

GAIL WRONSKY

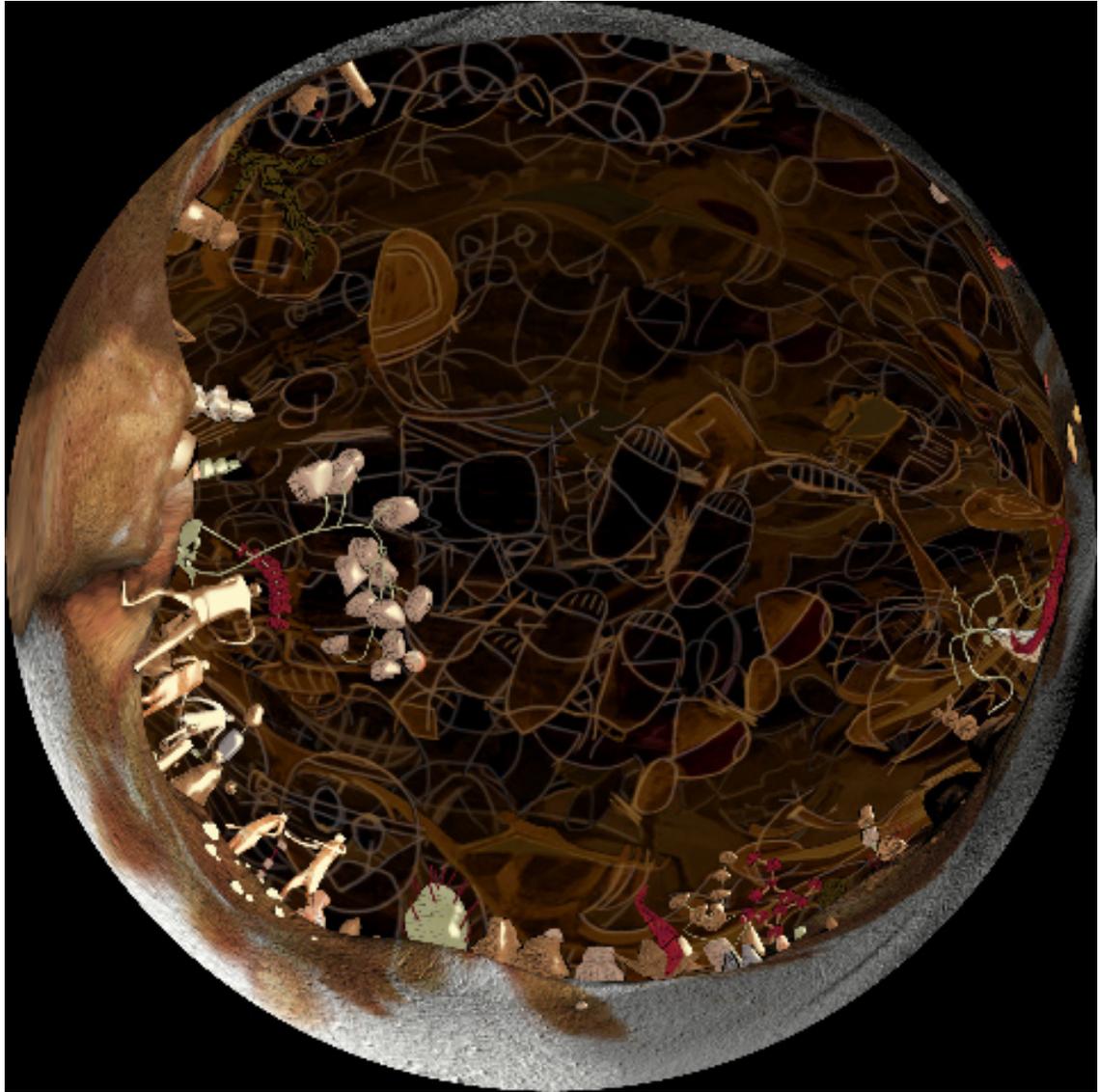
GWRONSKY ON GRONKIE: THE ART OF SELF-OTHERING

There are objects that get by without names (Rene Magritte). The pipe is *not* a pipe. This is *not* this. And then there's Gronk. Is he *not* Gronk?

I like to think of his name as a hybridized acronym for something. **G**roucho Marx plus **J**ean Cocteau plus **P**uck, maybe. Or **G**odzilla **R**avishing **O**ff-key **N**auseous **K**owtowers. There are so many possibilities!

