OBI SCROLL

The twenty-eight *Obi Scroll*s that Orozco began while he was making the *Roto Shaku*s are also, one might say, both more and less than collage. With their antique textiles and high degree of workmanship, they suggest an immersion in Japanese decorative culture that is far in excess of the *Roto Shaku*s or even the artist's own longstanding interests in Eastern cultural forms. And yet there is an umbilical cord that ties the two projects together even though they seem in many ways so utterly strange to one another. Their common ground is obviously not a matter of what they look like or any formal resemblance. It is, rather, to be located in the same set of basic actions and movements that are at work: wrapping, of course, first and foremost, as well as turning and cutting. Then the things themselves: The enclosing box, the vertical scroll, the material remnants — all are recognizable categories in Orozco's work. But now they return again to translate the much simpler and more makeshift workmanship of the *Roto Shaku*s into a language of almost exquisite decoration. In so doing, and in ignoring the normal coordinates of global contemporary art, he has brought abstraction into such a close relationship to the decorative that at times the one seems almost entirely imbricated in the other.

Packages

Rather than tracing an art-historical lineage, let alone a history of the "box," the more pressing task is to determine the relation of chance procedures to multiple units of measure, which, as we have seen, in Orozco's hands is subject at every turn to the rule of the somatic, the bodily, and the contingent. It is with this in mind that the *Obi Scroll*s and the *Roto Shaku*s reanimate, rather than merely recall, a critique of rationalist models of measurement that Duchamp first explored in *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913–14) — the wooden box containing three one-meter lengths of string that lie in the curves they landed in by chance, accompanied by templates created from these curves. The boxes containing the scrolls may be precision objects of a very different kind, but the pursuit of an alternative way of calibrating things is surely still very much at stake.

Obi Scroll 2, 2015
Cotton, washi,
Japanese wood

Instead of using cheap-colored tapes from Tokyu Hands, the *Obi Scrolls* engage with craft skills of extreme refinement. This is evident in both the hand-woven antique textiles themselves and the fact that Orozco worked with Mr. Tatsuo Ooiri, a master scroll-maker in Kyoto, who made the scrolls and fabricated the boxes to house them to remarkable standards of elegance and workmanship. Rather than incidental containers for the work, the boxes are very much part of it. They are literally a nest of boxes — a wooden box of Japanese yew contained in an outer cardboard one — that house the scrolls in the traditional Japanese manner.

Scrolls are generally kept in this way and taken out to be looked at for intervals of time but not permanently fixed, like a picture, to a wall. Rolled up, wound around a cylindrical Rosewood pole, they are placed perfectly in a box lined in paper and tied with gold ribbon in a special knot. At least from the point of view of the many layers of wrapping, it's hard not to see a proximity to the *Roto Shakus* — even taking into account the fact that the latter have the wood on the inside and are covered in colored tapes on the outside. The conjunctions may be surprising, but they mark out alternate ways of imagining so many variants on, or versions of, a portable, temporary object.

The form of the packaging inside each box is remarkably intricate, adhering to strict protocols and traditions of scroll-making. But as Barthes wrote of the package, and noted the characteristics of even the simplest set of boxes he found in Japan: "Geometric, rigorously drawn, and yet always signed somewhere with an asymmetric fold or knot, by the care, the very technique of its making, the interplay of cardboard, wood, paper, ribbon, it is no longer the temporary accessory of the object to be transported, but itself becomes an object."[6] The box is a mobile object that, in the case of the *Obi Scrolls*, encloses an artwork but could equally contain something far less precious or even significant.

