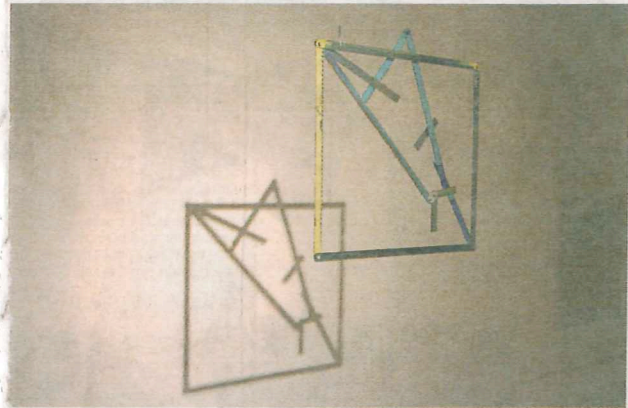


Off the Page and in the Air, Drawing Transformed



Librado Romero/The New York Times

The artist named Gego, who is the subject of a small, out-of-this-world survey at the Drawing Center in SoHo, was born Gertrud Goldschmidt in Hamburg, Germany, in 1912. The daughter of a Jewish banker, she studied for a career in architecture and engineering. But in 1939, as the political heat began to build, she left for Venezuela. Apart from short visits to Europe and elsewhere, she stayed there until her death in 1994.

**HOLLAND
COTTER**

**ART
REVIEW**

I first encountered her a decade ago in the eye-opening survey "Re-Aligning Vision: Alternative Currents in South American Drawing" at El Museo del Barrio. Even in that competitively eclectic show, her netlike, freehand ink drawings stood out. They

Gego, Between Transparency and the Invisible
A suspended sculpture from Gego's 1983 "Drawing Without Paper" series is among the pieces featured at the Drawing Center.

were plain and complicated in ways nothing else was.

And there was this other fabulous thing: a semigeometric, see-through, two-and-three dimensional piece made of twisted and knotted wires, suspended in space. It was as if spiders had rigged electrical circuitry and produced a crown of nodes and thorns. Most people would call it sculpture. She called it "drawing without paper," and was adamant about the distinction. She wrote in a notebook: "Sculpture: three-dimensional forms of solid material. NEVER what I do!"

So what, exactly, did she do? Several innovative things, and all of them are evident at the Drawing Center in "Gego, Between Transparency and the Invisible," a show originally organized in a larger form for the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston by that museum's curator of Latin American art, Mari Carmen Ramirez.

Gego started slowly. After arriving in Venezuela and finding few architectural gigs, she focused on painting and drawing

and did some studio teaching. But it was only after raising a family, divorcing and finding a soul mate in the émigré painter Gerd Leufert that she became a full-time artist. That was in the 1950s; she was already in her 40s. And as it turned out, the older she grew, the better she got.

In 1960 she lived briefly in the United States and had a New York moment. Betty Parsons gave her a solo show; the Museum of Modern Art bought a piece. Yet even then no one knew how to package her abstract, line-based work: was it drawing, sculpture, kinetic art, Op art, Latin American something-or-other? The attention subsided. Until fairly recently she was all but unknown outside of Venezuela, and even there she was not unreservedly embraced.

Her art was difficult; she knew this. Apartness was built into it. Early in her career, at a time when people still talked about movements and schools, she ignored stylistic labels. One of the earliest pieces in

Continued on Page 27

Off the Page and in Air, Drawing Transformed

Continued From Weekend Page 23

the show is an untitled 1955 abstract drawing in ink on a brushy blue ground. The quick, dark lines have an expressionistic drive: some end up in a tangled black knot. At the same time they form a classic, if unstable, Constructivist grid of uprights and horizontals.

You can think of the results as a grid gone haywire, or as rationality charged with emotion; classicism zapped by romanticism; Constructivism with an organic soul. What you see is a Klee-like pavilion, a transparent architecture of levels and layers set against a wild blue yonder, the whole business held in place by a framing ink line.

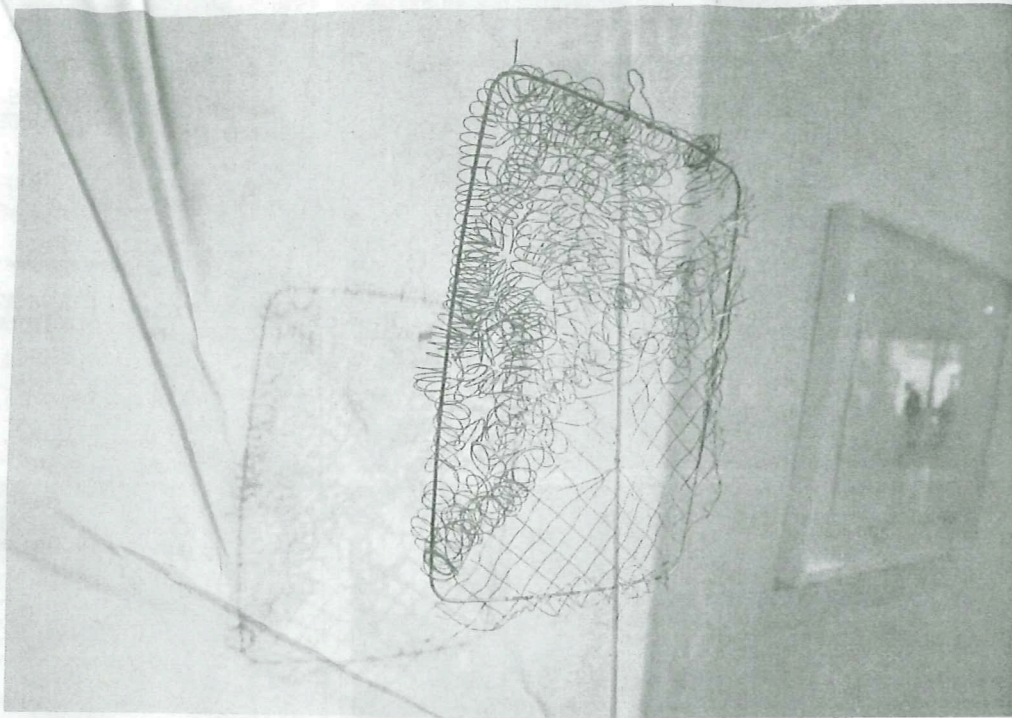
Within a few years, that containing frame is gone. Drawings begin to look like swatches randomly cut from an infinitely extending design. Tightly bundled bands of lines push in from one side of the paper and out the other, or patterns of hair-fine parallel lines cover everything.

