

OBRA GRIS

By

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Abstract

Obra Gris is a thesis art work consisting of a series of sculptural ceramic pieces, which depict human figures that transform into block-like forms, at the same time that it is integrated with real cinder blocks, which serve as both, narrative element and support for the sculptures. *Obra Gris* represents how people transform into conforming, and well fitting shapes, while struggling to maintain individuality.

Artist statement

Since the beginning of my career, I have been working with several materials, such as paper, wood and stone; however, I always go back to clay, which is my favorite material to work with. Even as a child, I remember constantly playing in the mud. I used to sink my hands deep in the wet soil; despite the fact that I didn't know it was clay. I was so fascinated with the way it broke in my hands, separating in layers, like a fantastic abstract mosaic. Years later I noticed that it could be more than a simple material to play in; it is a whole world of possibilities and ways to express myself. Still, I didn't realize that one day, clay would become ceramics, and ceramics would become my passion and way of life.

I like the textures of rocks, sand, gravel, fractures on the dry mud, and many other elements present in the earth, and I like to integrate those into my work, creating hybrid structures like cinder blocks and bricks with cracks and human figures, remaining from something bigger, but it is lost now.

I mostly like to work the human figure in ceramics; I concentrate on the emotions and expressions of people. My figures work as groups, as modular people, they create connections or boundaries, which represents our society. In it, we have to fit certain standards while struggling to maintain individual identity.

As a main technique, my primarily focuses are sculptural and architectural ceramics, and the purpose is creating a strong impact on the viewer with my three-dimensional work in clay. By creating a narrative of common structures turning them into complex figures, I want to portray an interaction between saturation and simplicity. And at the same time, using exaggeration in those constructed forms, as

well as contrast, gestural expression, light and shadow, I want to evoke a sense of the theatrical and dramatic.

I.

Origins of Obra Gris

“Mercancía de exportación” was a previous body of work that could be considered the beginning of the thesis work Obra Gris. This art pieces can be described as a first attempt to fuse the human figure with geometrical and mundane forms, in this case boxes and crates.



Mercancía de Exportación 2007-2008

Photo: Leonor Parra

“Mercancía de exportación” could be translated as export goods, but a much better word for goods would be commodities, since the concept was people from impoverished nations being sent as pre-packed workers to do cheap labor in developed nations. The concepts of imperialism, exploitation and even retaliation also inspired *Mercancía de Exportación*, in the sense that that the nations that were imperialists or still are, in a sense are being invaded by the people that were in occupied territories as in the case of Africans migrating massively to Europe. This can also be said of domination through economic power, as in the case of the United States and Cuba.

However, the main focus of this body of work is not geopolitical conflict but rather, the experience of the journey, emphasizing on the human figure and groups, representing the emotions of the people traveling under precarious conditions to unknown places by their expressions and gestures; hope, despair, sadness and joy. This marks the beginning of a new type of work, however, instead of people being inside the box packed and compressed, they were transformed into the very boxes or blocks.

Boxes and square elements have been part of my past works, later, I realized that they could interact more with each other, so I started a transition into modular forms, it is when it was born the term of modular people.

Brick Society

Brick Society is a project that carried on with the idea of integrating human form and every day objects. It can be seen as a direct continuation from “*Mercancía*” and it shares some similarity with it at the same time that it differs. Basically, it is a metaphorical sense, people and society described by using brick-shaped faces that form a larger structure; people in a way are transformed into a modular pieces that fit in modern day standards, ready to be used and fit into different roles as society requires.



L: *Brick Society* (detail top) 2012



R: *Brick Society* (detail bottom) 2012

This idea also shares the link or bond people have to each other, but it is different in the visual treatment of the work, human faces are now completely bonded to the brick shape, which is somewhat standard, but not quite, they seem irregularly forming a wall, but by being a little odd they retain a bit of their individuality and deal with our need to keep our own essence. *Brick Society* is more neutral in the sense that some viewers commented on the positive aspects of cooperation and solidarity as a necessary to build a prosperous society, as well as being seen as a society that forces us to fit into this roles.