In one version of the naming myth, Gronk's mother reads an article about a group of indigenous people living in the Amazon basin for whom the word "gronk" means "to fly" as she goes into labor and, either prophesizing or determining his soaring future, she christens him thus. In another version the name Gronk comes from a short-lived 60s tv show called *It's About Time* in which a couple of astronauts travel back in time to prehistoric days and encounter a caveman with the name. This story reflects light from many facets, not the least of which is that the show's theme song ("It's about time, it's about space . . .") describes "strange people in strange places," one of Gronk's particularly favorite milieus. In another version it's the nick-name given to him by neighborhood kids, short for "Gronkazoid—" a quintessential and fantastic grade-school blending of monster movie and sci fi nomenclature. In yet another version, probably the most accurate, he makes it up and gives it to himself for no reason at all, or for no reason he'll divulge. At any rate, Gronk's decision to know himself and have himself be known as "Gronk" constitutes the first step in what's been a lifelong process of self-definition which has been, by virtue of its insistent uniqueness, its defiant nonconformity, also a process of self-othering. It's his way of saying, you think I'm that? Well, I'm not that. And I'm not that either.

What I find cool about Gronk being "Gronk" is that as a word, gronk refuses to be anything other than itself. (I'm reminded of Antony, in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, describing the Nile crocodile to a bewildered Roman, Lepidus: "It is shaped, sir, like itself.") It's a name that doesn't give off ethnic identity or gender identity. It doesn't indicate where he's from or who his parents are. It doesn't aim to please or aim to displease. It just is. As Gronk would say, "Now tell me who you are," both



Gronk. *Brain Flame*, projection size 4750 sq. feet, 2005, digital animation.

pretending he has told you something about himself and because, in fact, he'd really like to know.

Gronk is a gay man and a chicano. Saying this, I feel a little ill at ease—not because these things are unknown about him, or because they're in any way negative, but because they raise assumptions and speculations about him and his work which, in the end, Gronk himself finds to be, well, not the main point. (Hence “Gronk” rather than, say, “El Vez.”) The otherness of being gay and chicano are not nearly as other as it is to be Gronk. In this way Gronk is a post-identity-politics artist. Which isn't to say that he denies, or doesn't identify with, chicano or gay culture, because in significant ways he does identify with and speak for both, but to say that somehow he inhabits both of these cultural groups as a matter-of-course, and that, in the end, what matters most to him is making marks on canvas, on paper, on walls, in music centers, on stages, on hotels, barrooms, paper napkins, and planetariums, thus defining the word “gronk” as “a person who makes art.”

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Glugio Gronk Nicandro, as he sometimes calls himself, grew up in a Mexican barrio in East Los Angeles. His first public artwork was an absurdist theatrical protest piece called *Caca Roaches Have No Friends* (November 1969). He was Spanglish before Spanglish was cool. In the process of mounting this piece he met Patssi Valdez, Willie Heron, and Harry Gamboa, Jr. with whom he formed ASCO, a guerilla arts group—a chicano collective whose name means “nausea” in Spanish. It was the late 60s, not only a more radical time politically and aesthetically in the arts than now but also a more cosmopolitan time. The members of ASCO made art in the streets; made theater and painting and photography and performance; were communal and anarchistic and extravagantly *rasquachismo*; and at the same time, genuinely intellectual, they read Sartre and watched New Wave cinema.

In 1972, inspired by Jean-Luc Godard's film *Bande a Part* (Band of Outsiders) in which three characters race through the Louvre as an absurdist criticism of the bourgeois fetishization and consumption of “great” art, ASCO members Gronk, Herron, and Gamboa spray-painted their names (Gronk painted “Gronkie”) on the outside of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). God that must have felt good! I was mesmerized when I heard about the action from my high school art teacher, Miss Mallieri, a beautiful Greek woman with a huge black bouffant hairstyle, in Southfield, Michigan. She found it exhilarating; when she described what Gronk, Herron, and Gamboa had done was clear to us that somehow she felt the act had vindicated her—had vindicated women artists, Greek-american artists, any artists who were underrepresented in the museums and galleries of dominant culture America. To this day I'm engaged by what they did—even more than I'm engaged by Chris Burden's arm-shooting (another brilliant and outrageous move)—because what ASCO did has even more layers of complexity than that did, and made a stronger political statement, with humor. Essentially,

what Gronk, Gamboa, and Herron did was to place themselves at the center of the art world, othering the Picassos, Rembrandts, and bourgeois art patrons whose names and reputations were inside the building. They flipped off the hierarchy, and flipped it on its head.

