



MFA **H/ICAA**

**GEGO,
BETWEEN
TRANSPARENCY
AND THE
INVISIBLE**

*JUNE 26—
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2005*

MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE

Whether drawing lines on paper or projecting them into space, Gego sought, in her own words, to “make visible the invisible.” The exhibition *Gego, Between Transparency and the Invisible* traces the development of the artist’s concern with projecting a space in which the visible and the invisible oscillate.

*... I discovered the charm of the line in and of itself—the line in space as well as the line drawn on a surface, and the nothing between the lines and the sparkling when they cross, when they are interrupted. . . I discovered that sometimes the in-between lines is as important as the line by itself.**

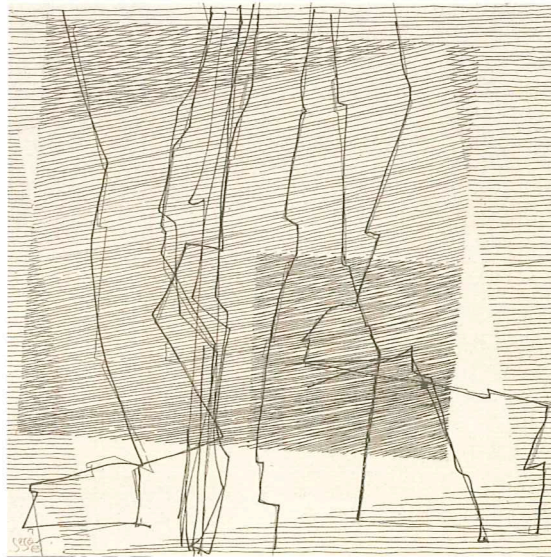


Figure 1

The selection encompasses rarely seen monotypes of the early 1950s to drawings, prints, as well as the delicate *drawings without paper* and *tejeduras* (woven paper pieces) of the late 1970s and 1980s.

Like Paul Klee (1879–1940), Gego turned to lines as conceptual and visual tools to achieve transparency in her work. For both artists a line was more than the sum of dots between two points. It also stood for the active relations between those marks. More importantly, line was man’s way of visually expressing all that which is incapable by nature of being seen (thought, intuition, emotions) but which exists in human consciousness. Gego, indeed, seemed to stress this issue when she described the lines that make up her art as proceeding “neither from the reality of seeing nor from the reality of knowing.”

In this context, transparency refers to that in-between space unfolding among and underneath the lines which, in Gego’s view, “is as important as the line by itself.” She thus described that ambiguous perceptual field generated in the eye by both parallel sequences and conflictive links between lines. For the artist, this was the equivalent of a force field where real, subjective, and even cosmic sensations and impulses merge. Her aim, however, was not to represent this transparent zone but to visually bring to mind its presence.

To achieve this purpose, Gego produced drawings (Fig. 1), where she assembled, crisscrossed, twisted, curled, and whimsically cut or interrupted lines of varying strokes, throughout the process generating active, passive, concrete, or illusory

THE WORKS

Gego's concern with *transparency* became evident as early as the mid-1950s in ink and watercolor drawings exemplified by **Sin título** (*Untitled*), 1955. In these works, the brush-applied ink lines and strokes generate loosely held together grids that appear suspended between layers of thin air. The artist continued these explorations in a series of Klee-inspired monotypes from 1955–57 where see-through ink lines, strokes, or stencils overlap to hint at stylized figures and abstract shapes floating weightless upon a grainy surface. Later, she randomly perforated the surface of the paper with outright cuts and tiny round holes (Figs. 2, 3) that allow light through while at the same time opening up the work to the space around it. Beyond evoking Lucio Fontana's surface slashing or piercing tactics—illustrated by the *Ambienti spaziali* series begun in 1947—the significance of this apparently random recourse in Gego's agenda stems from the way it simultaneously foreshadows and substantiates the radical kernel of her late *drawings without paper*. That is to say, this type of strategy turns *invisible* space into a visually palpable presence.

