



Interview with Omar Rodriguez-Graham

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By JESSICA STELLER, March 2020



Omar Rodriguez-Graham, *La Anciana de las 3 Navajas*, Oil Acrylic on Linen Mounted on Panel, 200 x 185 cm, 2020

Omar Rodriguez-Graham (Mexico City, 1978) is a powerhouse of an artist. He lives between both the analog and digital worlds, as an artist who represents the future of Mexico City's vibrant art scene. Omar's work reflects the present while simultaneously honoring the past. Rodriguez-Graham pulls iconic images from art history and distorts them to create new contemporary works through his own means of digital abstraction. His paintings reveal colors and figures that have not been present within the works previously. Through this process, he gives the art new life and meaning.

Omar's work has been exhibited extensively through public and private collections in Europe, North America, and South America. Omar Rodríguez-Graham lives and works in Mexico City and is now being represented by the internationally acclaimed Marc Straus Gallery in New York City. I had the pleasure of catching up before his upcoming solo show at the Marc Straus Gallery on February 23rd.

Jess Steller: In 2017 you had a solo show at the Marc Straus Gallery in New York. Can you elaborate on how your artistic practice has transformed since 2017?

Omar Rodriguez-Graham: When I did the show in 2017 with Marc, it took me out of my element in a way that I had to start using new tools that I've never really used before. I started using vinyl cutters and other tools that helped me, instead of having the assistance I have in the studio on an everyday basis. That really opened up the door for me, realizing there was this wealth of tools that I could start using and incorporating in my practice. I took into consideration that a printer is a tool just like a brush is a tool; they're all technologies that have been developed that can support your own practice.

Since 2017, I started thinking more about what tools, whether they be contemporary tools, like technological advancements, industrial tools, or older tools that can be incorporated in broadening the toolset that I have, to develop the paintings themselves. From 2017 to now, stenciling, plotters, vinyl cutters, JS: That's a lot to reflect on over the last three years. It's great to be able to bring in new tools and help yourself grow and develop as an artist.

ORG: The result is that it allows me to open up the realm of possibilities to a lot of other things, because while it started with making stencils, it leads you start thinking, what can stencils be used for, how can that extra thing be achieved through one kind of stencil or different stencils and how can that lead to other things. It allows me to think about shapes and canvases and how they can variate or whether its dimensionality can change with different techniques and machinery that might not have been obvious at first. So this train of thought challenged me in the way I think of what it means to paint, what it means to put things down on the canvas.



Omar Rodriguez-Graham, Defined by the Sound, Oil on Linen, 182 x 150 cm, 2016

That's also led to not only thinking that machines or technology can be an assistance in making these paintings but also thinking that if I'm allowing myself to lean on new technologies to make paintings, then maybe I can lean more on the team of people. That also led to my studio practice growing and becoming more of Atelier practice, like Rubens or Rembrandt might have had where they had a lot of assistants working on different parts of the painting and really leading to a lot more ambitious work, but using different collaborative techniques as well as technological practices.

JS: I can see how that atelier practice references back to your use of Renaissance and the iconic Western images.

ORG: Yeah, because in the end, my practice has a lot to do with, or at least it's born from a desire to establish a conversation with the history of painting. But history in the broader sense of how it's been taken on by different artists throughout the diverting practices throughout time. So, it's learned mechanics and processes from different moments in history and trying to apply them the best I can to my practice. Which, in the end, becomes like an amalgam of different processes from disparate times. But by using these ideas that can be from Renaissance or 2020, I can make them work together to create stronger work, if they're thought out that way.

JS: Since you completed your MFA in 2005 and since your Solo Show in 2017, how has returning to Mexico City impacted your work and your practice? Specifically, after you received your MFA, how did it change you? How did it make you look at your work differently?

ORG: When I returned in 2005 after doing my MFA, I had become very frustrated with painting in general. I think if I had not returned to Mexico; I would not have continued painting. I kind of quit painting when I first arrived, but Mexico has this really fantastic support system for young artists through state-grants, it's world-class, it's one of the best support programs that I've heard of, it's run by the Secretariat of Culture, and they give out grants to young artists under the age of 35. It's basically a year-long grant where you get a monthly stipend for a whole year.

When I returned, Mexico was very different than it is now. There weren't that many galleries, definitely not as many as there are now, and the scene was not as effervescent either. Returning when I did allowed me to start working at the galleries as an art handler and then transition over to being represented by a gallery and then being able to move over to Arroniz, the gallery I've been work with in Mexico the past 10 years. Because in a way, there wasn't much painting happening in Mexico, or at least not much contemporary painting in Mexico, so it was fortunate for me to arrive and be able to get a grant at the same time. That really pushed me forward in my practice. From then to now, it's been an excellent environment for me because I've received other grants from the government. Right now, I'm currently in my third year of a three-year grant from the government for mid-career artists, its called the Sistema Nacional de Creadores (National Creators System). That's been extremely helpful and has allowed me to be kind of ambitious and take risks that I wouldn't have been able to make these past few years.