Sometimes these patterns illusionistically swell into lumps or sink into pockets; occasionally, lines will suddenly stop in the middle of nowhere, skip a beat in unison, then move on, leaving a strip of unmarked space like a tear in the surface, with light showing through. Agnes Martin's grids come to mind, but pulled out of shape and made funky. So do microscopic and telescopic views of microbes and lunar valleys, and the surfaces of embroideries, frayed but under repair. (In the 1990s Gego did a series of works woven from strips of photographs and cellophane.)

Her art is most novel, though, when she takes drawing physically off the page, and conflates it with sculpture, using engineering tools — wire, nuts, bolts, screwdrivers, pliers — to do the job. One paperless sculpture seems to be constructed from fine-toothed, screwed-together band-saw blades. The piece was made in the 1980s, when Gego was at her inventive peak, but a very similar-looking print dates from almost 30 years earlier.

So chronology is another art-historical convention that Gego subverts: the idea that art progresses in neat, incremental steps, like beads on a string. In Gego's case the connections are nonlinear, all over the place, out of sequence, early and late. Also, she contradicts standard theo-

"Gego, Between Transparency and the Invisible" continues through July 21 at the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, SoHo; (212) 219-2166.



Librado Romero/The New York Times

A steel-mesh piece, made with iron rods, wire and silver paint, from Gego's "Drawing Without Paper" series.

ries of influence: artist X leads to artist Y, and so on. Her work is as far from her immediate contemporaries as it is close to artists past and future whom she never knew.

The 1980s were, however, marked by a succession of formal breakthroughs, as her art became less geometric and more organic in spirit. She did her most experimental work late in life. Many of the hanging pieces from this time look like the equivalent of freehand sketches or calligraphy, their forms eccentrically asymmetrical, their expressive content apparent but elusive.

There are undercurrents of danger, even violence: a hanging rectangle bristles with needle-sharp wire spikes; an iron mesh is torn at its center, as if it had been punched through. Geometrical shapes, reassuring in other contexts, turn into hair-trigger snares and traps.

But the step from aggression to whimsy is a short one. The 1980s pieces are touched with sweet, wry delicacies: tendril-like twists of wire; prickly star-burst knots; baroque curls and braids; candy-cane hooks; little metal sleeves for joints and angles; washers; clamps; beaded chains of the kind used for light-pulls; and flicks of paint, often

bright.

In the case of one ultraspar, almost unseeable construction much of Gego's art is hard to photograph), the lower corner dissolves into a network of short wires linked by tiny wooden gaskets, each painted orange or red. The effect is of a constellation of stars, the ethereality reinforced by the echoing shadow the piece casts on the gallery wall.

Of the mold-breaking gambits in Gego's art, her aesthetic equivalence of solid form and shadow may be the most radical. Shadows are, after all, not objects; they depend entirely upon objects and a controlled environment to become visible. At the same time they are always, potentially, present. They are the negative to the positive, the virtual to the real, the ephemeral to the solid. Philosophically speaking, neither exists without the other.

In a photograph of Gego's magisterial construction "Reticulárea" (1975), set against a black ground, you see instantly why "drawing" is the right word for this floor-to-ceiling modular web of stainless-steel wire filaments. Against the solid darkness, its volume flattens out. Its netting becomes pure tracery. A large work that looks small, drawing-size.

In person, the piece offers a very different, near-environmental experience, a physical space to explore, get lost in, like a Chinese landscape. (Some of Gego's "Reticulárea" were, in fact, walk-in installations.) The shadows it casts — faint at the Drawing Center — underscore both its linearity and its bulk, and its potentially infinite dimensions: with a shift of lighting, shadows can stretch and stretch, fill a room; with the addition of modular units, the piece can grow and grow without limits.

Gego, who was modern without being utopian, spoke of cosmic implications in her work, a way of talking about art that was less alienating in her days than in ours. And what she said makes sense. With her bolts and pliers, she was engineering infinity, a state where hierarchies, contingencies and gravity dissolve, where everything connects, and you can see the connections, and tighten them, or loosen them. How radical is that?

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Additional images from "Gego, Between Transparency and the Invisible," at the Drawing Center: nytimes.com/design