In tandem with the production of these monotypes, Gego's relational line-based method was taking shape. Her first line drawings—produced in 1959—consist of sequences of parallel lines that are nevertheless contained within defined forms or whimsical shapes, again clearly reminiscent of Klee. By 1960, however, the parallel line system evolved to cover the surface of the paper. In a series of etchings printed that year,

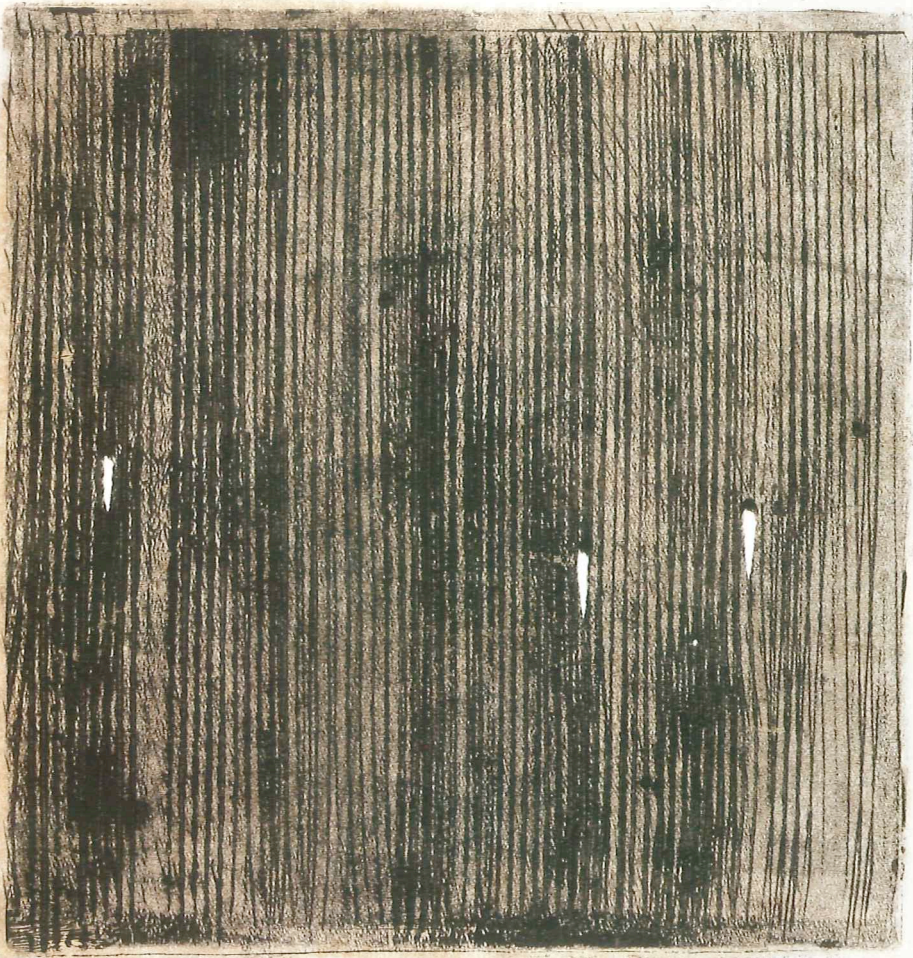


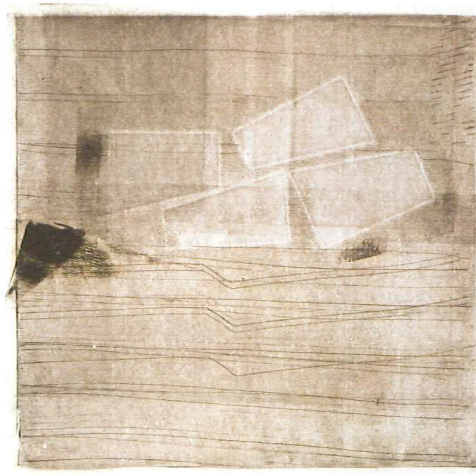
Figure 2

planes. This relational method allowed her to suggest depth without ever resorting to perspective. Her approach can thus be seen as tantamount to prying open the surface of the paper or vanishing into thin air to reveal either a transparent or an invisible zone. In both cases, by manipulating the density of the lines or by interrupting them at any given point, the artist was able to introduce light and shadow into her linear universe.

The successful implementation of this line-based approach is nowhere better illustrated than in the entangled interplay between negative and

positive spaces of Gego's renowned stainless steel constructions (*reticuláreas, líneas, chorros, troncos, drawings without paper*) that she began to develop in the late 1960s. And yet, it was in the two-dimensional surface of her less investigated drawings and prints—created throughout the entire span of her career—where Gego's use of lines first achieved an innovative dimension. Drawing, in particular, which she approached as a fully autonomous medium, not only provided the foundation for Gego's art but was frequently the catalyst for her more radical interventions in space.