Brick Society (detail) 2012

Again, emotions felt by the brick people are represented by emphasizing the facial expressions and gestures, some faces are stern, stoic, sad, numb, nihilistic, surprised, hopeful, and so on. Perhaps some of them wish to remain individualistic and refuse the rolls they have been given and wish to escape this grand wall, or maybe they conform to what they have to be.

Grava

Grava or Gravel is a relief that came out during explorations with textures and ideas of fusing the human figure with more irregular forms. Still, as in the case of *Brick Society*, the idea of a pretty common material used in construction, however it addresses people and society in a different manner, by showing more of the deconstruction, fragmentation or demolition of the form, rather than building a wall. The groups of faces that form the structure are emerging from the wall, and faces are fusing with the rocks forming modular panels.

This particular piece is relevant to *Obra Gris* in the sense that there was the need to break away with the box format of *Brick Society* and give the work a more organic shape and in general, to the way of working the facial expressions of the human figures.



Grava.

Relief mounted on wood. 2013

It also serves as preparation in accepting the nature of ceramics itself, being controlled to a certain point but with a “lottery” factor that comes from unpredictable aspects in the firing process. After this work, a crack in the piece can be something that adds character, instead of a construction and firing defect, which would render the piece useless and be discarded.

Modular people

Modular people or Mini blocks developed out of our modern way of building, small pieces that fit on other shapes, and built massive structures. We have for example screws, bricks blocks, etc. Modular shapes allow constructing larger sculptures by assembling the parts after firing. Used as a sort of building blocks that can be arranged in different configurations and in a sense, allow playing with the final form of the sculpture. An example of this is Lego®, which was based on the idea of bricks, these toys were designed on a simple shape that you could stack and build a complex form. Later, Lego added connectors to make them stronger and more versatile as well as adding ever more elaborate pieces to the sets.



Modular People or Mini blocks

Maquette for Obra Gris, 2013-2014

Also, using modular forms for this project was really important because, the idea was to generate a body of work which, I could construct in different environments, so, pieces that could be assembled, separated and arranged in many ways were developed. This is an essential aspect of this project; also, it adjusts to the size limitation of the ceramic pieces, mostly due to kiln size and clay materials.

Baroque and Ultra baroque

Baroque is a complex ornamentation and juxtaposing of elements that contrast themselves, this element evoke a different kind of sensations of movement, drama and tension that is distinguished by the grotesque extravagant complexity of forms and very appealing shapes ending in a irregular and abstract growing form. The most known characteristic of baroque is the saturation of elements.

The concept of Ultra baroque is multitude of ideas, all interacting together and ending in a contemporary form, like construction elements. It comes from the already overloaded baroque influence that came from Europe in the times of the conquest, fusing with the also very loaded art forms in Latin America, inspired by the rich nature of the place and evolving until it reached our modern time. Looking in retrospective to my work, I began noticing a strong tendency towards saturated elements and a fascination with packing materials on small places, modular shapes, boxes and all kind of masses. I draw inspiration, for example, from the stonewalls of Mayan and Incan cultures, in a way I could call it direct influence of the ultra baroque, also from *horror vacui* tendencies to fill up empty spaces in art

work. Packing materials and maximizing spaces becomes a sort of representation on overpopulation and globalization.



Obra Gris. Detail

Photo used on the promotional poster for the show. 2014.