My studio over the past year has grown from having two assistants to having seven assistants, and this grant has helped me to be able to cover the costs of developing the studio. So, moving down to Mexico was a place full of opportunities and a support system, and I was able to take advantage of that. So, for me, it was fortunate that I came down at that time.



Omar Rodriguez-Graham, Plumaje Tornasol (Despues de Ricci),
Oil, Acrylic, Dyed Linen & Gold Leaf on Linen mounted on Linen, 241 x 230 cm, 2018

JS: Your work is based on these iconic works of art that are then reworked and reimagined. Is there a way that you select the original artworks?

ORG: Well, I'd like to be able to tell you that it's a very well thought out process and there's very clear reasoning. But the truth of the matter is, I've concluded that just making art, making paintings is difficult in general. I think one of the most significant issues that I always had as a younger artist was trying to figure out what I was going to paint and why I was going to paint it. I eventually came to the conclusion that I wanted to establish my practice emerging from this conversation with history.

But when I chose the work--I mean that led me to this idea of appropriating these images. I started working from them and treating them as if they were samples that I could distort and modulate. But in the end, like any sample, there is conceptual baggage that's accompanying and carried along with whatever image you choose because you're always working from a moment in history, something that has context. The idea is about working from history and using that as raw material that you can distort, destroy, remodel for your own needs. Thinking about history, the aesthetic, the pictorial, and also the symbolic value of these paintings is really important.

But when I get down to choosing particular work, it's more about thinking in formal terms because what I'm trying to do it take the imagery, the colors, the forms, the ideas of drawing, the concepts of space that exist in those paintings and appropriate them to create the works I'm doing. So, it's trying to take the language that's being used in this original painting and transpose it into a much more dynamic, much more contemporary language of painting. That means putting together different textures, different ideas, various forms, a lot of gestures, and ideas of gesture and space.

In the end, it comes down to, what do I think? Do I believe a particular painting or image of the painting can function to develop the work I want to make? A lot of times, it just has to do with color, ideas of color, ideas of space. Whether there are specific drawings in these paintings, it's really what I'm drawn to because if I start getting down into, oh, it has to meet specific criteria, I think I'd just get caught up in trying

to meet the requirements. I think that for me, starting from a painting that's already exciting because of whatever reason it is, is a good enough starting point because it already gets me motivated from the start about making that painting I'm working on.

JS: Other than the Renaissance and the iconic western works that you select for your paintings, what are some of the more contemporary and modern artists, movements, or genres that inspire you?

ORG: Most of the work I do is based on the classics, like Renaissance and Baroque. I have done work from some 20th Century works by Duchamp or by Euan Uglow. I would have loved to be a figurative painter. I mean, I started as a figurative painter, but I would have loved to have been able to continue in that trajectory. Figurative painting is something that excites me, and although I would have liked to have stayed there, I didn't feel like I didn't have anything new to say in that kind of space.

But for me, what I try to do when I think of my work, is try to bring together a lot of different moments in history that are exciting for me. So, it can be abstract expressionism or minimalist painting, or it can be futurism or even going back to baroque and Renaissance works. Or, straight up just John Singer Sargent portraiture. In the end, painting is fascinating. It's not really about one moment in history or another.

There are so many artists that are exciting, and I think of an artist's practice as part of a continuum of a progression of how things develop. It's not that one thing needs to lead from one to the next, but rather, now we can start thinking about the way we construct paintings as a kind of metanarrative that's not necessarily leading to just one moment or being a continuous line from one point to another. But instead, an interlinked web of different ideas that are each feeding back into a composition, the psyche I'm working from.



Omar Rodriguez Graham, *El regreso triunfal del carnicero en el exilio (Despues de Tiepolo)*, Oil, Acrylic, Dyed Linen & Gold Leaf on Linen mounted on Linen, 233 x 214 cm, 2018

JS: Speaking of technology, I saw you were doing some new sculpture pieces, and I know there are some sculptural elements to how you build out your canvases. Can you elaborate if that's something you're going to do in the future?

ORG: When I was in New York, I started using a vinyl cutter, which is a straightforward machine, it basically just cuts stencils for me. But then that kind of grew eventually into other tools, and that led to growing my studio and working with a team rather than just me, on my own, making paintings. It's kind of freed me up. If I'm working with teams and I'm working with technology, how far can I start pushing the things I do. So, I've been wanting to start playing with the forms that I'm working from, which develop and emerge inside of my compositions and paintings. Because they're very dynamic, and they always hint at this idea of space. The paintings, although they're not illusionistic, they tend to have a lot of intimations of depth.

And so, I was thinking about what happens if I start creating more volume in them. About whether it can be relief type elements or having things hanging in front of pieces that just completely jut out of the work. Also, how it can be pulled back as well, not only in forward but in reverse, like behind the canvas and how light works, whether it's kinetic elements, whether the paintings can change. I mean this whole idea of total painting, which is a very modern Mexican concept. David Alfaro Siqueiros, who always spoke about the concept of total painting.