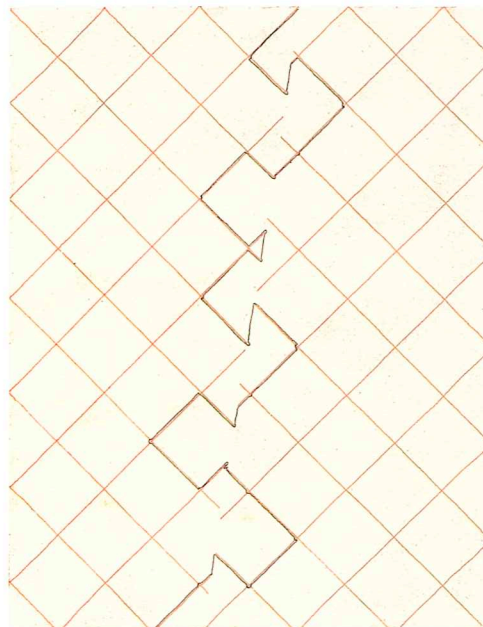
Gego played with this matrix, trying to multiply and juxtapose it in a manner so as to generate subtly vibrating, interactive planes. A series of textile-like ink drawings illustrates her deft handling of this structural method. Thin, almost ethereal cuts in the linear fabric of these works discreetly mediate the foreground/background relationship, thereby opening up an unsuspected density: one by means of which the paper's surface discovers yet another plane in the midst of its flatness.



Additionally, Gego introduced tonal values in the form of light and shadow. Light was first insinuated by sudden gaps in the uniform tonal density of the background. Yet, as the line drawings evolved, Gego began to manipulate the linear sequences to provoke the dramatic, vibratory play of light and shadow. The series of large lithographs made at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles in 1966 and exemplified by **Sin título (Tamarind 961)** (*Untitled [Tamarind 961]*), 1963 (Fig. 4), represent the highest point in Gego's inexhaustible research of the tonal qualities of lines. Such pitches not only address the silent resonance of her drawings but also announce the invisible modulations of her paperless drawings.



This persuasive and indefatigable concern with the presence and absence of shadows will come to a climax in the *Drawings without paper* series. These innovative constructions were prefigured in a series of drawings produced as early as 1966 (Fig 5). In these works, Gego substituted the parallel line system with a grid that she intervened by means of gaps and broken, frequently zigzagging, lines. By 1976, when she actually



Top to bottom: Figures 3, 4, 5

began the radical series, these interrupted lines became liberated into space configuring delicate wire constructions (Fig. 6). She thus took the final step of liberating, not only line into space but also space through lines. Along with the tangible shadows they cast on the wall, these paperless drawings are subtly questioning several issues at once: the physical stroke of the line, the void of the plane, the suppression of surface, the absence of medium, and even the lack of representation. In sum, they oscillate between transparency and the invisible.

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* All quotes by Gego are from *Sabiduras and Other Texts by Gego* (Houston: International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Fundación Gego, 2005).



Figure 6

THE ARTIST

Gego was born Gertrud Goldschmidt in Hamburg in 1912 and died in Caracas in 1994. She was trained in engineering and architecture at the Technical College in Stuttgart. In 1939 she moved to Venezuela where she established permanent residency and was granted Venezuelan citizenship in 1954. Two years earlier she had met and eventually became the life partner of artist Gert Leufert, an architect and graphic designer who was also a prominent figure of the Venezuelan abstract geometric movement. Encouraged by him, Gego began to produce art in 1953, more than a decade after her arrival in Venezuela. In 1957, advised by Alejandro Otero and Jesús Soto, she created her first three-dimensional pieces which consisted of planes of parallel lines in aluminum and steel as well as volumetric experiments in vibration and moiré. Her first individual show, where she presented only collages and drawings that complement these

sculptures, took place in 1958 at the Galería del Grupo Sardo in Caracas.

Gego spent 1959 at Iowa State University where Leufert had a scholarship to study printmaking. There she experimented with engraving techniques in Mauricio Lasansky's workshop and produced iron-welded sculptures, among which is *Sphere*, 1959, acquired a year later by Alfred C. Barr for the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. In 1960 she settled in New York where she continued to produce engravings and sculptures and exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery. There she also met the sculptor Naum Gabo and the artists Josef and Anni Albers. Back in Caracas in 1961 she took up teaching at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning of the Universidad Central de Caracas and assisted Leufert and Luisa Palacios in the establishment of their very influential Engraving Workshop. That year the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas organized her first individual exhibition focused on her recent drawings.

