

Mexican Wave

Internationally renowned artist Gabriel Orozco may travel the globe for his art, but passion for his birthplace remains strong

Highly acclaimed Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco was at London's Frieze international art fair to promote Ecuador:Block 16, an exhibition to highlight one of the worst oil related disasters in history. Orozco, along with photographers Adam Broomberg & Olly Chanrin and filmmaker Dastin Lynn travelled to the rainforests of Ecuador on an Adventure Ecology Expedition to witness first hand the damage caused by over 25 years of crude oil dumping in the Amazon which has affected the life, health and culture of multiple indigenous communities. They responded, not through shock tactics, but by creating beautiful art works in order to reflect the catastrophe on the rest of the world.

Orozco is a champion of using everyday objects in his work to twist conventional notions of reality and engage the imagination of the viewer. His latest work, exhibited at The Hospital, does not fall short. Orozco, who lives in New York, Paris and Mexico City, is still passionate about his homeland and its rich culture. We caught up with him in Wahaca to chat about Mexican food, culture and a few other things.

You were born in Jalapa, Veracruz – how much do you feel Veracruz as opposed to Mexican?

Although I was born in Veracruz I moved to Mexico City with my parents at an early age so I feel more of a DF (Mexico City) man than a man of Veracruz.

You live in three cities (Paris, NY, Mexico), how is the perception of Mexico (and its food) different in these three places?

In Mexico we obviously believe it is wonderful, especially home cooking. Restaurant cooking never meets up to home cooking. In America there is a strange idea that Tex-Mex cooking is Mexican even though New York has some really great Mexican restaurants like Rosa Mexicana and La Esquina. I think Americans don't travel much and so accept ideas that are handed to them more. In Paris there is a better understanding of Mexican food but then the French travel further into Mexico than the Americans who only seem to ever reach places like Cancun and Tijuana. So the French discover more.

Do you feel an outsider now, looking into Mexico?

I don't feel an outsider, I am 100% Mexican and proud of it but living in New York and Paris does give me another perspective. I can see Mexico with more than one vision. But when I am in New York I am fully in New York; when I am in Paris I am involved in Paris.

Your whale installation piece took part in Mexico first, then in the White Cube in London. What were the differences and similarities in reactions to it between Mexicans and Londoners?

In Mexico they reacted much more to the building that housed the whale as it was such a strange building whereas in London it was much more about the art.



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How has Mexico changed over the past decades?

Mexico hasn't really changed that much which is surprising. All the signs of globalisation that affect all countries around the world like the huge retail chains haven't seemed to hit Mexico. We still have small stores selling home-made tortillas and women still cook our incredibly complicated, time-consuming recipes. Mexican cooking is very intense so it is surprising that it has withstood the creeping influence of the modern, 'fast' world we live in.

How have environment issues impacted your work and is this a recent thing?

I think I have always been an 'organic' artist in that I have never really been a heavy industrial producer of materials and much of my work involves recycling materials and turning them into new subjects. I think the only change has been that this exhibition is a very public declaration of my interest in the environment whereas before it was silently intrinsic to it.

There seems to be a sense of the absurd in parts of your work. Does this come from Mexican culture?

There is a definite sense of the ridiculous in Mexican culture. I am not, and have never been, interested in 'kitsch' but in Mexico people are not afraid to behave in an absurd way. They are a proud people but they are also sarcastic and so do not back away from being silly or stupid ever. This is part of their creativity.

How much is food part of the culture of Mexico?

Food is totally interwoven in Mexico's culture, especially the street food. Mexicans almost define themselves through their favourite street foods. The culture of street food is part of Mexico's soul. I find it curious how little British food makes a stamp on the British culture, or American food on American culture for that matter. Maybe it is a Protestant thing (laughing). In France, Spain, Italy or Mexico you can walk into any town and get traditional food cooked well at an affordable price. Why isn't there more passion for British food here?

What would you like to see on the Wahaca menu?

I see you have enchiladas on the menu. I would love to see enfrijoladas too. These are the same corn tortillas, but wrapped around cheese instead of chicken and covered in this delicious black bean puree of yours.

What would you recommend to eat on the menu?

The frijoles, of course. They are really, really good.

What would be your last meal?

Without a doubt, oysters, my favourite food.

What is in your fridge?

I never cook at home. We have one of the best cooks in Mexico living with us so the fridge has rarely anything to do with me.

Who would you like to have round for supper?

Do they have to be alive? Actually, I'd rather not have dead people. No, definitely not. Anyone with good conversation then.

