Gego's Galaxies: Setting Free the Line

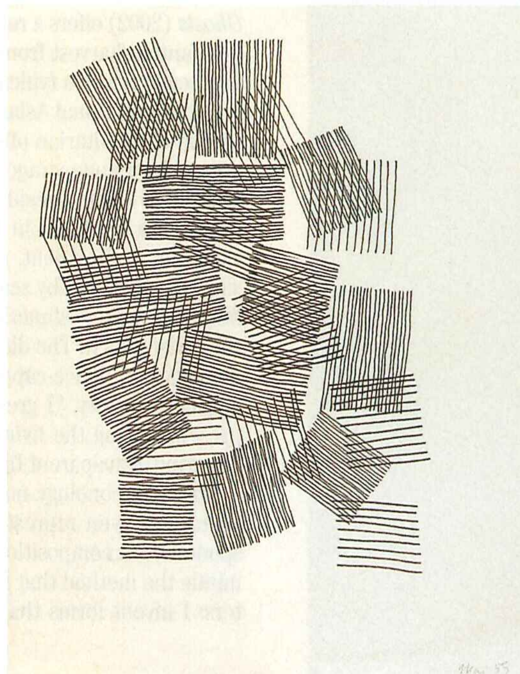
Though born in Europe, Venezuelan artist Gertrude Goldschmidt—known as Gego—created a body of highly refined abstract work that, by its formal rigor and uncanny inventiveness, places her firmly at the forefront of South American modernism.

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 Coyoacán 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.



Gego: Untitled, 1959, ink on paper, 11 by 8½ inches. Fundación Gego, Caracas. All photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Fundación Gego.

Opposite, Cascade, *1970-71, aluminum, bronze, dimensions variable; at Galería Conkright, Caracas. Photo Paolo Gasparini.*

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-

Reticulárea (ambientación), *1969, aluminum, bronze, dimensions variable; at Museo de Bellas Artes, 1975. Fundación Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas. Photo Paolo Gasparini.*

parency of her sculptures, drawings and prints—a transparency of process, as well as of form—is itself a kind of prestidigitation. Gego demonstrates that, even when the hand moves no faster than the eye, relative unpredictability within a strict repertoire of possibilities, combined with sureness of touch, can be as artistically effective as the most theatrical of flourishes. We see this in the intricate tracery 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 Peruga 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. *Reticulárea cuadrada* (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—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.[1] The second, *Reticulárea (ambientación)*, 1969, 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.

This environmental *Reticulárea* is Gego's masterpiece. (The title is a combination of the Spanish words *reticula*, 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 stratagem on which it relies, 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 warping, planes floated in midair to fretwork spheres and skeletal variants on Brancusi's *Endless Column*—shapes that look as if they could collapse into themselves—and on to still more complex polygons and stacks or spirals of polygons. Although Gego brings Alexander Calder to mind, her work eschews pictorial biomorphism, instead suggesting crystal growth, helixes 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 facture, 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 tetrahedra and other basic solids resulted in sometimes severe, sometimes extravagant aggregates whose generative 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 pliant 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 modularity anticipated or exemplified Minimalism in the 1960s and '70s. 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 stalactitelike hanging grids, when they exfoliated, block by self-centered block. (LeWitt after the 1970s is a different story.) The geodesic armatures 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 spines; to the most delicate sprung grids, dangling like sheets of crumpled graph paper; to her architecturally scaled "Chorros" (Cascades, 1970-71), waterfall screens made of chainlike shafts of metal that appear

