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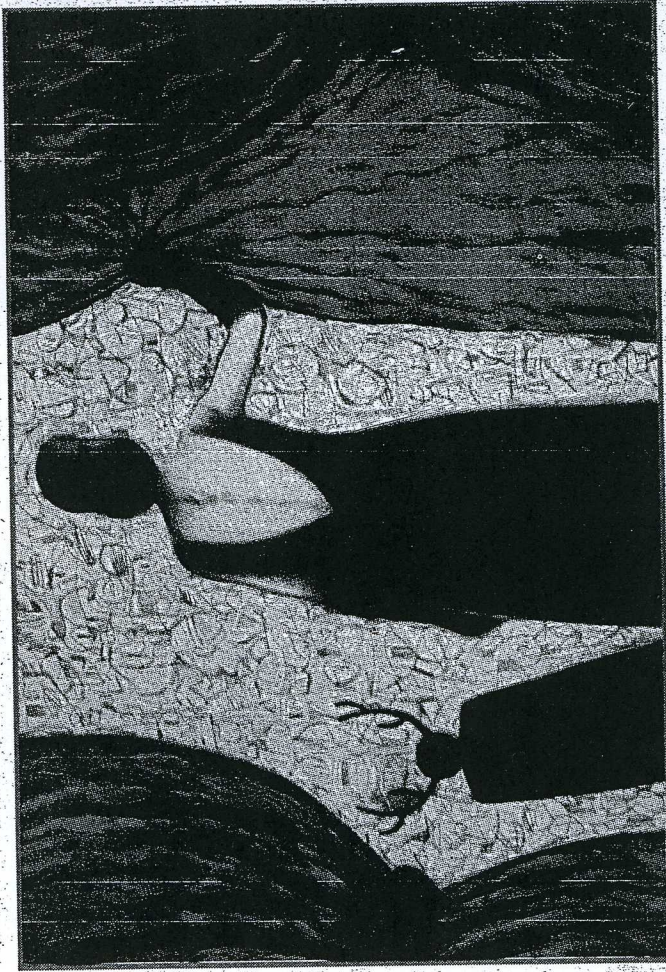
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## Gronk: Taking a look behind the curtain

By HUGH HART  
Special to The Times

**L**IKE most people who've lived in the same place for 19 years, the artist Gronk has accumulated a lot of stuff. Unlike most people, this 52-year-old is visited every Tuesday night by a team of student archivists. Wearing plastic gloves, they sift through decades' worth of notes, letters, paper napkin doodles, postcards and sketches, packing the documents into bins that will eventually be shipped to UCLA and scanned for posterity.

Of course, not everything fits into the bins. Gronk, dressed in work boots, black T-shirt and paint-splattered jeans, surrounds himself with artifacts, remnants and works in progress piled around the cavernous downtown loft that has long served as his studio and home. A freshly painted canvas lies on the floor, waiting to be framed by congenial assistant Ed Sanchez. Next to sculptures of his mythic persona, La Tormenta, sits a crenulated globe Gronk molded at the Museum [See Gronk, Page F6]



UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

**ENTER TORMENTA:** Gronk's 2001 acrylic tackles a recurring theme for the East L.A. native, the subject of the first book in a new series profiling U.S.-based Latino artists.



## ART

*'Finding things that most people would disregard, those are the things I latch onto.'*

