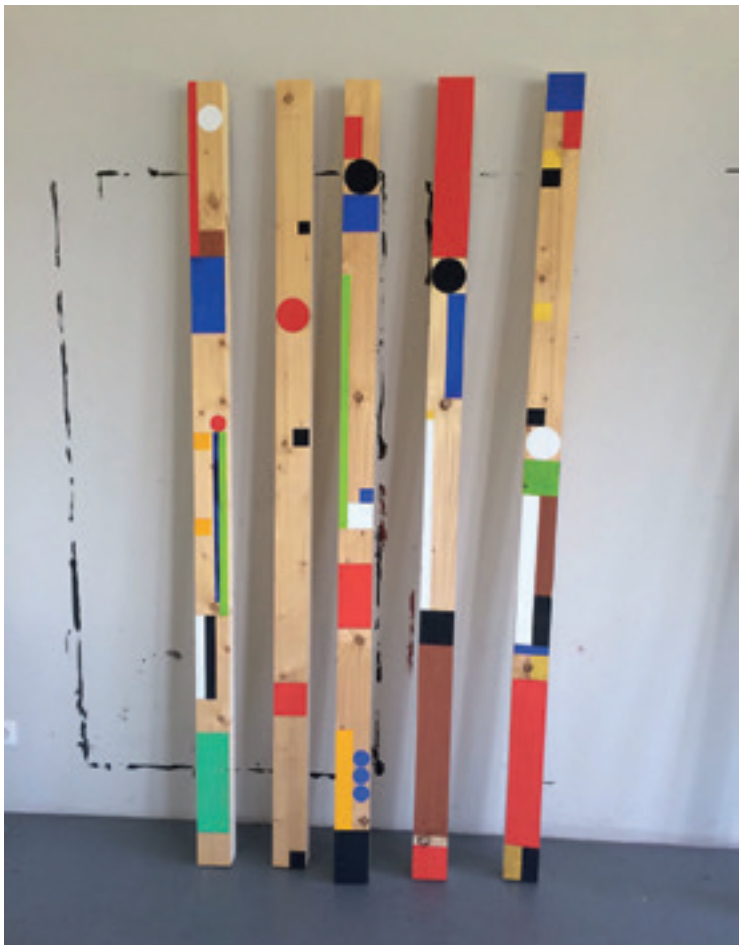
ROTO SHAKU

Gabriel Orozco's method combines system with susceptibility to the vagaries of life, including the particular habits of his own everyday existence. Rather than formulaic, it is a way of working that allows, paradoxically, for maximum improvisation. A few striking aspects of the work that Orozco has produced since moving to Tokyo at the beginning of 2015 may seem to fly in the face of his preoccupations up until now, yet they adhere to precisely the same method that the artist has been deploying since the early 1990s. This involves making a few basic decisions about his process and procedure that are then played out, often using found, local materials. A riot of color that occasionally erupts along the lengths of the *Roto Shaku*s, the first project he has completed while living in Japan, is an extension of Orozco's interests in chroma and structure, which have been developing in his work over a long period. Rather than prompting him to produce work that is "about" Japan, Tokyo has simply presented him with new ways to set these devices to work.

Temporary Measures

The wooden supports of the *Roto Shaku*s are made of ordinary construction materials of standard lengths, bought from the timber section of Tokyo's large department store Tokyu Hands — temple of DIY, bricolage, art-and-crafts materials, and merchandise of all kinds. I said "standard lengths," except of course, standards are never "universal"; they are subject to variation depending on where you are in the world, contingent upon geography and history. Despite attempts at metrification, there is no single system of measurement that applies the world over. In Japan, the metric system coexists with older measures in some areas of life. Orozco has selected lengths of ready-cut timber that are all six *shaku*s, the traditional unit of measurement still used in carpentry there. Sometimes called the Japanese foot, to which it roughly equates, the *shaku* was originally based on the length of a forearm, revealing the basis of measurement in the body. The standard six-*shaku* length is the traditional measure still used for the rice-straw matting, or *tatami*, that cover the floors of Japanese houses.

Installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, London, 2015



Painted leftover timber,
France, Summer 2014

Over the summer of 2014, in France, Orozco began to paint on some leftover bits of timber from the construction of a pergola. The experiment sowed the seeds of the work that he would go on to make in Japan. Previously, he had used the knots in the grain of the pine to designate the points where he should place circles. In Tokyo, he started over, using local materials that were to hand, following smooth-grained wood that contained no knots but nonetheless had its "own nature," as the artist has put it, just as his drawing in graphite had followed the strange bone terrain of a skull in *Black Kites* (1997). In the new work, his configuration of painted, colored elements attach to wood as they have attached to any number of different surfaces — bone, plaster, tickets, money, leaves — in the past.

The micro scale of Orozco's work acts out a deflationary impulse, a desire to puncture the bloated rhetoric of much contemporary large-scale art production. There is a constant insistence that art is made out of habits and the small epiphanies of everyday life. Some of the *Roto Shakus* consist of thin round poles, for instance, made of the same dowelling used to produce household utensils and long-handled tools such as brooms or rakes. The poles are too long to be used, but they still suggest ordinary hand-held things and routine activities: They create an imaginative proximity to the hand, and to things that are portable.

Chroma

The *Roto Shakus* are brightly colored round poles and square staves that lean casually against a wall, just as they did in Orozco's Tokyo apartment over the period that he made them. They are, to say the least, very low-tech, yet their often frenetic sequences and patterns connect to his familiar lexicon of geometric forms — with circles, squares, and rectangles punctuating each one. There are many variations: Some are painted in bright gouaches; others are wrapped in colored plastic or metallic tape. Most are colored — some are neutral or clear — but all conform to the same vertical format and dimensions.

The paint used on the *Roto Shakus* is Sennelier gouache, which Orozco has referred to both as "ready-made color" and as "color-dust,"[1] which is to say in terms that distance it from the idea that color is something the artist makes. He has added several new colors to his own repertoire (especially yellows and greens). The application of the paint is inexact, with the artist's under-drawing still visible in many of the works, emphasizing their provisional nature. Since the color wraps around all four sides of the staves, Orozco's interest in circularity can be seen not only in the circle shapes that recur insistently in all his work but also in this movement of encircling, especially in the repetitious gesture of wrapping the tape around the wooden bars. Although there is a side that is intended to face frontally, a suggestion of rotation is always present. They stand on the ground and have a top and a bottom, but the wrapping "turns" on its support, hinting at this mobility.

Untitled, 2008
Gouache and graphite
on banknote

While some of the *Roto Shaku*s are very simple, in others the layering of patterns becomes increasingly chromatically complex. Proceeding by addition, the tapes often cut into one another, creating a frenetic or jerky effect in the rhythmic color sequences (red-yellow-black, for example). On other occasions, the mixture of wound tapes and the overlaid or cut-out circles create accretions of color that are surprisingly subtle and intricate (in the green-yellow range in particular). These experiments in chroma tap into a history of geometric abstraction, especially as a means of rethinking the almost aberrant ticker-tape color sequences in Mondrian's late New York works, such as *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943). Equally, they might make us think of Kurt Schwitters's miniaturized collage constructions of urban detritus. As vertical props that lean against a wall, the *Roto Shaku*s provide an even more insistent reminder of Orozco's longstanding interest in the portable colored bars of the Romanian conceptual artist André Cadere. The practice of mixing up such strangely misaligned art-historical bedfellows has been a feature of Orozco's approach since the early 1990s, and it has now been transformed in response to a radically different set of conditions.

Signals

The *Roto Shaku*s are slender slivers of color at the periphery of vision, casually placed at the edge of the room. Even when they are painted, the staves are not paintings but rather objects of this very peculiar kind, which is to say partial objects (we can never see all four sides of them, after all). They have a connection to Orozco's paintings, but I think no more privileged a relationship than any other kind of thing that he makes. They may on occasion look like a very thin section of one of his more turbulent circle paintings, but they aren't paintings because they are palpably 3-D things. It is worth remembering that the artist has always been interested in objects that are somehow temporary, that anticipate that something might happen to them — but hasn't yet. They seem like they might be ritual objects, perhaps, or signals, but it is entirely enigmatic what ritual or system of signals they could belong to.