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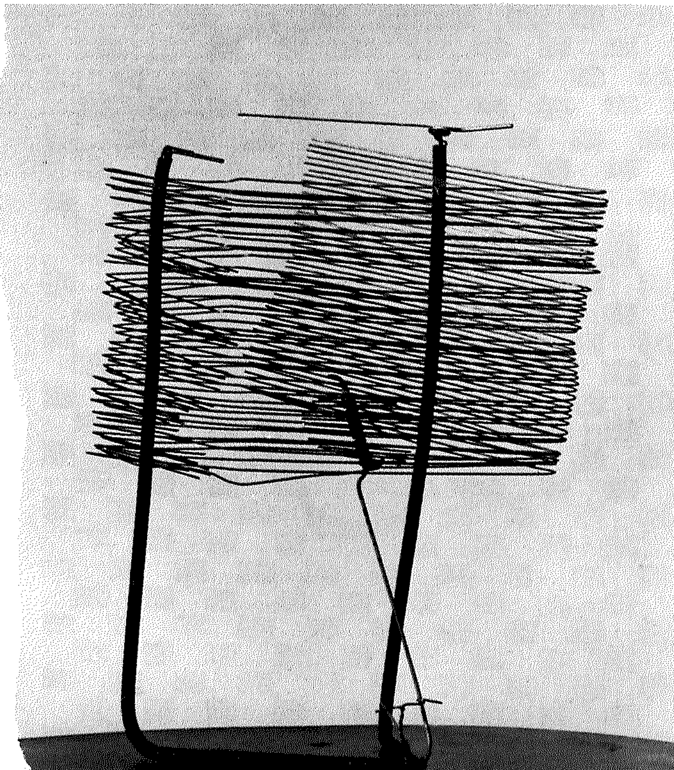
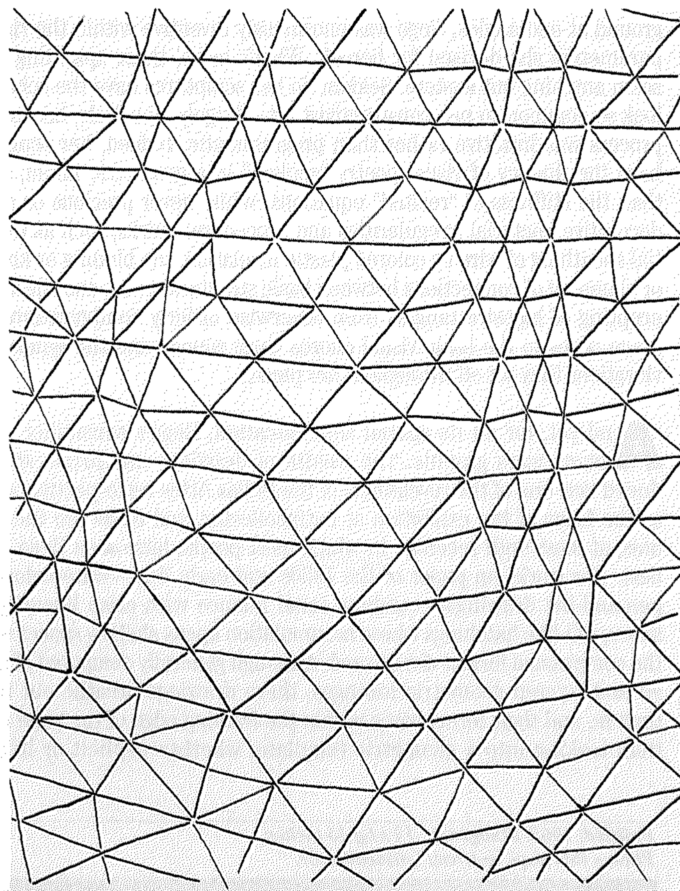
Small Structure I *(detail), 1965, stainless-steel wire, springs, wood base, 11⅞ by 11⅞ by 9⅞ inches. Fundación Gego. Photo Archivo Fundación Gego.*





Untitled, 1969, ink on paper, 25¾ by 19⅞ inches. Courtesy Latincollector, New York.

Gego's "Drawings Without Paper" emancipate line from flatness and pry loose a spatial interval between two and three dimensions.