— GRONK

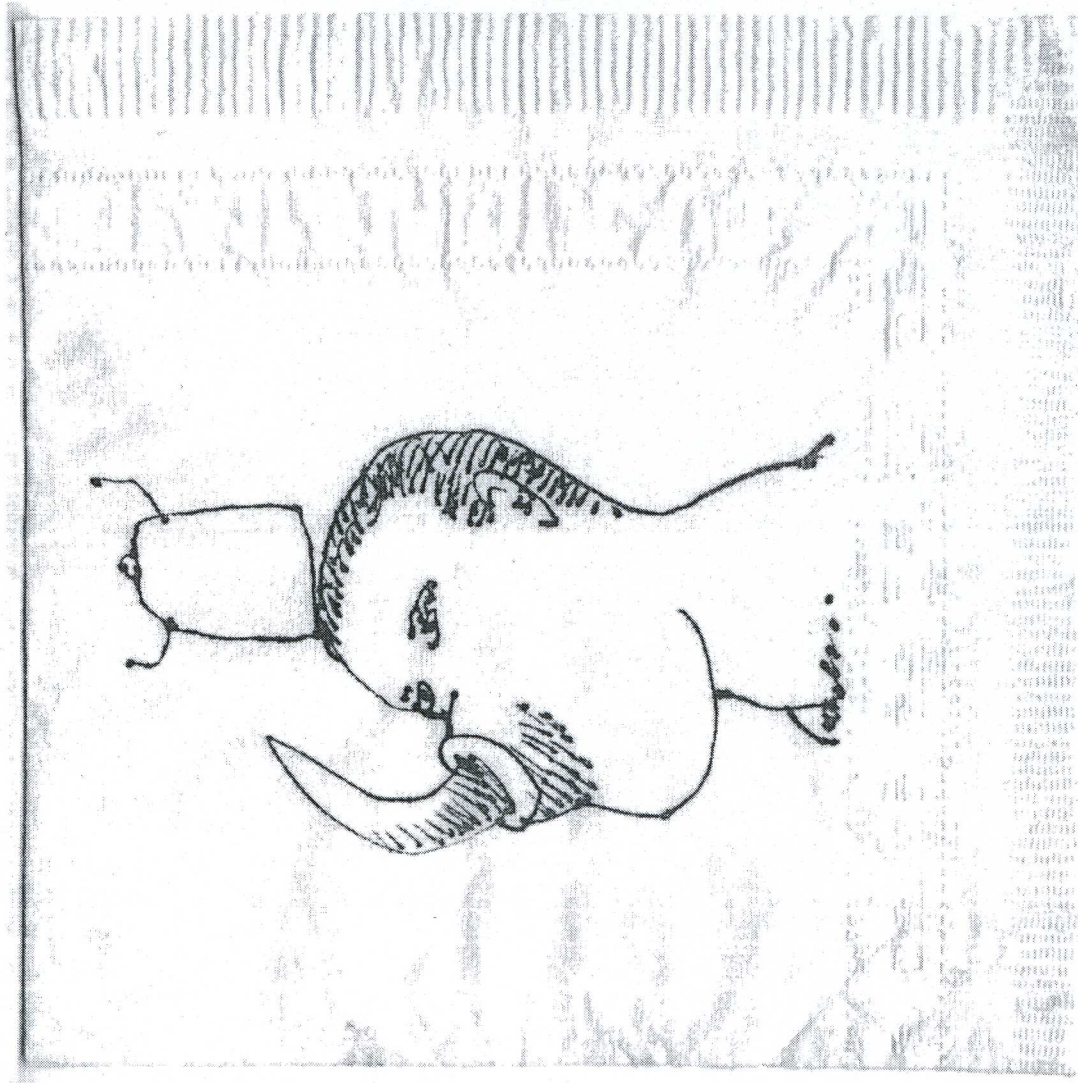


GINA FERRAZZI Los Angeles Times

**IN THE STUDIO:** Gronk has long lived and worked in downtown L.A. and finds beauty and inspiration in the bustle of its streets.



# The evolution of Gronk



UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center  
**'RHINO BOY':** The ink-on-paper-napkin sketch (2000) is among the ephemera being scanned in a UCLA project. "You try something, see what happens," the artist says.



[Gronk, from Page F1]

of Glass in Tacoma, Wash., and used for his animated film "BrainFlame," shown at the LodeStar Planetarium in Albuquerque in 2005. Propped against a potted plant on the fourth-floor rooftop patio is a tattered sign for the Hotel Senator, the nearby onetime house of prostitution that inspired Gronk to create his brooding "Hotel Zombie" and "Hotel Tormenta" gallery shows in the early '90s.