Obi Scroll (detail)

Obi Scroll 9, 2015
Silk, washi, rosewood

Remnants

The *Obi Scroll*s are composites, made up of several elements. They incorporate obis, or sashes that traditionally wrap around a kimono at the waist and are still worn today on special occasions. Orozco found these particular pieces as remnants and offcuts in a shop in Kyoto selling antique textiles. They mainly date from the Edo and Meiji periods, that is, roughly between the seventeenth and the early twentieth centuries. Obis often feature hundreds of repeating patterns based on landscape or floral motifs woven in silk or satin: mountains, birds, flowers, leaves, and bamboo proliferate and multiply

The *Obi*s are samples of Japanese craft techniques that date back hundreds of years. Rather than simply a repetition of the kind of Japonism that took hold in late-nineteenth-century European painting, however, Orozco's engagement can be set against a far wider global traffic in Japanese decorative arts, dating back to the late-sixteenth century. It has been shown, for example, that the early- modern colonial imagination in Mexico was shaped by Japanese techniques that were absorbed and integrated into art and artisanal practices.[7] Likewise, there is nothing "pure" or "authentic" about antique Japanese textiles that themselves had incorporated many Western influences, including that of the Jacquard loom at the end of the Meiji period.

Rather different, then, from Tokyu Hands. The finest obis, historically used as wedding attire, were coveted objects. Many of them were made in the Nishijin district of Kyoto, which had been a center of the weaving trade and was famous for its fine silk work. And yet, however remarkable they are as finely woven textiles, they are also leftovers. Designed to tie around the kimono and be folded in a variety of knots and bows at the back, these antique obis maintain that intimate proximity to the body. Cloth and clothing—which, after all, only wrap and encircle a body—become another way to register the corporeal through displaced material remnants. Between the *Roto Shaku*s and the *Obi Scroll*s, then, we can begin to see an intimate relation between the wrapping of a body and the wrapping of a length of timber. Basic units of construction are taken apart and put together in new ways.

Orozco's longstanding interest in craft and artisanal practices is clearly reflected in the *Obi Scrolls* — in his choice of materials, for example, and his decision to work with both old textiles and a contemporary, scrupulously exacting, scroll-maker. Not only has the artist worked with artisanal materials such as terra-cotta and gesso and gold-leaf finishes, he has also gone on to experiment with other traditional Japanese craft practices following on from the *Obi Scrolls*. For example, he has subsequently looked to Japanese joinery in his installation *Visible Labor* (2016) and to watercolor painting in the series *Suisai* (2016).[8] As disparate as these projects are, then, there is a strong logic underlying all of them: a plotting out of measures of difference, perhaps, or of pure contingency.

Rotating Objects

Using found materials and adopting a preset procedure, Orozco used a rotary cutter to excise sections of the *Obi*s and then rotate them to make configurations of circles in the patterned textiles that were sometimes very simple, sometimes more complex. He used both the backs and the fronts of the cloth, flipping the sections to show the wrong, or the right, side as alternating patterns or: flipping the cut sections to juxtapose the different patterning on the "wrong" or the "right" side. Turning the fabric in this way reveals horizontal seams in some places and exposes different haptic registers — smooth and rough, shiny and matte. The backs sometimes face front, showing the warp and weft of the weave very dramatically to reveal intricate passages of tiny silk grids and wayward threads that escape them. The cuts into the repeat patterns scramble distinctions between the figurative and the abstract and between forms and patterns. Scraps of material are set in motion and circles cut into circles, in many different variants, which introduces all sorts of rotational and turning movements into the collages.

Hashira/Buddha/ Mach Five, 2015
Acrylic on wood, Buddha figure, miniature car model

Hashira/Buddha/ Mahha Go, 2015
Acrylic on wood, Buddha figure, miniature car model

The many different orientations brought into play are both spatial and temporal. When the *Obi Scroll*s hang on the wall, they drop to the floor in a vertical orientation that echoes the artist's preoccupations with gravity — a preoccupation that is also, of course, fairly remarkable in the propping of the *Roto Shaku*s against the wall. Some of the longer thinner *Obi*s, with intersecting circles descending vertically and in series, make this even clearer. They may be hung on the wall as pictures, temporarily at least, but they are very much part of an object world in this — and virtually every other — respect. Then there is also the play of recto-verso in many *Obi Scroll*s, where Orozco reveals the backs of woven textiles that often show signs of the aging of the fabric. Small rents and tears, or merely parts that have been worn a little, suggest a degradation or undoing — even though as they do so the materials seem to reveal an even more complex sense of their own temporality. Fine work like this is susceptible to time's passing, demonstrating fragility but also resilience, unraveling onto a future.

