



Máximo González
Magma CCCLXX-I (detail)
2011
Money paper, glue
12 x 6 feet
Courtesy of the artist

Long Read: Mexico City - Cultural Affluence

by Leslie Moody Castro

Visiting **Máximo González** in his Mexico City studio is always a full day affair and well worth the hour-long trek it takes to get there and then back. Máximo's studio is a haven in the middle of the chaos of downtown. He rents a large apartment in a massive colonial building, and as the story goes, it was once a convent and then in the 1960's was the home of the famous Mexican wrestler El Santo. Máximo's neighborhood is famous, the site of Cortés' conquest of Mexico is essentially his backyard. Walking down his street in one direction, ancient pyramids arise feet away from the national cathedral. In the opposite direction the beautiful and breathtaking Palacio de Bellas Artes holds some of the most famous murals produced during the modern period in Latin America, including a recreation of the mural destroyed by John D. Rockefeller in the 1930s: Diego Rivera's *El Hombre en Cruce de Caminos* (Man at the Crossroads).

However, it is not only the surroundings of hundreds of years of history that humbles me when I visit Máximo's studio; it's the feeling of moving along with twenty million people. The city operates with a constant *rumba*, a drumbeat that subtly defines the emotion, movement and chaos. Emerging from one of the best subway systems in the world onto the Zócalo plaza, you are only allowed a split second to take in its sheer beauty before you are thrust into the chaos of hundreds of people participating in the informal street economy, beggars sticking their hands in your face for a few pesos or tourists snapping photos in an attempt to document all the madness.

The beauty in all of this is breathtaking and almost impossible to accurately describe. On one side of the plaza is the National Palace, construction of which began in 1522, and meant to serve as the second home

of Cortés. On the other side is the National Cathedral (Catedral Metropolitana), a glorious, looming, sinking structure, which began construction in 1571. Between the two is the growing excavation site of the foundation of the original Aztec city of Tenochtitlan. Surrounding this incredible dichotomy of cultures is a mass of people selling everything you could possibly imagine under a barrage of yellow, orange and red tarps, or the extension of the Tianguis de Tepito.¹

The recently preserved Centro is also an incredible place to witness all the nuances and contradictions present in the city as a whole. Walking down Avenida Tacuba, it is common to see people selling pirated CDs and DVDs for less than 15 pesos, while only feet away from chain stores that sell the same CDs and DVDs for more than 150 pesos each, literally twice the amount of money that I spend for one weeks' worth of food at my local market. Physically, the Torre Latinoamericana stands erect on the corner of Juarez Avenue and Eje Central as a reminder of the prosperity of the city in the 1950s.² Walking down Avenida Cinco De Mayo, a street named after the Battle of Puebla where Mexico evicted France from the country and once again became independent, I pass the major North American fast food chains: Burger King and Starbucks.³ It seems like Mexico City's colonization never stopped.

While I cannot contain my sense of awe and wonder of the history and beauty surrounding me, images of despair and poverty also strike me. It's a city full of contradiction, in every sense of the word, and it's these images and contradictions that define the sense of the visual and provide profound inspiration for countless artists in a variety of mediums. The artistic history of Mexico City in the 20th century is astounding, and has provided fodder for countless artists and movements. The city was a second home for the Surrealist Movement; it offered photographic inspiration for the likes of Tina Modotti and Edward Weston and was a mecca for adventure for the Beat Poets in the 1950s. Mexico City is not without its history of inspiration, and artists continue to use this and the city as a primary resource. Argentine artist Máximo González is no exception.

As I finally entered Máximo's studio, a giant cup of mate and a grinning artist greeted me.⁴ When I first met Máximo in 2004 he worked with devalued currency on a very small scale, a medium he started using with Argentine pesos in 1992. He began using Mexican pesos in 2003, the same year he moved to Mexico City. Beginning with smaller collage style vignettes, Máximo began to move to large-scale murals, all created from bills, cut and pasted with incredible accuracy. In 2005 he began experimenting with textbooks pulled from public schools of Argentina, where propagandistic retelling of histories have been standardized and accepted. In 2006 he focused a considerable amount of energy on his *Changarrito* project, a commentary and imitation of the smaller informal economies seen on the streets of Mexico.⁵ After 2006, Máximo made less and less currency drawings and more large scale water-color and pencil on paper drawings of industrial, man-made objects metamorphosing into trees, bodies of water or fields of grass.

