Off the Page and in the Air: Drawing Transformed

The artist named Gego, who is the subject of a small, out-of-this-world survey at the Drawing Center in SoHo, was born Gertrud Goldschmidt in Hamburg, Germany, in 1917. The daughter of a Jewish banker, she studied for a career in architecture and engineering. But in 1939, as the political heat began to build, she left for Venezuela. Apart from short visits to Europe and elsewhere, she stayed there until her death in 1994.

I first encountered her a decade ago in the eye-opening survey "Re-Aligning Vision: Alternative Currents in South American Drawing" at El Museo del Barrio. Even to that comparatively orthodox眼, her art-like, freehand ink drawings stood out. They were plain and complicated in ways nothing else was.

And there was this other fabulous thing: a semigeneric, saw-through, two- and three-dimensional piece made of twisted and looped wire, suspended in space. It was as if spiders had rigged electrical circuitry and produced a cown of them and thorns. Most people would call it sculpture. She called it "drawing without paper," and was adamant about the distinction. She wrote in a notebook: "Scultpure: three-dimensional forms of solid material. NEVER what I do!"

So what, exactly, did she do? Several innovative things, and all of them are evident at the Drawing Center in "Gego, Between Transparency and the Invisible," a show originally organized in a larger form for the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston by that museum’s curator of Latin American art, Mari Carmen Ramirez.

Gego started slowly. After arriving in Venezuela and finding few architectural gogs, she focused on painting and drawing and did some studio teaching. But it was only after raising a family, divorcing, and finding a soul mate in the emergent painter Gerad Lefort that she became a full-time artist. That was in the 1950s; she was already in her 40s. And as it turned out, the older she grew, the better the art.

In 1959 she moved briefly in the United States and had a New York moment. Betty Parsons gave her a solo show; the Museum of Modern Art bought a piece. Yet even then no one knew how to package her abstract, line-based work...
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the show is an untitled 1955 abstract drawing in ink on a brushy blue ground. The quick, dark lines have an expressionistic drive: some end up in a tangled black knot. At the same time they form a classic, if unstable, Contractivist grid of uprights and horizontals.

You can think of the results as a grid gone haywire, or as rationality charged with emotion; classicism zapped by romanticism; Constructivism with an organic soul. What you see is a Klee-like pavilion, a transparent architecture of levels and layers set against a wild blue yonder, the whole business held in place by a framing ink line.

Within a few years, that containing frame is gone. Drawings begin to look like swatches randomly cut from an infinitely extending design. Tightly bundled bands of lines push in from one side of the paper and out the other, or patterns of hair-line parallel lines cover everything. Sometimes these patterns illusionistically swell intoumps or sink into pockets; occasionally, lines will suddenly stop in the middle of nowhere, skip a beat in unison, then move on, leaving a strip of unmarked space like a tear in the surface, with light showing through. Agnes Martin’s grids come to mind, but pulled out of shape and made fussy. So do microscopic and telescopic views of microscopes and lunar valleys, and the surfaces of embroideries, frayed but under repair. (In the 1980s Gego did a series of works woven from strips of photographs and cellophane.)

Her art is most novel, though, when she takes drawing physically off the page, and confines it with sculpture, using engineering tools — wire, nuts, bolts, screwdrivers, pliers — to do the job. One paperless sculpture seems to be constructed from fine-toothed, screwed-together band-saw blades. The piece was made in the 1980s, when Gego was at her inventive peak, but a very similar-looking print dates from almost 30 years earlier.

So chronology is another art-historical convention that Gego subverts: the idea that art progresses in neat, incremental steps, like beads on a string. In Gego’s case the connections are nonlinear, all over the place, out of sequence, early and late. Also, she contradicts standard theo-

 ries of influence: artist X leads to artist Y, and so on. Her work is as far from her immediate contemporaries as it is close to artists past and future whom she never knew.

The 1980s were, however, marked by a succession of formal breakthroughs, as her art became less geometric and more organic in spirit. She did her most experimental work late in life. Many of the hanging pieces from this time look like the equivalent of freehand sketches or calligraphy, their forms eccentrically asymmetrical, their expressive content apparent but elusive.

There are undercurrents of danger, even violence: a hanging rectangular bristles with needle-like sharp wire spikes; an iron mesh is torn at its center, as if it had been punched through. Geometrical shapes, reassuring in other contexts, turn into hair-trigger snare traps.

But the step from aggression to whimsy is a short one. The 1980s pieces are touched with sweet, wry delicacies: tendril-like twists of wire; prickly star-burst knots; baroque curls and braiding; candy-cane hooks; little metal sleeves for joints and angles; washers; clamps; beaded chains of the kind used for light-pulls; and flicks of paint, often bright.

In the case of one ultrasonic, almost unseeable construction much of Gego’s art is hard to photograph, the lower corner dissolves into a network of short wires linked by wooden gaskets, each painted range or red. The effect is of a constellation of stars, the etherealness reinforced by the echoing shadow the pieces cast on the gallery wall.

Of the mold-breaking gags in Gego’s art, the aesthetic equivalence of solid form and shadow may be the most radical. Shadows are, after all, not objects; they depend entirely upon objects and a controlled environment to become visible. At the same time they are always, potentially, present. They are the negative to the positive, the virtual to the real, the ephemeral to the solid. Philosophically speaking, neither exists without the other.

In a photograph of Gego’s magisterial construction “Retículo área” (1975), set against a black ground, you see instantly why “drawing” is the right word for this floor-to-ceiling modular web of stainless-steel wire filaments. Against the solid darkness, its volume flattens out. Its netting becomes pure tracery. A large work that looks small, drawing-size.


In person, the piece offers a very different, near-environmental experience, a physical space to explore, get lost in, like a Chinese landscape. (Some of Gego’s “Retículas” were, in fact, walk-in installations.) The shadows it casts — faint at the Drawing Center — underscore both its linearity and its bulk, and its potentially infinite dimensions: with a shift of lighting, shadows can stretch and stretch, fill a room; with the addition of modular units, the piece can grow and grow without limits.

Gego, who was modern without being utopian, spoke of cosmic implications in her work, a way of talking about art that was less alienating in her days than in ours. And what she said makes sense. With her bolts and pliers, she was engineering infinity, a state where hierarchies, contingencies and gravity dissolve, where everything connects, and you can see the connections, and tighten them, or loosen them. How radical is that?

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Additional images from “Gego, Between Transparency and the Invisible,” at the Drawing Center: nytimes.com/design