
Art **Reviews**

The Gap Between Things and Their Names

A deep sense of loss, of being cut off or isolated from communication, runs through Elsa Gramcko's works, imbuing them with inchoate feelings that precede language.



John Yau 19 hours ago

Elsa Gramcko, "Intima Libertad" (Intimate Freedom) (1965), headlight, metal grate, and mixed media on wood, 13 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches (photo by Paul Hester; all images © Elsa Gramcko 2023. Images courtesy James Cohan, New York and Sicardi | Ayers | Bacino)

My first encounter with Elsa Gramcko's genius was in the revelatory exhibition [Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela 1955-1975](#) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (October 28, 2018-January 21, 2019), curated by Mari Carmen Ramírez and Tahía Rivero. Gabriela Rangel,

who contributed to that informative catalogue, is the curator of Gramcko's first US solo exhibition, ***The Invisible Plot of Things*** at James Cohan Gallery, which closes on February 15 and should not be missed. If you cannot see the show, do yourself a favor and buy the accompanying catalogue, with contributions by Rangel (who edited it), Aruna D'Souza, and Luis Felipe Farías.

Gramcko (1925–1994) was a prolific, visionary self-taught artist. During a career that lasted less than 25 years, from the mid-1950s to the late '70s, she made paintings, assemblages, wall reliefs, and sculptures. Decay, disintegration, hidden spaces, and oracular and totemic presences are among the subjects she explored. She recognized that Venezuela's dependency on oil to drive its economy would lead to catastrophe, as the last decade has borne out. As Ramírez wrote in the catalogue accompanying the Houston exhibition:

Although she was not among the first artists of the region to engage machines, she was a pioneer in incorporating machine parts and industrial trash as part of a broader critique of humankind's flawed embrace of technology.

Working on as many as eight series simultaneously in the 1950s and '60s, Gramcko was an extremely nimble artist who seems to be as possessed by her craft as Emily Dickinson, who wrote 1,800 poems in her lifetime. The show includes more than 40 works dating from 1954 to 1977. Gramcko's work pulls us close to create an intimate dialogue between the viewer and the work's decaying materiality.

Elsa Gramcko, "R-33 Todo Comienza Aqui" (R-33, It All Begins Here) (1960), oil, acrylic, and mixed media on canvas, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches (photo by Dan Bradica)

The two earliest paintings, both untitled and dated 1954, seem to be inspired by Vasily Kandinsky's late paintings. By 1957, Gramcko had moved on. "No 6" is a large, perforated beige form against a black ground, along with two geometric paintings in which forms are stacked vertically or the perforated shape is abstract and upright. By the 1960s, her work had transitioned again.

This pattern of restlessness is central to her art. In 1960, she made textured monochromatic works marked by circular or elliptical indentations, which may have been inspired by Lucio Fontana's "spatial concept" or slash series. These signal her move away from traditional oil on canvas to paintings as objects that have endured disasters. Two years later, she began working with rusted and distressed materials, arriving at surfaces that appear decayed or ravaged by time. Shortly after, she started incorporating machine parts and metal grating into her art and by the mid-1960s she was using car headlights to create cyclopean assemblages by embedding orbs or round machine parts into the surface. The integration of car parts became a commentary on Venezuela's booming oil companies.

Between 1964 and '66, Gramcko made a group of works that evoke the facade of a plain building or possibly a chapel, or closed cabinets — spaces that are largely sealed off. Their surfaces often appear rusted, as if the works had been abandoned. Are they post-apocalyptic? What is behind the closed doors of "Memoria" (Remembrance) and "Una pequeña edad" (A Small Age) (both 1964)? What has been lost, forgotten, or remembered? A deep sense of loss, of being cut off or isolated from communication, runs through these works, imbuing them with inchoate feelings that precede language. These works are haunting lamentations for an unknown subject. In contrast to the elegy's lyrical shaping of a voice, its calling out, the ambiguity of Gramcko's works can make them feel muffled, almost unheard.

Elsa Gramcko, "El león verde que devora al sol" (The Green Lion Who Devours the Sun) (1966), headlight and mixed media on wood, 23 5/8 x 28 3/8 x 3 1/4 inches. Collection of the Denver Art Museum, Vance Kirkland Fund (photo by Paul Hester)

At the center of the assemblage "Motivación interior alrededor de un objeto" (Inner Motivation Around an Object) (1977) is a faucet and stem on a platform. Surrounding this are pieces of weathered wood; one piece, directly under the faucet, depicts the silhouette of a drop of water. That silhouette underscores how open-ended Gramcko can be in her work, how it resists any reductive reading. What does this silhouette signify?

Gramcko was interested in the gap between names and things. What are the things that she has placed before us? What do they identify? How do we name them? And where in time do these things exist? Are they artifacts from destroyed civilizations? What is the purpose of the totems? I think not knowing whether "Totem No 2" (1974) exists in the past, present, or future inspires the viewer to speculate on the work's meaning. That is one of the compelling features of her art: because we cannot quite identify what we see, pieces such as "El león verde que devora al sol" (The Green Lion Who Devours the Sun) and "Plenitud" (Plenitude) (both 1966) remain in the mind long after we encounter them.

In "El león verde que devora al sol," a car headlight is embedded into a rough surface that evokes an aging, dirty, cracked wall. A small amber bulb (resembling an eye) is at the center of the shallow declivity. Around the rim of the lamp is a series of metal spikes bent into a U shape, facing inward. Are they eyelashes or teeth? Is this an eye and a mouth? Might Gramcko wish to

suggest a vagina dentata? Why is this eye-mouth-vagina embedded in a wall and is it about to consume or blind itself? Is Gramcko's work an update of the marble "Bocca della Verità" (Mouth of Truth), which has been mounted on the wall of the Rome church Santa Maria in Cosmedin since 1632? Is this cyclopean eye about to blind itself? What does it mean to live in such a world?

Elsa Gramcko, "Cruz" (Cross) (1966), crosshead pipe and mixed media on masonite, 8 5/8 x 6 3/4 inches. Estrellita B. Brodsky Collection, New York, NY (photo by Paul Hester)



Elsa Gramcko, "Memoria" (Remembrance) (1964), mixed media on wood, 29 1/2 x 21 5/8 inches (photo by Paul Hester)



Installation view of *Elsa Gramcko: The Invisible Plot of Things* at James Cohan Gallery (photo by Phoebe d'Heurle)

Elsa Gramcko: The Invisible Plot of Things continues at James Cohan Gallery (48 Walker Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) through February 15. The exhibition was curated by Gabriela Rangel.

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