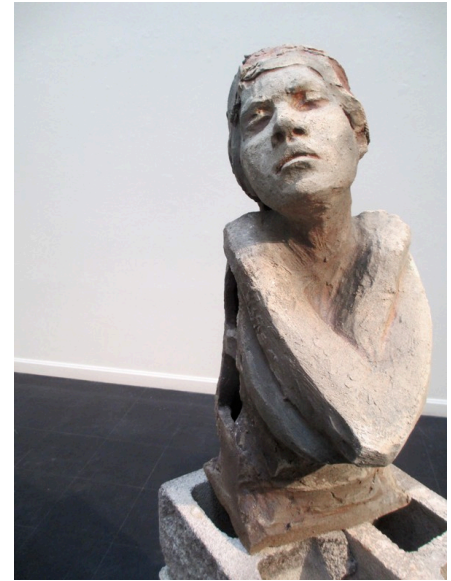
Hybrid art

Cultures all over the world are beginning to fuse in many ways, absorbing, assimilating and exchanging cultural aspects with one another, creating a new generation more global and standardized. But this generation belongs at once to both and neither side, they are in the middle and in the end, they develop to their own direction, being a sort of hybrid people. As a consequence, new artistic proposals are formed in the same way; two flows that mix into one, creating a new and strong tendency.

Hybrid art is an art fusion; it is the result of mixed medias in modern times. Hybrid art has been explored more intensely in recent times. People are looking for the meaning of the extravagant trends developing in Latin American. Reason seems to end in convergent point of cultural interactions. My country of origin, Costa Rica, is a good example of this, it is a small country in Central America, has always been a multicultural place of mixed ethnicity, and has always been a bridge between the much larger continental landmasses of North and South America; even in pre-Columbian times it was a trade center. Evidence of this is found in art pieces made of materials such a jade, which comes from the north and lapis lazuli, found in the south, but none being found in Costa Rica naturally.

In modern times, it is a bridge of nature and culture, a connection between two worlds, also a refuge for many foreigners who fled their countries due to war and political prosecution, it is foremost, a nation in development, which seems that is always going to be under construction and it will never be done, not only buildings and streets, but education and culture as well. Always with a sense of duality, being

a place of stability and chaos. This mixture forms a very different identity, a hybrid culture, which can be perceived as a multicultural collage of some sort.



L: *Obra Gris*, unused image for the show's promotional poster. R: *Obra Gris*. Detail. 2014

Artists References

Kathe Kollwitz (8 July 1867 – 22 April 1945)

Kathe Kollwitz was a well known German expressionist artist whose work had a important influence on my own, although her main body of work is drawing, painting and print making, she did also three-dimensional work where she transformed the lines from her drawn figures into sculptures, the main mediums used here were stone and metal. Her work reflected on the human condition, and the tragedy of war, by making representations of tight groups of people. What appeals to me the most from her work is the way she made her drawing vibrate with images and materials, it made me realize that expression in my work also comes from the material itself and how is treated. I aimed to give my sculptures the same expressiveness, but naturally attached to a different concept.

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968)

Negative spaces on Duchamp's work made me think of materials interactions as well as a link of concepts, he had a long and productive life, full of ready-made objects and installations. Using as a reference his work "Cast Alive", which is on display at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City. He reflects on the irony of his life by representing his face as a mask, held before a chessboard. Though this work differs conceptually from my own, the way that he places simple figure fragments on the space creates a relationship between negative space and figure, which I used in

my work where negatives spaces play an important role in the final installation, you could see through holes and because the figures are intentionally incomplete, the viewers make their own connections.

Constantine Brancusi (1876-1957)

As a mix of material Brancusi and his modern work integrates human figure to cubic structures, some of them fused on one simple block creating a new dialogue, other is incomplete or a simple blur on the form, as a mixed type of work. His work “Le supplie” is a great inspiration for Obra Gris, I see this figure as a progenitor to my work. Since my main focus on this work was to approach connections with materials and human figure, Brancusi fit perfectly of the connections between materials in his sculptures, and the incomplete figures creating a whole new composition.

Stephen De Staebler (March 24, 1933 – May 13, 2011)

He was a grand master of sculptural ceramics, his work *matter + spirit* explores the duality on human condition, I based the construction on my personal work on his solutions to work on clay as sculptural material Also it is not just his way of working clay, but also how his figurative work explored the resilient and the fragile, life and death as well as being bound to the earth and the likelihood of a transcending beyond mortal life. His monumental sculptures are built on big segments, creating a group of columns, the inside of this monumental works are

built using slabs, so when you see a fragment of his sculptures, you could see something similar to a cinder block. The work done in Obra Gris has similarities on the way of construction, but instead been just one column that always assemble in the same way, it could be assembled in many different ways, which makes the installation more playable.

