912-1994)—professionally known as Gego. Nevertheless, as her work gradually emerges from the background mosaic of post-World War II art, it becomes increasingly clear that she is of equal artistic stature to Kahlo, and indeed any Latin American artist, male or female, active, as she was, during the mid-1950s into the '90s. This is true even though her “career” barely registered on the seismic scale of mainstream taste while she was still working. It is high time for her achievement to be evaluated in relation to her modernist peers.

Chronologically and culturally, Gego’s life marginally overlapped Kahlo’s. She was born in 1912 to a liberal Jewish banking family in Hamburg; while Kahlo, whose father was a free-thinking photographer of Hungarian and German Jewish extraction, was born in 1907. In their separate ways, both Kahlo and Gego are products of the Central European migrations that helped populate Latin America in the 19th and 20th centuries, and, more particularly, both have their place in the Jewish Diaspora. Although Gego did not bear witness to a revolution in progress as Kahlo did, she did experience the upheavals of post-World War I Germany and the rise of the Nazism, which forced her expatriation to Venezuela in 1938, the year she graduated from Stuttgart Technical School with a diploma in architecture and engineering. An emancipated woman from a comfortably well-off milieu, Gego was the last member of her family to escape their homeland. Although out of harm’s way in Caracas, she fully experienced the stresses of that society as well, responding in her own subtle but substantive way to the technologically oriented forms of artistic expression supported by modernizing constituencies in the political and economic establishment of her adoptive country.

Spare and unequivocally abstract, Gego’s art is the antithesis of Kahlo’s. Though self-evident, this fact must be insisted on because North American perspectives on South American modernism tend to be skewed by the lens of Mexican, Central American and Caribbean art. Geographic proximity to these varied and, in many respects, heavily conflicted artistic traditions has led North Americans to focus disproportionately on the tropical, the folkloric and the exotic when taking account of South American artistic currents. Kahlo played all those cards, with dazzling results. And her work is seductive, provocative and richly problematic in ways she plainly intended.

By contrast, every gesture the self-effacing Gego made was out in the open; she had no cultural trumps up her sleeve. And yet, the very trans-
parenity of her sculptures, drawings and prints—a transparency of process, as well as of form—itself a kind of preordainment. Gego demonstrates that, even when the hand moves no faster than the eye, relative unpredictability within a strict repertoire of possibilities, combined with success of touch, can be as artistically effective as the most theatrical of flourishes. We see this in the intricate trace of Paul Klee, who was as essential to Gego's esthetic as the other Bauhaus artists, who in Germany pioneered the geometric language of forms she assimilated and pushed further. We see something similar in the De Stijl artists and the Constructivists. It is through the filter of such work and its pervasive influence in Latin America before and after World War II that Gego's position can best be appreciated. Recent scholarship giving proper breadth and depth to formalist abstraction in Latin America—particularly in Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela—has begun to spawn exhibitions of a similar cast, and in these Gego has held prominent place. "Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection," which appeared at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum in 2001, was a particularly successful example of these corrective surveys.

Finally, Gego has also become the subject of a series of one-person exhibitions, beginning with a full-scale retrospective mounted at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas by Iris Peraza in collaboration with the Fundación Gego (2000-01), followed by a smaller overview exhibition organized by Mari Carmen Ramirez at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and a New York gallery show of works on paper at Latincollector (both 2002). Although the Museo de Bellas Artes was at that time already besieged by populist factions within the current government that at least implicitly militate against the kind of refined nonobjective art in which Gego specialized, the exhibition itself could not have made a better case for the artist it featured.

Indeed, the Caracas museum boasts two major works by her in its permanent collection. *Rotuladores cuadrados* (1972) is a ceiling-to-floor grid-based sculpture made of stainless-steel wire and nylon filament that visually coalesces into cubic blocks. This piece comes closest to the sleek Op art works of her fellow Venezuelan Jesús Rafael Soto—of one of the artists whose scintillating reliefs found official patronage in the 1960s—and by that very token makes it exceptional in her overall production. The second, *Rotuladores (combinación)*, 1968, is an astonishing tessellation of suspended, interlocking stainless-steel wire elements that fills a large white room whose corners have been rounded so that viewers can more easily lose themselves and their sense of scale in the triangulated, volumetric webs that surround them, webs through which they move like planes navigating the gaps in a cloud bank.

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This environmental Retícula is Gego’s masterpiece. (The title is a combination of the Spanish words retículo, meaning “net,” and área, which is cognate to the English.) Given the work’s fragility, it is unlikely to leave Caracas, and to see it one must make the pilgrimage. The sculptural strata on which it rests, however, was developed by Gego in many small and intermediate-sized works, and these made up a considerable part of the museum’s three-floor retrospective. Assembled from slender lengths of rod or wire, often with circular “eyes” or wire twists at their ends to facilitate joining them one to another, Gego’s geometric configurations vary from relatively simple intersecting, generally warpig, planes floated in midair to freework spheres and skeletal variants on Braque’s Enforced Column—shapes that look as if they could collapse into themselves—and on to still more complex polygons and stacks or spirals of polyhedrons. Although Gego brings Alexander Calder to mind, her work eschews pictorial biomorphism, instead suggesting crystal growth, helices and astronomical mappings. Nor, in the realm of pure abstraction, did she juxtapose opaque silhouettes to wire lines, as Calder did. Instead, her sculptures are thoroughly integrated formally and of a piece in terms of texture, so that contour and volume, facet and void are the consequence of the nuanced manipulation of a consistent system of geometric variables using almost rudimentary sculptural means.

