

PERROTIN

Gabriel RICO

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Gabriel Rico Organic Languages

GABRIEL RICO

ORGANIC

Guadalajara-based artist Gabriel Rico's metaphysical and ontological approach to artmaking offers an earth-shattering reflection of our natural world. Utilizing neon, taxidermy, ceramics, mathematical equations, and detritus—both man-made and natural—like Coca Cola bottles and delicate tree branches. Rico constructs bold, humorous, and symbolic immersive installations that are rife with contradictions and decadent ironies. But these incongruencies are never without merit: Rico's Aristotelian assemblages have their own logic and formulaic geometries that seem to speak a strange and universal organic language. This fall, Rico will present a large site responsive and post apocalyptic installation for an exhibition that will inaugurate the new Institute of Contemporary Art, San Diego.

LANGUAGES

Interview OLIVER KUPPER
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OLIVER KUPPER I want to talk to you about the natural world, which your work is so concerned with and connected to. When did you become fascinated with nature and its many systems?

GABRIEL RICO I grew up three hours west of Guadalajara in a small town. But even in that small town, you live in the middle of nature, because there are no other houses. In my backyard, there was natural light, the smell of the rain, the spring with tons of insects, so I never believed in the city totally. Cities are monuments constructed by the idea of control and to create mini ecosystems. The reality is that they broke the system where humans come from, which is nature. Now the projection of the cities of the future seem like they're bringing us hope. But to make cities like that all over the world, it would take at least three hundred years. Or maybe more. I don't think we have enough time to wait for that to happen. For that reason, I think the connection between our lives and nature needs to be more clear. You need to be close to the ground, to nature, to feel the fragility of our life. Because in the middle of a concrete house, it's not easy to feel the fragility of nature. Nature brings me, of course, the most important things I need to survive: water, freedom, food. All my senses feel excited when I'm in the middle of nature. That's why I prefer to be in that line of contemporary art.

KUPPER And you studied architecture, which goes in line with your thinking about cities too. Do you see a connection between the natural world and architecture?

RICO There's an architectural group that came from England in the '60s called Archigram—the biggest architect from that practice is Peter Cook. This guy constructed a city that walks on legs, like a spider. It can move from one place to another once that city finishes all the natural resources from that area. This is more science fiction than architecture. When you study architecture, you can be whatever you want, because you study a very open range of things, like mathematics and the composition of the ground. It depends on how you want to develop your career. In my case, I discovered conceptual art in an art history class. And when I read about artists such as Mario Merz and the other was Joseph Beuys, they just blew my mind—they're free, they're philosophers, but they're artists. When I was a kid, I collected different things like rocks or branches. One of the things I worried about was the amount of space that I need to collect all these elements. So, when I discovered contemporary art, it was amazing to have that possibility.

KUPPER There's the use of the Coca Cola bottle in your work, which has a connection between the corporation Coca Cola, but also globalism and trade politics. Can you talk a little bit about the use of the Coca Cola bottle?

RICO Coca Cola is not a beverage. It's a symbol. Coca Cola represents the capacity of humanity to manipulate the chemical elements, or natural materials, to construct another element. I mean, look at the color of Coke. It's black. But I use Coca Cola to talk about the capacity that we have to erase, to manipulate materials, to construct new paradigms, together as a society. And also, why is Mexican Coca Cola more expensive than American Coca Cola? This represents how capitalism prostitutes countries such as Brazil or Mexico. But it's not about US versus Mexico, it's about the whole situation. Mexico is the biggest consumer of Coca Cola in the world. So, it was part of my childhood. I would go out to eat with my friends and they would offer you a coke instead of fresh water.

KUPPER Water is a whole other side of the history and politics in Mexico. They are pumping chemicals into the ground to extract the water.

RICO I consider myself a fighter of nature. I don't post anything about the things I do for nature because that's very personal to me. With my work, I can tell my history and my vision of life. But, it's impossible to ignore the condition of the planet now. I don't really want to turn this into a conversation about the history between Mexico and America, but it's obvious that petrol is the main thing in the relationship between the two countries. The fracking. In the middle of the jungle you discover huge holes made from machines that come from South Africa. You really think about the prostitution of the planet.

KUPPER We have this problem where we think that just because we can't see our footprint, it just doesn't exist. So, we have this very bizarre viewpoint of the world that the things we do and the way we live doesn't have a chain reaction.

RICO That's one of the main reasons I started to make the connection to native tribes in Mexico. It was very personal. As I started to work with them, I got involved in the mystical, and the visions of these tribes, because I really think they know better than us in terms of how to deal with nature. That's the first step. They don't have the level of pragmatic consciousness that we have as a contemporary society, but when you spend several months in the mountains with them, you start to realize you don't need that prag-

matism in your life. More or less, art doesn't need to be pragmatic. It needs to be more organic. I'm talking more about the state of the art. For example, you can use beautiful, or ugly, or gross to describe something that is in front of you, but that is a personal decision. But, as a whole, we don't necessarily need these kinds of art objectives to be defined. The native tribes don't recognize borders. I spent three months in Phoenix, which is where the biggest ceremony is held for the Yaqui tribe within the whole continent. People from Mexico can walk there freely without borders. There is an agreement between the US and Mexican governments to let them move freely across the border to meet for the Easter celebration in Guadalupe, Arizona.

KUPPER You use taxidermy in a really interesting way. We live in a time where only four percent of the world's mammals are still wild, but the taxidermy becomes part of the relic-making. Can you talk a little bit about your use of taxidermy, and how that factors into your work? And the language of taxidermy as relics?