Suisai XIV, 2016
Watercolor on gold card

Work-as-Maquette

When Roland Barthes, at the end of the 1970s, gave one of his final courses of lectures at the College de France, the whole first half of what would become known as *The Preparation of the Novel* was devoted to the Japanese haiku. He had lost none of his fascination with Japan or with the shortest of literary forms. The second half of the lecture course was devoted to thinking about what it means to make a work — in Barthes's formulation, of course, a literary work. He dwelt at length with the longest of novels, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and as he did so, amid the many speculative avenues he pursued, he introduced the idea of the *work-as-maquette*. This wasn't a preparatory work, or even a work in preparation, but a work that makes itself before our eyes. "The work as maquette," he wrote, "presents itself as its own experimentation."[9]

Barthes rooted the idea in Diderot's description of a newly mechanized loom for making stockings — that is, a weaving loom. Weaving was a form of labor that seemed to offer a way of thinking about the process of something being made *made visible*. What strikes me about Barthes's formulation — and why it is suggestive in the context of Orozco's work — is the way it brings together the idea of a provisional structure or scaffolding (the maquette) with the idea of weaving as an archaic technology, if not in fact as one of the earliest "machines." To hold the two together in one thought is surely relevant to the double aspect of Orozco's recent work. Although there are undoubtedly many other connections and links one could explore to other works that would inflect them very differently, this gives traction to the relation between the *Roto Shaku*s and *Obi Scroll*s as both intimately twinned and powerfully distinct.

Both the *Roto Shaku*s and the *Obi Scroll*s can be seen as receptacles in both an abstract sense and a literal one. They are receptacles that collect — or could we say "gather up" — the circumstances of their making. They are entirely sensitized to the places they were made in; they are defined by what Barthes called their "surrounds" or "circumstants" (*circonstants*) rather than "referents."[10] This is a way of describing the extrinsic pressures on the work of art that come to shape and color and embody it (rather than simply provide a context or a background or a set of influences upon it). The gap between the art object and the object-world becomes infinitesimally narrow. Orozco's work invites us to think about how porous art can be to the artisanal or bricolage practices to which he has exposed his working process. Rather than thinking in terms of formal vocabularies that are intrinsic to art, now it is those very factors, not least the chromatic and the artisanal, that seem to be driving the work in new directions. This is the opposite of keeping the world out of art. It's more a matter of letting it in. The point turns out to be how could Tokyo *not* put its mark on the artist's work and change it.

NOTES

1 Gabriel Orozco in conversation with the author, Tokyo, February 2016.
2 See Orozco's attention in his notebooks to the instrument as "a means by which work is done" (Notebook 4 1993). I discuss this in detail in Briony Fer, *Gabriel Orozco: Thinking in Circles* (Fruitmarket Gallery: Edinburgh, 2013), p. 121.
3 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, translated by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang: New York, 1982), p. 9. The title of this essay is taken from page 45 of the same volume, from a passage on packages.
4 Ibid p.46.
5 ibid p.47.
6 Roland Barthes, ibid., p. 45.
7 See for example, Sofia Sanabrais, "From *Byōbu* to *Biombo*: The Transformation of the Japanese Dolding Screen in Colonial Mexico," in *Art History Special Issue: Objects in Motion in the Early Modern World*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar and Meredith Martin, Vol. 38 issue 4, pp. 778–79, September 1, 2015.
8 *Visible Labor*, Rat Hole Gallery Tokyo, 2016, and *Tokyo Strokes: Suisai*, White Cube Gallery Hong Kong, 2016.
9 Roland Barthes, "Session of December 15 1979," in *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the College de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, translated by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 170.
10 Roland Barthes, ibid., p. 52.