The guerrilla spray-painting was allegedly inspired by a meeting between Gamboa and a LACMA curator in which the curator told Gamboa that chicanos were gang members and lowriders and that, if they made any art at all it was to be considered folk art not fine art. Something along those lines. So the act of signing LACMA, as if it were one of their artworks, tagging it, as if it were a street-corner in East L.A., is an act of political outrage, justifiable and overdue. In and of itself it's an act of incredible *chutzpah*. It took *cajones*. But what is really remarkable, and what defines the gesture, for me, as Gronk qua Gronk, is not only its daring but its wit and charm—its worldliness. The day after signing their names on the museum, Gronk, Herron, and Gamboa showed up at the scene with Patssi Valdez and took photos of Patssi standing next to their signatures looking elegant and bored. Looking French. Looking like someone, perhaps, in a Godard film, more existentialist than revolutionary. Chicanos, it turns out, *are* gang-banging graffiti artists and at the same time savvy performance artists whose actions, as in this case, can bring international condemnation and embarrassment to a major art museum. It's delicious. And stylish. And just.

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Enter Tormenta, Gronk's alter-ego, the other's other. La Tormenta is a figure Gronk has painted, photographed, sculpted out of papier-mache, and directed on stage in various venues for decades. She's always black and white. We always see her back—her elegant white shoulders rising out of a black strapless gown very much like the one worn by Anita Ekberg for the fountain scene in *La Dolce Vita*. She has black hair like *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Sometimes she looks shabby. Sometimes she looks like a bereft mother, sometimes like a prostitute. She's a glamorous, comfortably plump Latina who just doesn't want to take it any more. But does. And gives it as well. She's *La Dolorosa*, the mother of sorrows. She's the Gloria Swanson of East L.A. She takes her otherness and makes you want to own it, embody it, marry it, yourself.

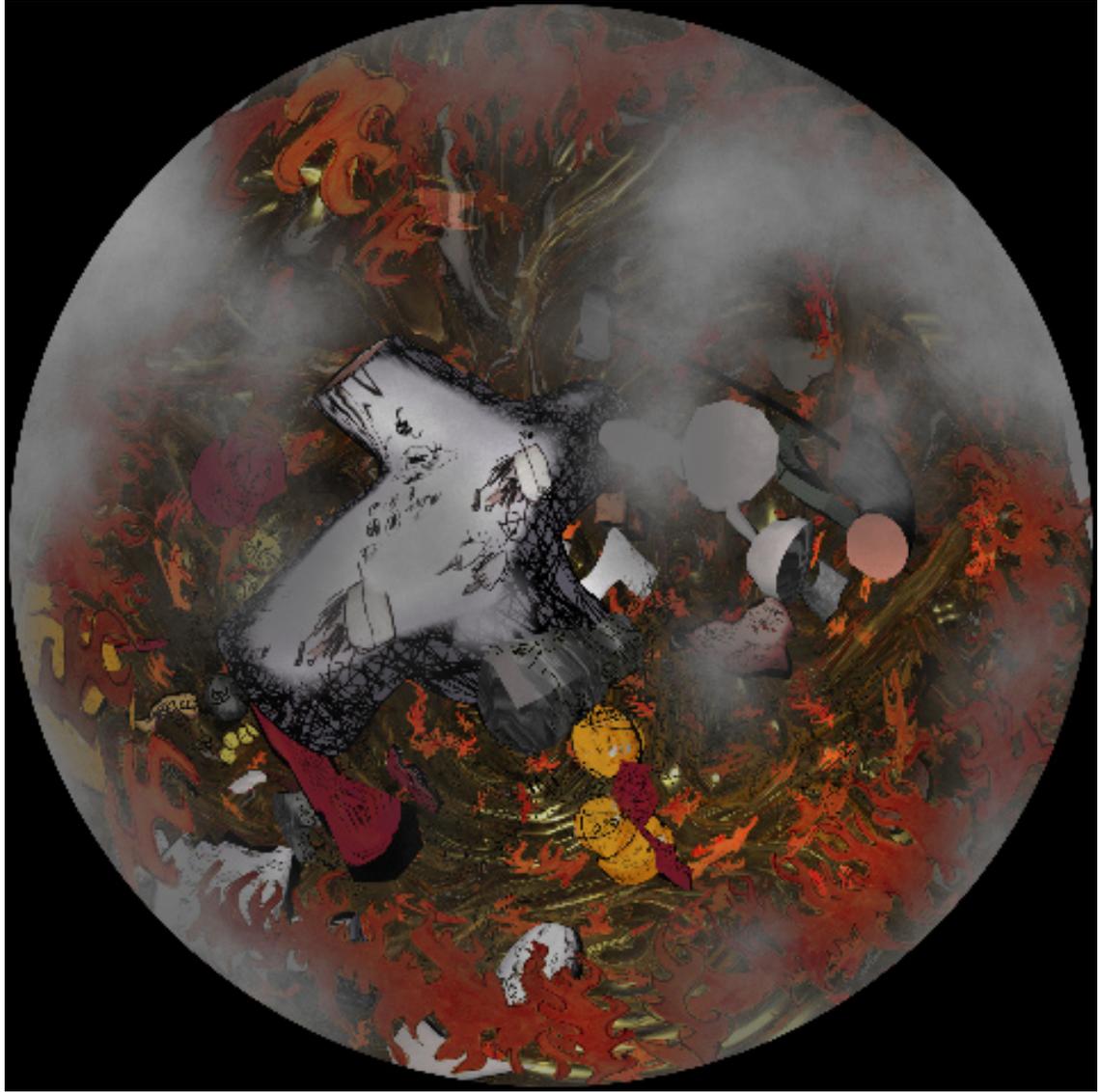
The first time I saw her image I thought, how can a man have created her? She's not objectified. She's not dismembered, not put there to be admired for her parts, her beauty, her sexual appeal. In her backless gown and almost ghost-like pallor, she's a kind of parody of both elegance and pain. But she's not a parody either. She's dead-serious about the art of female female-impersonation. In her exaggerated gestures and suggestive, fleshy excessiveness she's like all women who perform female identity in order to shatter it, or to own it, which makes her iconically and essentially female—a member of the second sex who will never be second. Tormenta strikes me as a kind of black-and-white chicana version of Dolly Parton, another performer of female identity, who has taken her otherness and parlayed it into almost