The Mexican Muralists

As a hybrid art center, Latin America is the best candidate since it is postmodernist and ultrabaroque along with traditional. In a way, all that is represented in Obra Gris. However, examples of these forms of communication and art which inspired my work can be seen easier on a much larger country than Costa Rica, that is for example Mexico.

Mexico is a fusion of cultures, where you can see past, present and future. On this nation, architecture shows the remains of the dramatic change that occurred in this place. I would like to refer to this city because it is where I have better seen this amalgam of cultures. Mexico City is the best representation of hybrid architecture, because you could see more than five cities coexisting one place all together. Past is represented on the city buried underneath, this stone cities under ground representing origin, the pre-Columbian empires transformed by migrations. Then there are the old colonial cities that used the ancient ones as a foundation and destroying the origins. But, there are some remains like stones and structures of the original pre-Columbian city mixed with new modern Mexico. Creating new canons of esthetics implementing tradition and moving towards the future.

II.

Obra Gris

Obra Gris is a term we use in Costa Rica, it means “under-construction”; referring to when a building is in progress or half way done, but it mostly comes from the color of cinder blocks which is gray (gris). These blocks are one of the most standard structures used in building, since they are designed to fit one another. Additionally, I have noticed that wherever I am, there are usually constructions or restorations taking place, which never seem to finish, and that was the starting point of this thesis work.



L: *Obra Gris*. Detail



R: *Obra Gris*. Detail. 2014

I am using the cinder block; widely recognized, all-fitting standard modular shape as a symbol of modern people, and the partial construction society in which we live. In my work, the characters portrayed are transforming into modular forms to fit better, but because the world around them changes so fast, some get incomplete, not fitting so well, unfinished, under permanent construction, some become standard blocks, because they want to fit so well, that they end up losing their identity. Other figures with hybrid adaptation are more resistant; they are partially fitting but refuse to lose their identity. As modular people they create connections in one way or another to the construction, but never become a full cinder block.



L: *Obra Gris*. Detail.



Center: *Obra Gris*. Detail.



R: *Obra Gris*. Detail. 2014

Art & Design Gallery. University of Kansas.

Elaboration

Sculptural ceramics is a technique used since ancient times. Clay is a very common material on Earth, easy to find and model into shapes, then is subjected to firing, in which it transforms its composition from a soft material to a rock like quality. This idea of a rock-like substance started my research of materials, textures and ways of firing which was used for the finished pieces. It could be said that clay is the material that camouflage itself to look like almost any other. Different possible ceramic finishes were researched from the beginning of the project to try to make clay look as construction materials like concrete, gravel, bricks and stone. With the technique of slabs this project turn into life, built one by one each piece turn in complex building like an anthill structure.



L: *Obra gris*. Green ware



Center: *Obra Gris*. Bisque



R: *Obra Gris*. Stoneware.

III.

Conclusion

Obra Gris starts on a very simple idea of construction, based in a common shape; a brick, that during four years it turned into a block and it transformed into a community of shapes, that in the beginning were individual and now they conform a much larger group of sculptures. It changed the way I work in general, becoming less polished and refined, having a much fresher, immediate and expressive quality.

Now, I am letting the material talk and allowing the viewer to make the final contribution to the show, by interpreting what they see as well as what is not visible. Even the show itself looks like it is under construction and not yet finished.

In addition, this thesis work reflects a transition in my life, were I had to develop myself professionally, looking for a better life through education; part of the struggle during this three years has been the English language, which I had to push myself to learn and understand very quickly, as well as having to adapt to a different culture. Thus, I will say that in the hardest of times, creativity develops. I think *Obra Gris* is part of that transformation, and it made me realize that there are too many ways to develop a body of work, but in the end you have to pick one and compromise with it and with yourself and just keep going until the very end.



Obra Gris. 2014

Art & Design Gallery. University of Kansas.

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