Gronk, who never learned to drive, remains ever-mindful of the hustle and flow that uncoils outside his window. "I walk out of this studio onto Spring Street and to me it's like Fellini's 'Satyricon,'" he says over a cup of intense home-brewed coffee. "People say Los Angeles is perhaps ugly, dirty, grimy, but if you scratch below the surface, there's beauty. Finding things that most people would disregard, those are the things I latch onto. You're constantly bombarded with all this information, so it's always been about taking in all kinds of sources, pushing the boundaries of things, exploring the unknown. You try something, see what happens."

Gronk's experiments as a muralist, performance artist, painter, set designer and conceptual provocateur have hardly gone unnoticed. Next week he receives yet another dose of Major Artist treatment with publication of a scholarly monograph offering a midcareer overview of his life and work. "Gronk," sold as a \$20 paperback or a \$60 hardback that includes a documentary DVD, inaugurates "A Ver: Revisioning Art History," a new book series focusing on contemporary U.S.-based Latino artists.

### Presenting the artists

**D**ISTRIBUTED by University of Minnesota Press and produced by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, the series will assess 15 artists with roots in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Chon A. Noriega, the center's director, says he came up with the idea for "A Ver" (Spanish for "let's see") to remedy a dearth of quality scholarship on the subject. "I spent 18 months doing research and pulled together a list of 100 Latino artists who had some presence in the world of solo and group exhibitions. We ran those names through art history indices and search engines and published the results. We didn't need much ink."

Beyond the occasional two- or three-sentence exhibition review, Noriega says, "none of these artists had a book-length work. We even looked through survey-type textbooks that marketed themselves as being multicultural and found nothing. There's been no presence of U.S. Latino artists on bookstore shelves."

Next fall, the "A Ver" series will continue with books about Malaquías Montoya, co-founder of Mexican-American Liberation Art Front and best-known for his silk-screen prints, and María Brito, a Miami-based Cuban American painter, sculptor and mixed-media artist. In 2008, the series will is-

sue volumes on Judy Baca, Carmen Lomas Garza, Rafael Ferrer, Yolanda López, Amalia Mesa-Bains, José Montoya, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Pepón Osorio, María Magdalena Campos Pons, Freddy Rodríguez and Juan Sanchez. Modeled after monographs published by Taschen and Phaedon, the books will be issued in paperback and hardcover formats, each with 100 color illustrations, a 25,000-word essay, bibliography, exhibition history and index.

Classifying creative output according to ethnicity can be a slippery slope, but Noriega hopes the project will broaden the definition of what it means to be an artist of Latino heritage. "We want to judge individual artists on the basis of their work and build out from there, rather than saying, for example, 'This is a Chicano artist and therefore all this traditional iconography from the Mexican revolution going back to the conquest of Mexico is

going to front-end our understanding of that artist.'"

In some instances, that approach makes sense, Noriega says. "But in other cases, like Gronk, it's not true at all. The Chicano political and social movement is clearly part of his work, but Gronk operates in so many other contexts — the emergence of gay art, the punk scene, correspondence art, performance art — all these things make him a much more complicated figure. Unless we look at his work on its own terms and connect it to the broader history, we're going to sell him short as an artist. If we sell him short, we sell short the idea of Chicano art as something worth looking at."

Glugio Gronk Nicandro grew up broke, gay and intensely curious in East L.A., raised by a single mom, surrounded by gang violence and obsessed by his goal of reading every single book at the local library.



# Still an eye to performance

In the early '70s, he co-founded the subversive multimedia collective Asco (Spanish for "nausea"). Dismissed by museum officials as folk artists, Gronk and partners Harry Gamboa Jr., Patssi Valdez and Willie Herrón III earned a measure of notoriety in 1972 with their "Spraypaint LACMA" piece, for which Gronk, Gamboa and Herrón painted their names on the outside of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, then returned the next day to photograph Valdez with their handiwork.

"They tagged the museum, took the picture with Patssi and all their names signed on it and said, 'The museum is one of our artworks,'" Gronk author Max Benavides says. "It was one of the most audacious conceptual pieces anybody's ever done in L.A. The street was their studio, the street was their gallery, and the street was where they took their inspiration."