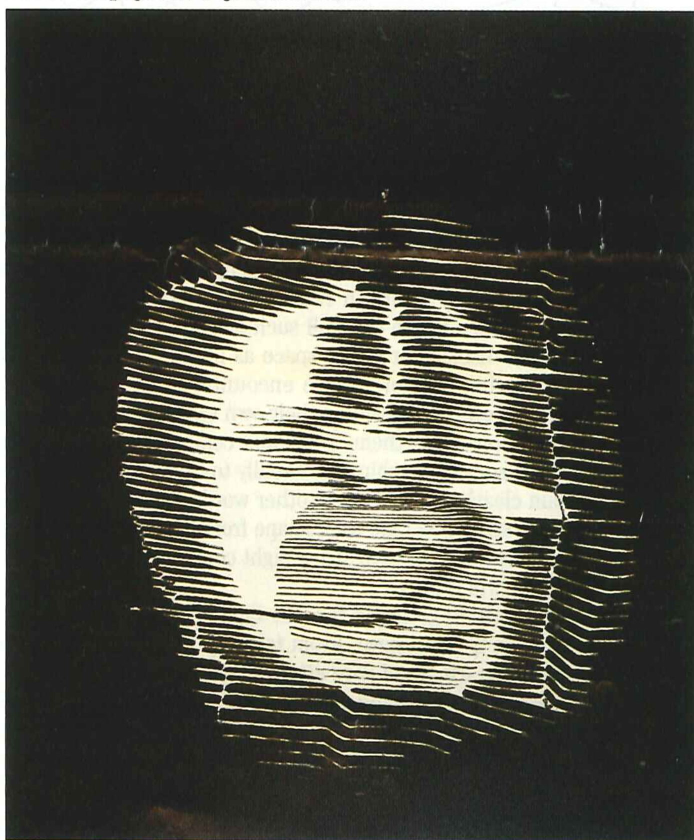
to have tumbled like pickup sticks from on high to touch or lean on the ground at odd angles, Gego was enormously inventive within the rigorous parameters she devised for herself. What's more, these sparkling works seem anything but austere. Seldom do her sculptures have the schematic look so common to neo-constructivist art—largely, one feels, because her process was intuitive rather than programmatic. Indeed, her sculptures have the fluency of visual poetry "spoken" in a geometric idiom, rather than the stiffness of "recited" equations. While never precious or merely decorative, material irregularities and procedural quirks, such as the partial sheathing of wire by colored plastic insulation, the binding or knotting or clamping of connections between basic structural units, and the sudden erupting of haywire tangles from otherwise orderly configurations, add grace notes to the basic visual chords Gego sounds and the sympathetic vibrations they set off throughout her pieces.

And yet, for all its spatial sophistication, Gego's sensibility was in many ways graphic. The wealth of drawings and prints she produced was one of the revelations of the Bellas Artes retrospective, as well as the focus of the exhibition at Latincollector, and those are the mediums, at least until recently, in which most people have seen Gego at her best. Her works on paper of the 1950s and early '60s—watercolors and pen-and-ink drawings—combine tonal nuance with crisp linearity and sheer, veil-like hatchings whose accumulation opens shallow spaces within the compressed format she favored. Although generally composed of striated and layered geometric lozenges, these drawings breathe out rather than in, and their forms hover within the framing edge of the page rather than locking into a geometric template, whether explicit or implied. Without actually looking like Eva Hesse's mature drawings, they nonetheless evoke the same sense of liminality and flux, with much the same tension between self-discipline and an innate responsiveness to gestural opportunity, between deft mark-making 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 1980s pale watercolor-wash versions, these motifs presage the patterns of Brice Marden and Terry Winters. Starting in late 1959, Gego also began to produce linocuts and etchings that have many of the same properties as her drawings, along with a crackling 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.