He was really harkening back a lot to the muralists from the Renaissance like Paolo Uccello with the Battle of San Romano and Battle of San Lorenzo. But they were these massive paintings that kind of create a narrative that envelopes the spectator just because of their sheer size. And Siqueiros, what he did, it took it next level, he was making murals that are like 30 meters by 15 meters, he was creating murals inside of whole buildings. It wasn't just like a dome in a church, but instead, he was painting all the walls, and the walls were creating a space that the viewer stepped into. It wasn't just the illusion of space that was being enveloped by the spectator by sheer size. It was building space around where the spectator would have experienced his painting.

But for me, the idea is how do you take that idea of painting and challenge the concept of the window or challenge the idea of painting an object. What's the relationship that we have as spectators that once we stand in front of a painting? Is that painting taken to a space beyond the space that we inhabit, or is it occupied in a space we inhabit? In a way, the works that I've been doing, they start inhabiting, co-existing in the same space as the spectator. So, that led me to the idea of, how can I make these paintings be, not necessarily more like objects, but rather how far can I push the possibility of these paintings.

Right now, what we've been doing, is now that I've felt a lot freer to have people that I'm collaborating with on my team and we're using technologies, I've started doing these 3D printed volumes and shapes. And the hope is, and these are all very experimental at the moment, I don't know if they'll ever turn into anything concrete. But the idea is maybe part of the elements can be 3D printed, attached to the stretchers, or they can become sculptures onto themselves.

JS: Your work samples other artists work, if you could collaborate with any artist in the history of art, who would it be?

ORG: Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, because his use of color just seemed so contemporary, his use of drawing, but it's still very classical. In the end, it's also weird because if I could collaborate with any artist, whether they be painters or not, you think of John Chamberlain in the 70s with these massive structures of crushed steel that he was working with, he had this amazing use of color.

Then again, you think about the possibilities of new technology, and you start thinking about these artists that are programmers and what they can do. It's kind of crazy, and I don't know, I wouldn't be able to narrow it down to one thing. I think it's just exciting in general, thinking about the possibilities of collaborating and feeding off other people. Because especially the practices of a painter are very insular, you're making decisions on your own. There are very few painters, I think that are actually working in a more collaborative process.

Julie Mehretu is one of them, and I'm fascinated by the way she runs her studio; it's interesting to see how the younger artists that work within her studio, her studio managers, the colorists, whatever. They're all giving her feedback and pitching in on ideas. Turning the studio practice, the artist practice into kind of a teamwork practice. It would be interesting to assemble a team of really talented artists and start doing collaborative pieces rather than collaborating with one. Instead of thinking more on the lines of how you can use people's knowledge, their skills to make pieces that are still more transcendent than what I can do on my own.

JS: Can elaborate on your studio practice. How has working with more studio assistants impacted your work?

ORG: I've realized that my goals within my practice, that to make the paintings I want to make, are something that's become something that's out of my reach. I can't do them on my own. It requires a reliable team of really committed individuals that are working towards this project, to approximate my vision in the end. But it's necessary to be able to depend on a team that helps you build these ideas into real things. I think a little bit of that does come back to the way I'm looking at my practice. How can I use other people's skill, knowledge, their ideas, not appropriate them for myself, but rather have them be part of the creative process and how we build forward this idea that's my work.

JS: You have an upcoming solo show at the Marc Straus Gallery. Can you tell us a little bit more about it?

ORG: Well, I'm bringing six paintings, four of which are very large paintings. They're not mural-sized, but they're big paintings. They really required me to kind of push myself and the group that I work with to the limit over the course of developing this exhibition, this body of work. I've had to grow the studio, so I had two assistants, and now I have seven assistants. That's required a lot of learning, and that's why I think it's been on my mind, this idea of how do you work with a team. How do you collaborate? How do you feed off their strengths and unique ideas and build them into your own?

I think what's happened and what I hope can be seen in this work is that it's the most complex, ambitious, painting I've done to date. There are things that I haven't done before that start to happen in these works. But what's most interesting, is the confidence that has grown out of understanding that I can let go of certain processes, certain parts of the creative constructive process, and that frees me up to think more strategically.

Not only has the team allowed me, with a little bit of stumbling and lot of learning, to really be able to feel a lot freer, to push the work in ways and do certain gestures and apply certain techniques that I might not have felt comfortable doing before because I was just so bogged now in the minutia of getting it done. Now, I get to step back and really work on the work. I can now take the time to think and see what's happening in these paintings, and then be able to push them forward in a more ambitious, take more risks and more freeing kind of way. WMCNC machines, all of these more industrial, not painterly techniques and tools, have become part of the day-to-day routine. Processes that have been incorporated into my practice.

I think one of the things that I've considered more over these past years, is how technology can be something that can push ideas of painting. Thinking of how to construct a painting without tools being at the forefront of the painting, but rather underlying and helping me achieve results that I couldn't achieve otherwise.