Black Kites, 1997
Graphite on skull

The *Roto Shaku*s certainly connect to that rhythmic dynamic of circles cutting into each other that has been a constant feature of Orozco's work. Almost as soon as he began to make paintings in 2004, the system that he set in train in the *Samurai Tree* series began to undo itself. Already, colors overlaying colors would obliterate each other, and in many ways over time it has come to seem that his whole painting practice has to do with the way circles are "instruments," as the artist would call them, whose job is principally that of cutting *out*.[2] So when one circle cuts into another, it takes away a part of itself. In some of his more recent paintings, this has been taken to an extreme point of almost "'white-out" where an increasingly complicated pattern of circles on a white ground end up cancelling themselves out almost completely and leaving only the most fragile of substrates. Even in a painting against a predominance of white ground, the fragments of circles seem like scraps in a vacuum.

Turbo Bubbles, 2005
Acrylic on linen canvas

The variations of patterns on the *shaku*s disturb, and sometimes completely sabotage, any secure sense of a rational ordering system being in place. The sequences seem at once to be self-generating and to open to a world of ready-made material and color. This makes the *Roto Shaku*s seem almost like transmission poles, receptor surfaces of some kind that become enwrapped and entangled in the place they were made. They become not just bearers of such a mass of signs but signs themselves. They invoke the signage you find on a Tokyo street — the spiral of the sign for a barber's shop, or a post papered with vertical script — that can seem both to attract attention and to be camouflaged and outnumbered by other signs and objects of visual interest.

Emptiness

There has always been an unpredictable but intimate connection between materiality and emptiness in Orozco's work. What else was his seminal *Empty Shoe Box* (1993) but a depiction of these two extremes not as opposites but as coexisting in one very ordinary but strangely volatile object? This double action is still very much in play, except not necessarily where you expect to find it. If, once upon a time, Orozco's decision to make paintings seemed to some commentators to suggest that he was turning away from his conceptually-oriented practice, now it looks much more clearly like a continuation of a project that necessarily thrives on unpredictable conjunctions. The *Roto Shakus* — however spare and almost reticent they are as objects — bring some of those supposedly disjunctive parts together. In other words, the geometric lexicon that he has pretty thoroughly broken down in his paintings and drawings has come to settle on a few temporary posts or place-holders. Each one of them is full of incident yet at the same time is so incidental as to draw attention to the void space that envelopes it.

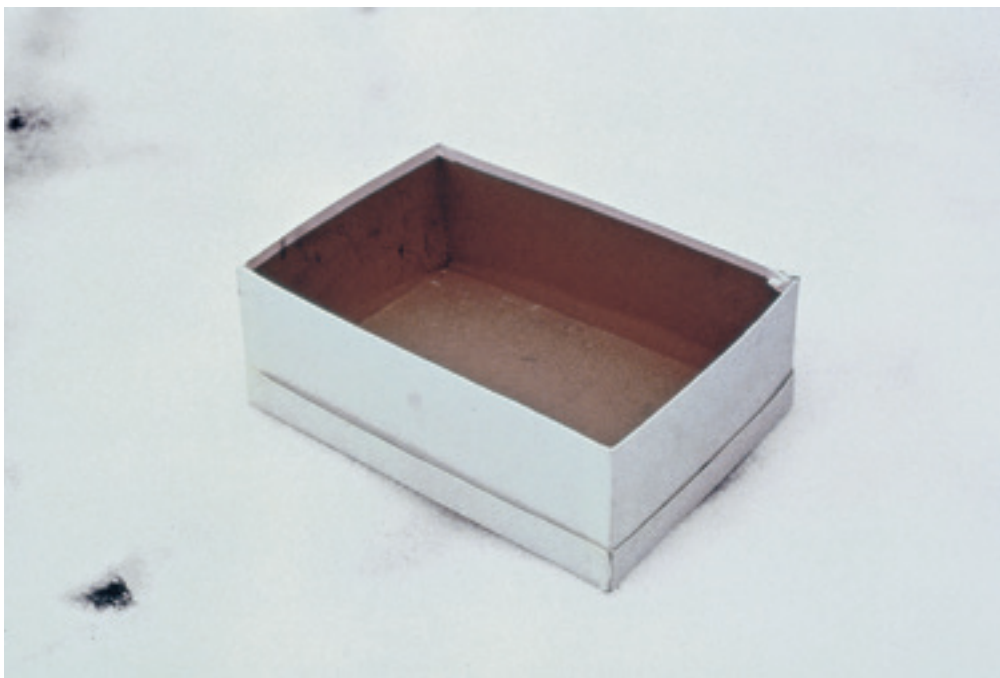
Fish Feathers 2, 2015
Tempera and burnished gold leaf on linen canvas