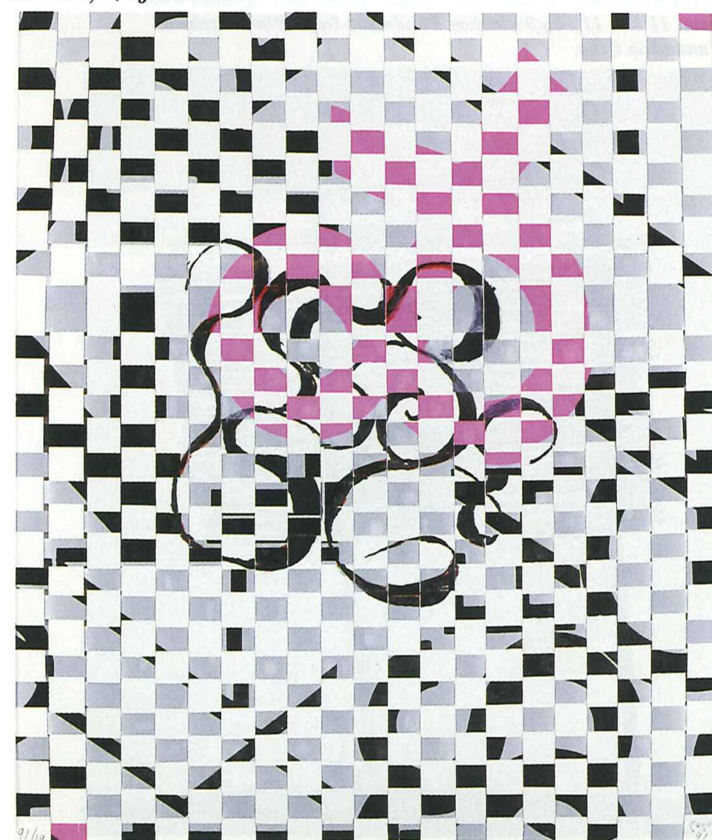
This is not at all to disparage the direction Gego took instead, which was to fuse her sculptural and graphic concerns in an innovative group of what she called "*Dibujos sin papel*," "Drawings Without Paper"(1976-89). These ingenious and varied works, for which there is no obvious precedent, consist of generally flat and approximately rectangular assemblages of wire, window screen, hangers 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, zigzags 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 designs, 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

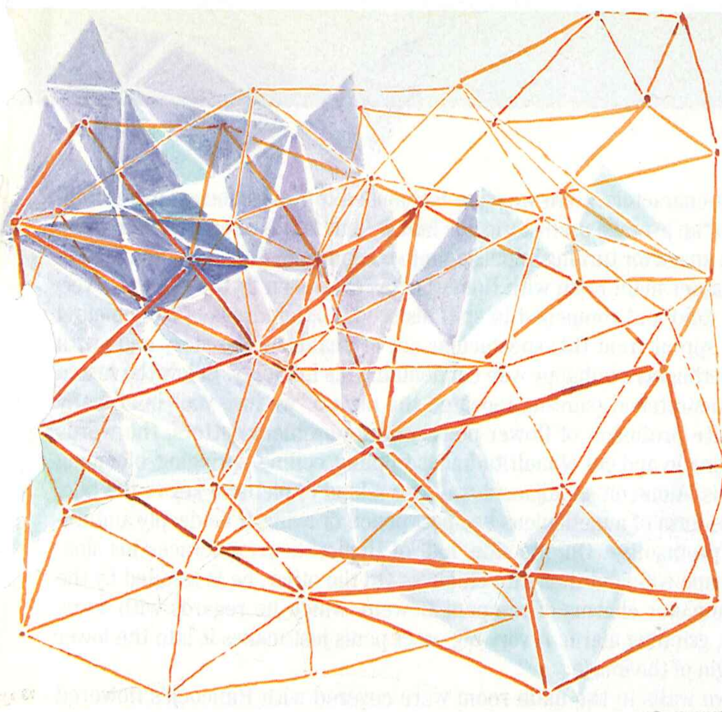
Untitled, 1963, lithograph, 18⅛ by 15 inches.
Photos this page courtesy Latincollector.



Untitled, 1991, paper strips and black ink on board, 14 by 11 inches.



Drawing Without Paper, *1976, stainless-steel wire, colored plastic insulation, metal twists, 25½ by 28⅜ by 7⅞ inches. Collection Leonel and Ana Cristina Vera. Photo Reinaldo Armas Ponce.*



Untitled, 1980, watercolor and graphite on paper, 14⅝ by 15⅝ inches. Fundación Gego.

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 esthetic 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 nuance and less fuss or affectation.

That indeed is the sense one gets from Gego's work as a whole, and insofar as the Caracas 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 lucidity and its surprises rather than its historical weight. It is too bad that more people could not have seen it, but the 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 Kahlo 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. □

1. I would like to thank Adele Nelson for drawing my attention to this issue.

"Gego: 1955-1990" appeared at the Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas [November 2000-April 2001]. "Gego: Works on Paper 1962-1991" was seen at Latincollector, New York [May-June 2002]. "Questioning the Line: Gego, A Selection 1950-1990" appeared at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston [Mar. 17-May 19, 2002].

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