Currency and economies of various kinds have consistently played a large part in Máximo's work. However, when I walked into his studio today I found a knitting loom that is eight-feet in length and four-feet wide, consuming the entire space. Máximo is knitting a giant curtain of money. The sheer size of the piece is breathtaking, and the near-random color palette is visually stunning. Whichever way you look at it, the thing is made of money. Although the currency is no longer in circulation, within the current economic climate, using devalued banknotes to produce a work of art seems entirely appropriate. The extraordinary part is the process by which he transforms something devalued by economic standards, pulled from a specific moment in Mexico's history, into something of artistic and conceptual worth. The entire process functions as a colossal metaphor for the visual arts in Mexico, where they are esteemed and held to a standard beyond the monetary. Máximo's work is a reminder of history and crisis, and the ability to let those things converge into a statement of beauty.

In the States we are accustomed to defending what we do in the visual arts. We are used to funding loss and are never surprised when the government cuts art funds. The recent loss of the Texas Commission on the Arts was a massive blow to institutions and individuals across the board, not to mention the message it

signals for the lack of regard held for visual arts in the state and country. Museums and visual arts professionals constantly try to re-conceive programs and exhibitions in order to expand viewership and audiences. We have witnessed the constant and consistent dwindling of art education in public schools over the past few decades. The culture surrounding visual arts in the United States relegates it to a level of frivolity. While it's true we are not saving lives; it's refreshing to live in Mexico, a country that regards the visual arts on strikingly different terms.

In Mexico, art is considered a source of national pride; and it is everywhere. Public sculptures and installations line major avenues of the city. Exhibitions are installed in subway stations. Entire families visit national museums every week for free on Sundays. Public schools send students to review exhibitions of contemporary art on a regular basis. People are eager to view, listen and learn no matter the medium or the time period, and visit institutions equally, from the contemporary to the latest international exhibition funded by the National Institute of Fine Arts.⁶ Visual arts are respected and revered as a source of intellectual capital that is worth more than monetary value. The mass support humbles and inspires, the energy of which is unavoidable.

Culture is a funny thing. It does not come without problems, nuances and complexities; it is not ideal or easy. Support for the arts, however, something is deeply embedded in Mexican history. This is reinforced constantly walking through the historical streets of downtown, wandering through the massive galleries of the Palace of Fine Arts, and reminiscing on the histories of artists who have made this city their home and creative mecca throughout the 20th century, artists including Máximo González. The visual arts contributes to the *rumba* through which the city moves and strengthens the heartbeat through which so many continue to be inspired.⁷

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1 In Mexico City an open-air market is more commonly called a Tianguis. The Tianguis to which I refer sprawls around a large portion of the center and extends from one of Mexico City's most notoriously dangerous neighborhoods called Tepito.

2 The Torre Latinoamericana served as the highest structure in Mexico City for a number of years until the Torre Mayor was built on Reforma Avenue across from the famous forest of Chapultepec. The Torre Mayor is also diagonally across from the Palace of Fine Arts.

3 France occupied Mexico for only three years, a defeat celebrated on May 5th in Mexico, a date commonly referred to in the United States as the "Mexican Independence Day." However, Mexican Independence is actually celebrated on September 16th, the date Mexico defeated the Spanish and became an independent republic in 1810. May 5th is called the "Battle of Puebla," named after the nearest city where Mexico physically defeated the French troops.

4 Hierba mate is a famous tea in South America and is especially popular in Argentina.

5 Máximo's Changarrito first exhibited in 2005 at ARCO, the international art fair in Madrid. Since 2005 the Changarrito has garnered international success, has been exhibited in countries all over the world and has expanded to include books and publications by emerging authors. A smaller incarnation of the Changarrito was also taken to Austin as part of the [Fusebox Festival](#) in 2007. In 2008 it had a home at [Co-Lab: A New Media Project Space](#), also in Austin, and has recently gained a new permanent home at [Mexic-Arte Museum](#), also in Austin.

6 Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, or INBA.

7 To understand more of this rumba I suggest reading *Down and Delirious in Mexico City* recently by Daniel Hernandez published by Scribner in February 2011.

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