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ART

He's Struck by Wonder of It All

Michael Gonzalez's work uses Wonder Bread packaging--both literally and metaphorically.

May 24, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

Michael Gonzalez is dedicated to putting the wonder back in art. His compositions of tiny bubbles of red, yellow and blue are painstakingly cut from the plastic wrappers of Wonder Bread. "I'm using wonder and taking it quite literally. If there is any doubt, I can safely assure you that there is wonder in these works," he says in his gravelly drawl. Gonzalez is exhibiting 15 of these concoctions in an exhibition at the Christopher Grimes Gallery that opened this weekend.

The 44-year-old artist is a big, athletic guy. He seems too large for the small studio apartment he rents in a '50s complex in Santa Monica. His single room is outfitted with a bed, worktable and kitchenette, while clothes and work materials are tidily stashed in closets and cupboards. It is modest even by the standards of most artists. Gonzalez's reasons for his spartan lifestyle, however, are practical. He devotes his time and his finances entirely to making art and lives off the occasional sale. He takes part-time jobs as necessary, but shuns teaching as an option both exhausting and futile. "If the only chance you have after art school is to become a teacher, isn't there something flawed about that reasoning?" he asks in a slightly cynical tone.

Writing in Artforum, critic Lane Relyea once observed, "The pleasure evident in Gonzalez's art remains wonderfully wicked and wanton, derived as it is from an act of creation that goes nowhere and yet seems adequate, complete . . ." Indeed, in review after review, since Gonzalez began exhibiting his work in the mid-1980s, writers have focused on the artist's ability to coax transcendental beauty and meaning out of the most banal of materials. For example, he uses brilliantly colored Staedtler erasers to emulate Minimalist paintings, but on a tiny scale. Works from this series, which he continues to produce, were among his first to attract critical acclaim when shown in 1988 at the now-defunct L.A. gallery, Thomas Solomon's Garage. Gonzalez became the Cartier of humble electrical wire by twisting grounding braid into dazzling pieces of jewelry for the wall. Then came his discovery of the wonders of Wonder Bread.

In the latest work, colored circles are trapped between several layers of plexiglass, with 12 sprightly arrangements of dots per panel. Gonzalez says, "I'm the world's leading authority on Wonder Bread bags. There are three different kinds of material I use for different effects." Reaching over to a cabinet, he brings out an English muffin bag. "With these, I cut out the dots separately, the red, dark blue and the yellow," he explains. "But the hot dog bag is a whole different kind of graphic art, translucent, with different colors and patterns. Wonder also makes a whole wheat bread that comes with circles of red, yellow and brown, but I haven't used that yet."

It is this obsessive attention to detail, in part, that transforms the material from commercial packaging to fine art. "I like the Wonder Bread wrappers for their Pop art and pop culture references," Gonzalez says. "It's such an American thing and certainly a baby-boomer thing. Wonder is emblematic of our whole kind of skewed sense of ourselves in the world as middle-class Americans. Wonder is a metaphor for unlimited future."

"In addition, I think of my work as a metaphor for how I've received 20th century art. Most of my art education comes from small reproductions, which explains the small scale of my work," he adds. "Everything is so mediated that regardless of how disciplined you are, you always wind up with your own version of art history.

"In this work, I can see every major tendency in 20th century art. You've got your California Light-and-Space and Finish-Fetish, you've got your Pop and your Minimalism, you've got the stuff I came up with, like psychedelia, underground comics and cartoons. It has a taxonomical effect as a collection of influences, literalized."

Gonzalez believes the dwarfish scale of his work--ranging from just a few inches high in the eraser works to 14" by 17" in the most recent works--lends it an "anti-heroic quality."

"I'm trying to make fun of heroic pretensions in Modernist art. But I don't like to emphasize that too much, because it begs the question, 'Why bother?' It's not like heroic Modernism is much of a target anymore. Why should that be your organizing principle? But it's part of the legacy of my generation, you have to make fun of something."

He admits that the size of his apartment is a contributing factor. "I have nothing but admiration for people who don't let anything stop them once they get an idea, but I like working for its own sake and I'm pleased that I've figured out ways of working without having any room or any money. I've managed to make water into wine here. I keep my overhead down, I live like a middle-aged college student. But I've been able to keep the work going."

Although Gonzalez's father was born in Mexico, he worked for the Air Force and insisted that English be spoken at home in order to assimilate as completely as possible into Southern California suburbia. The artist's mother was a homemaker, and he grew up with his sister in the middle-class comfort of San Bernardino and Ventura. After graduating from high school, Gonzalez moved to Solana Beach in northern San Diego County to pursue the perfect wave. A self-described "surfer hippie," (still an avid surfer, his board hangs from the ceiling over his bed) Gonzalez finally entered California Institute for the Arts at 26 with little knowledge of the visual arts other than of underground comics and custom cars.

Gonzalez's drawing skills were honed by copying cartoons, and he vaguely assumed he would follow the path of his heroes--underground comics artists like Zap's Ric Griffin. Instead, he found himself attending lectures on subjects like the sculpture of German artist Joseph Beuys. He was ready to drop out after the first semester when artist Jonathan Borofsky made a presentation. "He was unpretentious and utterly indifferent to theory. He was the first one to make any sense to me. There was a tendency at CalArts to demystify art, but here was a guy who was uncritical and really demystifying art while everybody else was just adding layers of intrigue."

In 1983, Gonzalez received his bachelor's degree, and he believes his was one of the last classes to retain the idealism of the '60s and '70s. "There was never any discussion about getting a job. We thought the whole idea of making a living was overrated," he recalls. That mind-set contributed to Gonzalez's ability to put art ahead of lifestyle.

Five years after graduating from CalArts, Gonzalez invented the highly praised eraser pictures, which he continues to produce. Despite his ambivalence over the theoretical emphasis at school, all of Gonzalez's art is as redolent with content as with physical panache.

"In my mind, they have so much presence, you don't have a sense of them being small," he says.

"I'm a little stubborn about working small because I've been nagged so many times," he adds. "People assume that if something is really cool this small, then it stands to reason that it's going to be so much better if it's bigger. Every once in a while, I start making things bigger, and I end up going 'Why? This is purely a market-based decision.' The bigger the work, the more it sells for. But the work is a reductivist sensibility to begin with. Why make it bigger if it's not going to be any better. If you have something that is perfectly resolved and it's only seven by five inches, then that's as big as it needs to be.

"I'll bet Joseph Cornell got badgered his whole life, too."

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MICHAEL GONZALEZ, Christopher Grimes Gallery, 916 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica. Dates: Open Tuesday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Ends June 20.
Phone: (310) 587-3373.