mythic stature. And yet she's more elegant than Dolly. More noble. As Dolly herself says, "I cannot compete with you, drag queens." Tormenta is a bit like a female drag queen—not campy, not coy, but wielding total control over her presentation-in-gender. I am too, on my good days.

La Tormenta is also ageless, which in itself is a radical gesture, the age of a woman having everything to do with how we read her. In the painting *Putta's Cave*, she's shown in her black hair, black gown, black gloves, making a shadow in the shape of a stag against a white wall. As in Plato's cave, the place in which we watch the world of images and actions pass, the place in which we realize it's all illusion, it's all removed from us, it's inaccessible and insubstantial, this world in which we are hopelessly othered, hopelessly separated from the essential, in *Putta's Cave* the stag-shadow is the image we're compelled to read—the image to which we attach our gaze. Gronk has created her, she's created a shadow; now we're two steps removed—doubly othered.

But here the intellectual, art-historical Gronk is also evoking the cave paintings at Lausanne (and perhaps the show *It's About Time?*). The stag is an image of a hunted beast, an image to be worshipped, to be thanked in advance for dying, for allowing us to catch it and eat it. According to paleo-anthropologists, paintings of hunted animals are used to prepare adolescent hunters for the hunt, and to summon the animals via intervention from the spirit-world. Who is Tormenta preparing for what? And who is being summoned for the kill? The stag is also, for me, an allusion to the mythic Actaeon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Actaeon, perhaps you know him from Petrarch's *canzone*, is the hunter who comes upon the goddess Diana bathing in a forest pool, for which transgression she turns him into a stag who is then pursued and dismembered by his own hunting dogs. It's a story so steeped in othering—Actaeon others Diana by objectifying her nudity; Diana others Actaeon by transforming him into an animal, into prey; the dogs other him, well, to pieces.

The painting *Putta's Cave*, like the stories in Ovid, is a stage whereon rituals of transformation are performed: female to male, flesh to shadow, human to animal, hunted to hunted-in-a-different-way, goddess to animal totem. Or perhaps the Tormenta figure is a drag queen, a man-as-woman, and the shadow on the wall is the shadow of a male dressed as a female, wearing a set of costume antlers, pretending to be male? Or the shadow is a shadow of death that the corpulent sensualist is holding at bay with a diminuizing gesture, as if to say, "Stay put. Stay in your place. I've got business (the business of bodily pleasure) to attend to." Whatever contradictory pair of figures you see, it's the tension between them, finally, that's riveting. The painting creates from this tension a space where there is no separation between male and female; real and unreal; living and dead; flesh and shadow; contemporary chicano culture, Greco-Roman culture, and Neanderthal culture. All of these things exist only in relationship, in contradiction, as part of an immediate, theatrical whole. The shadows we cast, the shadows we make, are our art, which, in the process of revealing something about us, threatens to other us into extinction.



