

A VER: REVISIONING ART HISTORY

VOLUME 1

# GRONK

MAX BENAVIDEZ

FOREWORD BY CHON A. NORIEGA



UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER PRESS  
LOS ANGELES  
2007

# FOREWORD

CHON A. NORIEGA

Gronk is easily one of the most recognized Chicano painters. And yet he remains a mysterious and mercurial figure, just as he was for those who first met him in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There is, first of all, the question of his name, its origin traced variously to a story about the Amazon in *National Geographic* or to a character in the short-lived CBS television series *It's About Time*. Indeed, Gronk has gone by many names since the 1950s, underscoring not only his artistic self-invention but also his underlying conceptual approach to art, identity, and politics. Rather than vesting himself in the object (both thing and goal), Gronk privileges the idea, because ideas can change and can bring change.

Growing up in East Los Angeles amid poverty and police riots, the recipient of a dead-end education in barrio schools, Gronk became an autodidact whose critical interests included art cinema, modernist theater, and campy B-movies, along with a wide array of philosophers, theorists, and writers. In this book, Max Benavidez, having immersed himself in Gronk's extensive library and film collection as part of his research, brings these influences to the foreground. In this way Benavidez gives us a different view of the "Chicano painter" from East Los Angeles. Here, we see an artist inventing himself within a global artistic frame of reference, even as his work intervened in volatile social conflicts in Los Angeles: homophobia in the Chicano community, police crackdowns on civil rights protests, racial biases in the print and electronic news media, and the exclusionary practices of the local arts institutions.

If Gronk remains a mysterious figure, that has largely to do with the fact that critics have recognized just the tip of the iceberg (a recurring image in Gronk's work). They often describe him as a painter and also as a co-founder of the Chicano conceptual art group Asco. But, as Benavidez notes, Gronk's is a "hybrid voice that speaks in many artistic tongues": painting, drawing, graphic arts, murals, performance art (street, stage, and video), photography, set design, ceramics, and computer-generated animation. While Gronk is most often associated with Asco, he has had other significant collaborators, before, during, and since Asco: Mundo



Gronk working on *Hit and Run*, an installation at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, in 1993. Opposite: the finished work.



Meza and Robert “Cyclona” Legorreta (performance), Willie Herrón III (murals), Jerry Dreva (mail art), the Kronos Quartet (music and action painting), and Peter Sellars (set design), among others. He staged the earliest gay-themed performance in East Los Angeles, contributed to the emergence of gay, punk, alternative, and Chicano art spaces, and—as a member of Asco—developed and theorized the No Movie concurrent with similar instances of conceptual or “expanded” cinema around the world. In short, his work constitutes a nexus for several art histories that have been seen as distinct.

Gronk’s self-invention, hybrid voice, and conceptualism pose a challenge to clear-cut categories, identities, and practices—including the gallery system, toward which he remains ambivalent, but within which he has succeeded. “In the end,” he explains, “I am not going to ask for permission to do something.”

In fall 1993, I commissioned Gronk to do an installation painting in the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University. The piece, *Hit and Run*, was part of a group show on Latino site-specific installation art, called *Revelaciones/Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence*. After the exhibition the works were disassembled, destroyed, or painted over. At the time, there were no published books on installation art, but most critics dated the genre to the 1970s. The exhibition brought together nine Latino artists whose installation work spanned—and in a few cases preceded—that historical framework, but who remained outside the critical discourse. What if, we proposed, the history of the genre could be told through these artists?

For two weeks, Gronk painted the far wall of the museum's main gallery, playing music, talking with passersby, and even stopping to give impromptu lectures to assembled students. As he applied layer upon layer of paint, using a power lift to reach the upper portions of the wall, familiar Gronkian shapes emerged, merged, and transformed, only to be covered over the next day. Each day, I would secretly will him to stop, since what he had painted seemed so beautiful, so compelling, and so complete. But he continued.

Meanwhile, another artist in the show was generating a great deal of notoriety for a series of black-tarred walls lining the walkways in the main quad. Eventually the piece would become the object of racist graffiti and vandalism and the catalyst for a student takeover of the administration building in protest of the hostile





Gronk, detail of untitled mural, 1993. Ithaca, New York.



climate for Latino students. What few people appreciated at the time, however, was that the piece was the result of prolonged negotiation with the university, and that the artist, Daniel J. Martinez, had been given permission to construct the installation.

The night of the opening, the curators, artists, and assistants all boarded an old school bus and headed down the hill from campus to the town for a celebratory dinner. As the bus prepared to turn into the parking lot, we all noticed that the warehouse across the street from the restaurant had been tagged. In the midst of a series of red flames and floating heads stood none other than Tormenta, Gronk's most iconic image, the eternal enigma with her back to the viewer, on the city street and not in the campus gallery. Everyone moved to the left side of the bus to get a closer look. Around the corner from Tormenta, more flames and a stenciled question: "Who is Columbus?" For the answer, an arrow pointed downward, toward the ground (or perhaps the restaurant). Suddenly, Gronk called out in a lilting voice, "Danny . . ." We all looked to the back of the bus, where Gronk sat, and he proclaimed: "I didn't ask permission."