



THE LANGUAGE OF
OBJECTS IN THE ART
OF THE AMERICAS

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(From Car and from Clay), Romero's appropriation of the form of the tire, as well as its execution in a medium that adds both great weight and fragility to the object, removes it entirely from any functional context, "freezing" it in a perplexing space, in which it stands alone in paradoxical relationship to its original purpose (fig. 196). At the same time its identification as an "art object" is called into question by its absolute verisimilitude to the "real thing." It no longer functions as a medium for further creation (not having the "artistic" tread of its rubber doubles) and exists within a space of perplexity, deliberately created by the artist to serve as a postmodern interrogation of the Duchampian concept of the readymade.

The critic Tobias Ostrander has stated that "central to the artistic work of Betsabeé Romero is the question of how an object gains meaning, gains memory, within a specific context . . . her work seeks to both identify and validate the specificities of the Mexican contexts in which she lives and works."⁵² His underscoring of the artist's self-conscious evocation of her place of origin (and the locus of her work) calls for further commentary. Since 1997 Romero's concentration on the iconography of car culture has developed in a singular, geographically specific fashion. Unlike the fetishization of the automobile in the United States, western Europe, or Japan (where the auto is prized for both its up-to-dateness and its connotations of speed and power), for example, the car assumes deeper cultural and economic meanings in Mexico. Romero commonly makes references to particular models of cars, principally the Volkswagen, the moderately priced vehicle that was for many years the indicator of a level of financial attainment on the part of many Mexicans.⁵³ Her art also refers to the fact that in Mexico (and especially in its capital) thousands of cars are seen on the streets without working parts, serving as storage places or refuges from crowded houses or apartments. The "lowrider" culture of the Mexican border towns has also been employed by Romero as a reference of resistance to the hege-



Fig. 195 (opposite). **Betsabeé Romero, *Pre-Columbian Archaeology (Aztec)***, 2002. Bas-relief on automobile tire, diameter: 32 in. (80.6 cm). Collection of Bruce and Diane Halle, Phoenix

Fig. 196. **Betsabeé Romero, *De carro y de barro*** (From Car and from Clay), 2000. Black clay from Oaxaca, diameter: 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (50 cm); height: 5 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (15 cm). Courtesy of Galeria Ramis Barquet, New York

mony of U.S. economic potency.⁵⁴ Yet within a body of art that takes as a major point of departure the consumer culture of Mexico, Romero's work offers much more than easily understood evocations of place or time. It rejects any allusion to the worn-out clichés of "typical" Mexican culture, replacing them with bolder statements about contemporary life and its complex permutations in an age of globalism, in both its positive and negative senses.

Through her tire objects Betsabeé Romero actively engages with some of the most salient realities of her own society, employing basic elements of commodity culture to wryly comment on economic adversity, the need for recycling resources, and the fixation upon the automobile as metaphor for both mobility and stability. In her work Romero creates a compelling poetics of banality while simultaneously constructing a paradoxical commentary on the nature of beauty inherent in the prefabricated object.

Josefina Guilisasti

The 2001 work *La vigilia* (The Vigil) by Chilean artist Josefina Guilisasti (b. 1963) focuses on perception and illusion through the means of perspective (figs. 197 and 198).⁵⁵ This work consists of seventy-two oil paintings on canvas,



each shown in an individual niche or compartment, reminiscent of the funerary niches suggested by the work of Doris Salcedo, examined in the previous chapter.⁵⁶ Each division contains a precisely rendered painting of an aluminum cooking utensil, including frying pans, tea-kettles, and steam cookers. The shadows define the perspective and enhance the multiple angles from which the viewer perceives the objects. This wall-size still life may, at first encounter, appear to be a tour de force of illusionism, and indeed it is. Other facets reveal themselves, however, as the viewer penetrates more deeply into the “skin” of the work. Those who saw the piece when it was originally exhibited in Santiago recognized the pots and pans as typical components of their parents’ or grandparents’ kitchens.⁵⁷ Many undoubtedly also knew that they were the products of the now defunct state factory Aluminios El Mono.⁵⁸ At the same time, the utensils also resonated on a far more visceral level for those who had witnessed or participated in the many anti-government demonstrations during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, especially those who had sought to bring the tragic question of the *desaparecidos* (the “disappeared ones”) to wider public attention. Pots and pans like these had been banged with spoons or other utensils to make the loudest noise possible during the public vigils, awakening attention to a national disgrace while also ritually banishing the evil spirits that such behavior had created within the public consciousness. On the level where metaphors meet real objects, this piece also calls to mind other references, such as Saint Teresa of Avila’s assertion that “God walks among the pots and pans,” or less sacramental allusions, such as that of the kitchen as safe nucleus of the household. Guilisasti’s project is also a meditation on the history of still life painting within the Western tradition, offering a parallel art historical commentary on seriality, a device in which repetition (and, at times, variation) of the same form constitutes the principal formal strategy. *La vigilia*, like other



works I have discussed here, conforms on several levels to the specificity of recent history, conjuring up allusions to Chile’s unsettled past through the representation of banal objects. Yet the objects also enter into a larger dialogue of suggestiveness, in which the inert thing becomes the vehicle for larger ruminations on universal concerns.

Gabriel Orozco’s Skull

Gabriel Orozco’s *Black Kites* (1997) is a subtly dramatic object (fig. 199). I use it here not as a summation of any of the ideas or observations in this book, but simply as a way to suggest some of the other possible avenues of investigation

Fig. 197 (opposite). **Josefina Guilisasti**, *La vigilia* (The Vigil), 2001. Oil on canvas, seventy-two paintings, overall dimensions variable. Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin. Gift of the artist, 2005 (Photograph: Rick Hall)

Fig. 198. **Josefina Guilisasti**, *La vigilia* (The Vigil) (detail of fig. 197).