The *Roto Shakus*' sense of lightness or weightlessness also connects with *Inner Cuts* (2014), a room full of plywood boomerangs, only partially cut from their templates, fixed to the wall at eye height as if in flight around the room. Originally exhibited at the Marian Goodman Gallery New York in 2014, this work now looks like something of a key moment. Boomerangs may be as unlikely a comparison here as they are a material for an artwork, but as man-made throwing tools that mold to the hand — ax *handles*, almost, that can fly and loop back to the thrower in a huge circular movement — they are of relevance here. Even if the poles and staves are not suggestive of flight in the same way, they do arguably create the same kind of agitation when installed in an otherwise empty room.

After all, many of the *Roto Shaku*s may be full of pattern and color, but they are very spare as objects. For all the sundry material that may be attached to them, they barely seem substantial enough to be called sculpture. It is hard to imagine an artwork more reduced — or made of simpler stuff — than these long thin posts that stand vertically just over average height (the staves are only four by four centimeters in section). Yet if one observes the effect they have, one comes to notice that they often seem to create a frenetic disturbance in a much larger field than they themselves occupy when they are installed in the empty space of the gallery. Making emptiness, then, is part of what they do. That chromatic decoration provides the means to create this effect of dismantling and evacuation through color is fairly startling.

Precise, Mobile, and Empty

Orozco's copy of Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs* is much marked and underlined, much read and re-read. This remarkable book was written during Barthes' trip to Japan in 1966 though not published until 1970. In a way it is a book about not "discovering" Japanese culture but attempting to read what is ultimately unreadable. For Barthes, Japan was always a fictive place — an "empire of signifiers," "so immense, so in excess of speech"[3] — one that fascinated him because behind it there was nothing firmly to fix in place. It was graspable, and even then only just, through a series of fragments, among which the Japanese haiku — the French theorist's preferred literary form and, he claims, the smallest form of the poem — could serve as the paradigm.



Empty Shoe Box, 1993

In one chapter on packages, Barthes discussed the cultural meanings that attach to the custom of meticulously wrapping goods and gifts in Japan. He observed that the actual gift, whatever it was, was inconsequential. What mattered was the wrapping, not what was actually inside it. A package is always a highly mobile thing, he insisted, portable like "instruments of transport."[4] And the satisfaction it promises lies in the layers of wrapping, not what it contains — in the anticipation of the process of unwrapping. It must therefore also be temporal — always about to be or to come, always deferred in some way. In Barthes's description of what a package is, we find the antithesis of the kind of immediate satisfaction we associate with a commodity culture. Wrapping turns out to be the antidote to the easy or quick fix. He writes that "the richness of the thing and the profundity of meaning are discharged only at the price of a triple quality imposed on all fabricated objects: that they be precise, mobile, and empty."[5]

Inner Cut: Shoe II, 2014
Wood and graphite

"Precise, mobile, and empty": I am not sure there could be a better description of Orozco's *Roto Shaku*s than these three words. The point being that something has happened in that simple move to wrap an object that relates to collage but is also more than that. It's an attempt to make something altogether slighter, something more like a package than like the product at its center, which would be the more usual way to think about the primacy of the art object. For Orozco, it doesn't matter what is inside the work: More productive are the layers of wrapping and the layers of cutting and peeling away that may reveal an empty center, or make visible an empty room.