Twenty-one years after Asco's so-called "Pie in Deface" protest, Gronk became the first Chicano artist to have a solo exhibition at LACMA. In 1997, he used an amplified paintbrush as a baton, conducting the Kronos Quartet as he completed a painting in tempo to Joseph Julian González's 45-minute composition "Tormenta Cantata." Recent set designs for opera director Peter Sellars — including for Igor Stravinsky's "The Story of a Soldier" in 1998, performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Music Center, and Osvaldo Golijov's "Ainadamar," which opened in Santa Fe in 2005 and later played Lincoln Center in New York — further enhanced Gronk's reputation.

Benavidez, a former adjunct faculty member at UCLA's César E. Chávez Center, views the artist as a sort of "post-Chicano paradigm." Gronk's work certainly reflected a Chicano sensibility, Benavidez says, "but I see him now as this more global type of artist, in that he can't be categorized or put into a box. Yes, he comes out of East L.A. at a particular time, but he's also been a downtown guy and epitomizes that art scene with all its ups and downs. He's a polymath with all these other influences to draw from."

## New performances, new palettes

**I**NDEED, Gronk wryly notes that Alfred Hitchcock's "Notorious" may have had as much impact on his aesthetic as Diego Rivera. "My earlier paintings, in the '80s, were very bright and vibrant," he says. "People sometimes tell me they remind them of a fiesta, and I say, 'Stop right there: Wrong.' It's MGM musicals. That's my palette. I'm deriving the richness and saturation of those colors from Vincente Minnelli."

Gronk says he never felt locked in by stereotypes. "Asco was criticized by many people for not doing Aztec gods or things along those lines. Some people want obvious political slogans they can identify with immediately. Well, my work is not like a sitcom. It's not an easy solution. The characters have to come back the next episode. You have to think a little bit more about my work because the more you put into it, the

[See Gronk, Page F7]

[Gronk, from Page F6]

more you're going to get back."

As houseguest David Garza, an Austin musician, noodles on a nearby spinet piano, Gronk settles into a nearly Zen-like demeanor that contrasts with some of his more outrageous street theater back in the day. He did, after all, tape Valdez onto a wall for Gamboa's 1974 "Instant Mural." "That's the performing part," he says. "The real me is low-key and calm. I'm the idea person intrigued by pulling things together, taking them apart, constructing my own world."

Even as Gronk explores new venues, color palettes, collaborations and media, the fascination with ephemeral, performance-based art remains essentially unchanged, according to Benavidez. "In the early years, Gronk did so many murals and loved to see them destroyed," he says. "When his 'Urban Narrative' show at Gallery 727 closed in 2005, the people there said, 'What do we do with this 'Cheap Construction' piece?' He told them, 'Just paint over it. It's gone.' I've never known any artist who gets such a rush from the fact that things are here and then they're gone."

Gronk says: "Outcomes have never been as important as the actual doing of something. When I did those Asco pieces, I never thought I would end up at Lincoln Center or that my paintings would be floating on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. We just had these ideas we wanted to unleash that were more about spontaneity, I guess, and never asking permission."

The larger-scale commissions that come his way these days require substantial preparation. Gronk spent 10 months immersing himself in the life and times of Federico García Lorca, subject of Golijov and David Henry Hwang's Spanish Civil War-themed "Ainadamar." He then spent a month, 14 hours a day, covering the floor and walls of the Santa Fe Opera's stage with images he hoped would "plant a seed of imagination in the audience."

"I think of the way I paint as being very musical. It's like conducting in many ways — you're trying to create a sense of harmony."

And if that sense of harmony is fleeting, so be it.

"I always felt more comfortable doing on-site pieces that were there for three months and would then be completely whitewashed after they were done," Gronk says. "I equate that with performance in many ways. The viewer owns the piece. They take it with them in their imagination as opposed to something that hangs in a gallery. A museum can't collect it, a collector can't buy it. It's only there for a short amount of time. Like Tibetan monks' sand painting, you appreciate the beauty for the moment."