By Amy Serafin (June 2015)

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Unpeeling history from château walls or reslicing a Citroën DS, artist Gabriel Orozco always surprises. His new London show doesn’t disappoint.

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Art

OPPOSITE: GABRIEL ORSOLINO
PHOTOGRAPHED AT DOMAINE
DE CHAUMONT-SUR-LOIRE,
A FRENCH CHÂTEAU WHERE HE
WAS ATTENDING THE UNVEILING
OF HIS COMMISSION, FLEURS
FANTÔMES, EARLIER THIS YEAR.
THIS PAGE, ELEMENTS OF
FLEURS FANTÔMES, WHICH WAS
INSPIRED BY PEELING LAYERS OF
ANCIENT WALL PAPER IN THE
CHÂTEAU’S GUEST BATHROOMS.
Gabriel Orozco figured that being the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo this year was as good an excuse as any to move with his family to Japan. Which means that if you ask the artist where he resides, the answer is now even more convoluted than before, when he lived between Mexico City, Paris and New York.

Never knowing where Orozco is going to show up next is an apt metaphor for his career. The Mexican artist glides from photography to sculpture, from installation to painting, from conceptual to concrete, refusing to be categorized. 'I don’t like to repeat myself,' he explains, admitting that he even grew weary of his recent mid-career retrospectives. 'If I see my work again and again, I start to get bored.'

'He manages to master each form while raising questions that go beyond the form, and that’s what characterizes a great artist,' notes Christine Macel, chief curator at the Musée National d’Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou, which hosted an Orozco retrospective in 2010-2011.

Orozco’s latest work is showing this summer at the Marian Goodman gallery in London. As usual, part of it is made from objects he’s chanced upon – this time scraps of fabric from obis (kimono sashes). He bought them in a shop in a small Japanese town because he found them beautiful and appreciates that fabrics are important in Japanese culture and Buddhist art.

After studying them for a while and getting over his feeling that it would be ‘sacrilegious’ to cut them, he took a circular knife and cropped them, flipping them from front to back, to front again, to create geometric forms made of circles, vaguely reminiscent of mandalas. ‘The embroidery is sometimes more beautiful on the back than on the front,’ he says. He mounted the results on layered squares of paper on a Japanese scroll like a collage, the gold threads in the fabric reflecting the light.

Orozco is also presenting new paintings in London, part of his ongoing exploration of circular forms and grids, a system of sequencing colours taken from how knights advance on a chessboard. 'I like the knight’s movement because it’s a tri-dimensional proposition in a bi-dimensional game.'
he says. He does these paintings in egg tempera and gold leaf, in the manner of medieval icons. He creates them in Mexico with an expert restorer in tempera, a material he calls 'difficult, mysterious and permanent'.

We met in spring this year at the Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire, a 15th-century French château, where he was attending the unveiling of a commission for the site (showing until November 2015). When he first visited the château, what inspired him most was the layers of old wallpaper, dating back to 1879, peeling off the walls of the former guest bedrooms. He enlarged and copied the motifs using a machine from the 1970s that sprays oil paint on canvas, resulting in strange, blurry reproductions of the patterns and flowers. The work's name, Fleurs Fantômes, makes reference to the ghosts, or fragments, of a disappeared past.

Orozco's own personal history began in 1962 in Jalapa, Mexico, where he was born to a father who painted communist murals and a mother who played the piano. He decided to be an artist at an early age. 'I saw my father working every day, and he looked very happy painting, painting, all the time painting.' He attended the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas in Mexico City, receiving a classic fine arts education. He then moved to Madrid, in 1966, where he took courses at the Círculo de Bellas Artes. In Spain he discovered works by the likes of Piero Manzoni and Joseph Beuys, and started to see that art was everywhere to be found, either ready-made or ripe to be manipulated. Taking particular inspiration from the derelicts of human activity, he's since applied this philosophy to everything from fruit at an abandoned marketplace to tumble-dryer lint.

From the outset he refused to play it safe, even when his career began to take off internationally. For his first major show, the 1993 Venice Biennale, he pulled a shoebox out of his backpack and placed it on the gallery floor. Marian Goodman, who represents Orozco, recalls, 'He had placed his humble yet challenging shoebox in his allotted space. It seemed to be causing quite a stir, with at least one dealer and one artist interested in taking his space away, because there was nothing in it except a shoebox, seeming to demand, “Where is the art here?” I remember Gabriel being calm. It was quite a statement for an artist showing internationally for the first time.

That same year Orozco also created one of his most spectacular pieces. Every day for a month, he and an assistant saw their way through a vintage Citroën DS. They cut it lengthwise into thirds, removed the middle section (including the engine), then put it back together. Though its fantastically streamlined proportions implied greater speed, it could no longer go anywhere. In 1997 Orozco dealt with the spectre of his own mortality by turning a human skull into art. His lung had collapsed and he wanted to spend his convalescence alone. He spent nearly six months covering a skull with a chequerboard design using graphite pencil. This was a decade before Damien Hirst did his platinum and diamond skull, and even Orozco found it a bit disturbing. ‘When I finished it I couldn’t believe I’d done that, I was like a kind of freak monster or something. And then I put it in my closet for a month.’

The artist is fascinated not only with the objects he chances upon but also with what’s missing or been removed. One summer at his country house in France, he decided to teach himself how to throw a boomerang, then cut his own, out of birchwood. ‘I liked the leftovers,’ he says. ‘I put them aside and said, “Maybe I can do Matisse with this.” He flew his home-made boomerangs before hanging them on the walls of the Marian Goodman gallery in New York last year. ‘I didn’t know what to do with the cut-outs. Matisse is too good. But I didn’t dare to trash them. So I put them back with the boomerang.’

As for those circles that show up repeatedly in his works, he says, ‘I believe the idea of movement, circulation, containers, focus, concentration, pointing, all have to do with circular forms in motion and the connecting of circles and elements like individual bodies.’ Over the years he has created an installation from four circular yogurt lids; photographed round blobs of toothpaste-thickened spit; and superimposed circles onto images of athletes in motion.

Macel says that despite the artist’s multiplicity of styles, his overall body of work is remarkably coherent. ‘No medium is isolated from the others.’

But Orozco often finds himself in the position of a rock band that disconcerts its fans by changing styles. These days, for example, critics tend to pan his tempera circle paintings. He responds that there should be a degree of breaking expectations. ‘Every work has its own life because that work generates more works. Then you keep doing different things, because they are all part of the body of work. Some people end up understanding the reasons for each work, but that at the beginning a lot is disappointing.’

And so, I ask, if you don’t disappoint, does that mean you haven’t done your job? ‘At this point I don’t have to worry about it,’ he smiles. ‘I will always disappoint. I have managed very well to impose myself, so expectations are very high!’

Gabriel Orozco is at the Marian Goodman Gallery, London, 12 June to 7 August, mariangoodman.com