In that respect they recall the work of Tony Smith, another architect-turned-sculptor. But while his improvised massing and fusion of tetrahedrons and other basic solids resulted in sometimes severe, sometimes extravagant aggregates whose general but inorganic qualities resemble those of Gego’s shapes, Smith’s monoliths and space frames are uniformly “closed,” while Gego’s sculptures are always “open.” His structures are rigid in substance as well as appearance; hers are plant in both. Gego may not have known Smith’s work, although she lived in New York in 1960, had a residency at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1963 and was included in the Museum of Modern Art’s Op art exhibition, The Responsive Eye, in 1965. In any event, what separates Gego from Smith also separates her from the whole gamut of sculptors whose recourse to modernist antecedents or exemplified Minimalism in the 1950s and ’60s. The “primary structures” of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt and their cohorts were spatially fixed and fundamentally symmetrical, even, as in the case of LeWitt’s stalactite-like hanging grids, when they exploded, block by self-centered block. (LeWitt after the 1970s is a different story.) The geometric armature of Buckminster Fuller—whose work Gego saw at MOMA—and, to a lesser degree, the sculptures of Kenneth Snelson also depend on tautness and rigidity in relation to a basic unit or core. However, Gego’s objects—if one can call such airy things “objects”—do not so much occupy, displace or divide space as permeate it. Instead of absolute and unyielding geometries, we encounter forms that give in response to the tug of others, sustaining their own essential shape thanks to the tension thus exerted on them, forms and compounds of form that quiver in a draft and sometimes shimmer visually to the point of evaporating and yet remain clearly articulated. In other words, we are in the presence of sculptural textiles that take their shape from an exquisite balance between the tensile strength of their lightweight components and the artfully attenuated effects of gravity.

The range of formats Gego found for this type of incremental, lightweight constructivism is impressive. From tabletop sculptures in which planes are created with fringes of wire attached to thicker metal frames, posts or spires, to the most delicate sprang grids, dangling like sheets of crumpled graph paper, to her architecturally scaled “Chères” (Cascades, 1970–71), waterfall screens made of chainlike shafts of metal that appear...
Gego's "Drawings Without Paper" emancipate line from flatness and pry loose a spatial interval between two and three dimensions.

Without actually looking like Eva Hesse's mature drawings, they nonetheless evoke the same sense of limnality and flux, with much the same tension between self-discipline and an innate responsiveness to gestural opportunity, between deictic marking and authoritative shape-making. As the 1960s ended, these often pictorial motifs gave way to stretched, pleated and bunched allover linear fabrics that recall the brittle pen-and-ink hatch drawings of Jan Schoonhoven and the elastic "infinity nets" of Yayoi Kusama, except that Gego's grids never tend toward entropy as Kusama's often do. In their 1960s pale watercolor-wash versions, these motifs passage the patterns of Brice Marden and Terry Winters. Starting in late 1969, Gego also began to produce linocuts and etchings that have many of the same properties as her drawings, along with a cracking luminosity all their own. And in 1966, at the invitation of June Wayne, Gego made a series of lithographs at the Tamarind Workshop. With their rich, mysterious blacks and bold asymmetrical arrangements of form, these works brought an emotional density and an almost painterly physicality to her practice that one wishes she had returned to.

This is not at all to disparage the direction Gego took instead, which was to fuse her sculptural and graphic concerns in an innovative group of what she called "Dibujos sin papel." "Drawings Without Paper" (1976-89). These ingenious and varied works, for which there is no obvious precedent, consist of generally flat and approximately rectangular assemblages of wire, window screen, bangers and other components in which color, thickness of line and relative depth of field are all brought into play. The images presented in these works range from lacy contour drawing, sigants and grids to passages of bundled wire, superimposed and off-square frames that bind and shift against each other, and other more erratic formal constellations.

As their name implies, Gego's "Drawings Without Paper" emancipate line from flatness, gesture from surface, and pry loose an interval between two and three dimensions in which a new kind of very low relief becomes an optical and tactile reality. Although they take advantage of shadows cast on the walls to reiterate and recast their design, they are quite unlike Richard Tuttle's wire drawings in their substantiveness and intricacy. The subtlety and freshness of these avatars of a hybrid genre are nearly

Unnumbered, 1969, lithograph, 17 1/2 by 19 inches. Photos used courtesy Latinocollector.

Unnumbered, 1983, paper strips and black ink on board. 14 by 11 inches.
impossible to describe. Suffice it to say, then, that only very occasionally does one see something that, like the “Drawings Without Paper,” snaps into focus so completely and alters one’s sense of aesthetic opportunity so forthrightly that it is hard to imagine why nobody hit on it before. It is equally hard, in this case, to imagine that anyone could have addressed a problem so inherently susceptible to overembellishment and have invested it with comparable mance and less fuss or affectation.

That indeed is the sense one gets from Gego’s work as a whole, and insofar as the Curacas retrospective was, in breadth and depth, the most important presentation of Gego’s art to date, it admirably served its function of honoring the essence of her accomplishment by accenting its facility and its surprise rather than its historical weight. It is too bad that more people could not have seen it, but smaller exhibitions in Houston and New York and Gego’s increasing presence in survey books are, one hopes, harbingers of more comprehensive and more accessible exhibitions in the future. In the meantime, the international public’s appreciation of Latin American art’s multidimensionality continues to grow, and if Kablo represents one of its most striking facets, then it is, in a sense, to Gego that we must look to see the complex overall model into which that facet fits.

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