RICO The first animal I found dead was a grey fox from Mexico. I found him in a creepy bazaar, in a small town between Guadalajara and Mexico City, about fifteen years ago. I kept the fox in my studio until one day I built a circle combining branches and neon to complete the circle. In front of that circle, I placed the fox, and immediately the connection was so strong, because the position of the fox is not an aggressive position, but more of a contemplative position that cancelled me out as a person. When you are in front of a very powerful piece of art, it feels like you're no longer necessary to define whether it's important or not. If you cannot see the beautiful part of an art piece, it cancels your position as a visitor, or even as a person. Those kinds of objects are very powerful things. Even for the brain, it's difficult to think about the infinite. When I realized that these kinds of pieces had this power, I started to think about how taxidermied animals are more of an object than an animal. For the brain, it takes a few seconds to realize that those animals are dead, and I like to think that, in a metaphorical or metaphysical way, the animal comes alive again for just a few seconds.

KUPPER And neon too, these natural and unnatural worlds, to see them in that realm is really interesting. When did neon come into your work?

RICO Neon is really old school. You can use any type of noble gas to excite the electrons to produce light. The seven gases are helium (He), neon (Ne), argon (Ar), krypton

FROM TOP: (1) Gabriel Rico, *To be Preserved without scandal and corruption*, 2020. Volcanic stone, rope, taxidermy axis deer, fiberglass column. 436 x 120 x 300 cm | 171 5/8 x 47 1/4 x 118 1/8 in. Photographer: Claire Dorn. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. (2) Gabriel Rico, *Who reckons the close of his life among the boons of the nature? (The Jealous God)*, 2018. Coyote, petrified wood, wire, plastic hand, glass bottle, ceramic, volcanic stone, bubble level, sponge, neon, mirror, brass. 75 x 190 x 340 cm | 29 1/2 x 74 13/16 x 133 7/8 in. Photographer: Claire Dorn. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin





(Kr), xenon (Xe), the radioactive radon (Rn) 1, and the synthetic oganesson (Og). Each gas has a different color. Usually, people only use argon and neon; neon is red and argon is blue. They have the most range of light. Like an architect, I draw by hand. The contrast between a sheet of paper and the graphite comes from the pencil—you can see the contrast is white and black for example. I use neon as an extension of my drawings.

KUPPER And your use of mathematical equations, and the Fibonacci sequence—it blends all of these things: philosophy, mathematics.

RICO I really like the idea of learning new things. That's one of the most exciting things in life. I am fascinated with how crazy the ideas are in mathematics. It's crazy how they can define everything with numbers. At the beginning, I didn't feel free enough to play with the numbers. But at some point, I just realized that the formulas and equations have meaning because others believe in those meanings. For example, Coca Cola is easier to represent a value in an equation than the number or symbol because the number is very practical. Coca Cola is composed of trillions of atoms, so how can I define that amount of atoms? Or how can you divide that amount of information into another type of information? So, I just started to play with the numbers and switched the symbols. I discovered that you can use that freedom to compose equations to construct new artworks.

KUPPER It's really interesting when you start to think about mathematics and how there are formulas that can explain a snail's spiral or a leaf's patterns.

RICO Describe is a better word to explain the world around you. You can use a language, but the language has limitations and the numbers don't. We can't forget that numbers are abstract entities. For example, there's something called universals in ontology that refers to the many different things that objects share. For example, color is universal. I can say red and you can think of a tomato or something with a red color. But when I say red, it's very difficult to think in red. It's not possible. Or the weather, it's universal. It's abstract. Numbers are the same. So, I think it's easier to define the world with abstract things in a very precise context, like an equation to predict your future.

KUPPER You're inaugurating the Institute of Contemporary Art in San Diego with a solo exhibition. A sense of place becomes a part of it. Can you talk about how the show will reflect the geography and culture of Southern California?

RICO The title of the show is going to be Unity & Variety. This is a physical and philosophical principle. Scientists and mathematicians define beauty using unity and variety. The other branch of the project comes from a poem by an American poet, James Thurber. The poem is about a couple of workers in the mountains of Cincinnati. During their lunch break, they were super hungry, so they rushed off to eat, and forgot a pane of glass in the middle of the field. One of the birds flew in the middle of the field and crashed into the glass pane. For me that represents a barrier. That's the way I'm going to talk about the border and how dangerous the border is. An obvious danger is the physical wall we can see. But what about the things we can't see? We are in the same position as the sparrow. We fly into a field and we cannot recognize all the borders that surround us. The internet is the main border now. You can feel free, your brain can give you the illusion of freedom, but we don't understand the borders. I'm going to talk about the invisible borders, and how the new materials are new borders for nature, and how beautiful the idea is of constructing unity in the different variety of borders we have now. We're speaking with an augmented reality company to potentially create two coyotes to implement in the show. So, it will be all different types of media working together. It's going to be very immersive.

KUPPER Do you ever collaborate with scientists or geologists in your work?

RICO It's very important to have this professional framework. Art is traditionally more related to this bohemian representation of reality. But now, art is more about investigation, and all the practices of human knowledge that can cross together to construct a new reality. For me, the most important thing is to collaborate with important people like scientists. My first time was at ASU [Arizona State University]. They gave me the chance to collaborate with a geologist. It's really important because otherwise, contemporary art museums will only be interested in contemporary art. And now, I invite natural history museums to do something with contemporary art; to mix all the realities.

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