In 1962 she was awarded the First Prize in Drawing at the *IV Exposición Nacional de Dibujo y Grabado*. A year later, Gego returned to New York where she produced many engravings, intaglii, etchings, and handmade books at the Pratt Graphic Art Institute. At the end of that year—which proved to be one of the most productive years of her career—she travelled to California to study teaching methods at the University of California at Berkeley. It was during the time in California that she first worked at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles where she produced two lithographs. In October 1966, she returned to the Tamarind where she produced two books and a series of large prints

under the supervision of Clifford Smith, Tamarind Master Printer.

Beginning in 1964 she taught courses on two- and three-dimensional forms at the newly established Neumann-Ince Design Institute. That same year, she began to assemble steel-wire constructions connected, with creases and twists, at metal or plastic nodes, thereby initiating a new direction in her work. In 1968 she developed *Flechas* (Arrows, no longer extant), a work whose objective was to eliminate form and volume from sculpture by using line.

However, it was 1969 that proved to be a groundbreaking year for the artist. In June she installed the first version of *Reticulárea* at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas. This was an environmental structure made from very fine stainless steel rods. The critic Roberto Guevara coined the term “reticulárea” to refer to “the net-like weave” or “area of nets” exemplified by the suspended rods. The piece was preceded by a series of drawings of interwoven lines and webs. In November of that year, Gego travelled to New York to install *Reticulárea* at the exhibition *Latin America: New Painting and Sculpture: Juan Downey, Agustín Fernández, Gego, Gabriel Morera* at the Center for Inter-American Relations Art Gallery.

In 1970 she took the structural system of vertical lines to the third dimension in the series *Chorros* (water jets), which consisted of a suspended accumulation of aluminum rods. Gego also exhibited her drawings at the Graphics Gallery in San Francisco. During the following years she taught the Spatial Relations Seminar at the Neumann-Ince Design Institute and continued

her constructive explorations of space through triangle- and square-based structural systems. The artist generated structures of double-curvature, square reticuláreas, as well as the *troncos* (logs) which she began in 1974. As before, each new series is preceded or accompanied by drawings and prints that reflect the formal and conceptual evolution of her line-based structural system. In 1976 Gego began the so-called *esferas* (spheres). That same year she took a qualitative leap, moving away from her large-scale wire constructions to a more intimate method of drawing in space that she called *drawings without paper*. In these delicate pieces, constructivism became a living, sensory, and haptic stimulus, rather than a mere visual effect. The comprehensive exhibition *Gego. Dibujos sin papel*, opened at the Museo de Bellas Artes in 1984 showcasing her production in this novel medium up to that date.

Beginning in 1988, unable to manipulate wire due to severe arthritis, Gego concocted her *tejeduras* (weavings), intertwined paper strips made from catalogue pages and pamphlet cut-outs, and the wrappers from her ever-present cigarettes. These works were first exhibited at the Galería Sotavento in Caracas in 1990.

Since her death in 1994, Gego’s oeuvre has been shown in numerous national and international exhibitions and has been the subject of major retrospectives curated by Hanni Ossott (Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas, 1977), Iris Peruga (Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas, 2000), and Mari Carmen Ramírez (MFAH, 2002). Her work continues to be avidly collected by leading museums and private collectors throughout the world.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1. *Sin título* (*Photographic Untitled*), 1963
Fig. 2. *Sin título* (*Untitled*), 1961
Fig. 3. *Sin título* (*Untitled*), 1961
Fig. 4. *Sin título* (*Tamarind 961*) (*Untitled* [*Tamarind 961*]), 1963
Fig. 5. *Sin título* (*Untitled*), 1966
Fig. 6. *Dibujo sin papel 85/22* (*Drawing Without Paper 85/22*), 1985

COVER IMAGE

Sin título (*Untitled*) (detail), 1980-82, watercolor and graphite on paper, the MFAH, museum purchase with funds provided by the Latin Maecenas in memory of Marisol Broido.

EXHIBITION CREDITS

Gego, Between Transparency and the Invisible is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, June 26–September 25, 2005.

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