Gronk. *Brain Flame*, projection size 4750 sq. feet, 2005, digital animation.

Unless we turn the lens, flip the dialectic, and find ourselves more wholly, in absentia. Unless we control the othering, and determine what has value. This, in essence, is what I see her doing: forming a frame with her hands, framing a space in which to be both what she is and what she is not. It's a painting about black spaces and white spaces defining themselves in opposition to each other, and out of that opposition creating a delicately balanced, firm and tenuous new space. La Tormenta holds this new space elegantly between her gloved hands, the poised hands of a dancer or an actress, defining a precise and tangible beauty. Always, her back is turned—she's not doing it for us. In fact, she couldn't care less what we think about it.

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Since the ASCO days, Gronk has probably covered hundreds of acres worth of surface with paint. As a painter he moves easily between figuration and abstraction, always suggesting movement, electric movement, and the presence of life. As an artist he consistently crosses genre-distinctions, incorporating *assemblage*, film, performance, photography, and on-site installation. In 1990, he painted "Hotel Senator," a series of wooden doors inspired by the rundown hotel, "the *locus spiritus* of sleaze" (Benavidez, 78) across the street from his loft in downtown Los Angeles. Also in the 90s he collaborated with Peter Sellars on *Los Biombos/The Screens*, an adaptation of Jean Genet's *Les paravants*, which was mounted at the East Los Angeles Skills Center. In 2005 he painted enormous sets for a new opera, *Ainadamar*, with a libretto by David Henry Hwang. *Ainadamar* is the place where in 1936 Andalusian poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca was assassinated by one of Franco's death squads for his politics—he was anti-Fascist--and also because he was homosexual (too other to live). Although the opera is set in Uruguay in the 1960s, Gronk's set, dominated by his trademark blacks, reds, and bone-whites, his deep strokes and urban-mosaic shapes, evokes for me, even though I've only seen the set in photographs, Lorca's Spain, Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads*, Lorca's concept of *duende*, or dark sounds. Gronk did his homework. The walls and floor of the stage seem drenched in paint which feels like blood and tears and semen and death.

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Also in 2005, Gronk debuted a film for planetariums called *Gronk's BrainFlame*. *Gronk's BrainFlame* is a 5,000-square-foot digitally animated work of wonder. Created at the ARTS Lab of the University of New Mexico along with composer Steve La Ponsie, animator Hue Walker, and students of all ages working with the Digital Pueblo Project, the film took two years to complete. It can only be seen in planetariums.

I saw it in 2007 at the planetarium of Glendale Community College near Los Angeles. What an amazing venue—the seats recline automatically once you sit in them so that you're almost flat on your back looking up at the white dome of celestial amphitheater. What unfolds above you is both shocking

and comforting—instead of seeing the light-show of stars and planets, or the laser light-shows some planetariums have taken to offering, we see the slow unfolding of a new world. This new world is charming, not alienating. It has plant-like things and rock-like things, and everything feels organic, so that even though none of what we see is recognizable to us exactly, all of it is deeply familiar. Things assemble and disassemble. Grow and die. The palette is subdued, the music abstract and haunting and at the same time strangely soothing. There's a delicate balance, in the first part of the film, between bleakness and warmth, between mournfulness and hopefulness. It's incredibly, well, lovely, even as it alludes, in a brief glimpse or two, to the dark corners and stairwells of de Chirico's hellish cities; even as something resembling one of Magritte's disembodied torsos floats by. There's a gentleness to the tone which seems to indicate that we're not in danger, even though all of this might be taking place on a post-apocalypse planet earth populated by aliens who move with the deliberate nonchalance of Merce Cunningham dancers.

And then an animated glass brain arrives from the center of the dome, spinning seductively. Glass, even an animated rendering of it, makes the brain a beautiful thing. The glass brain-stem stretches out like a gorgeous tentacle, blurring distinctions between organic and inorganic things, between three dimensionality—which it resembles, spinning in the center of the dome—and two-dimensionality, which it is. The golden glass brain evokes both fragility and eternity (is it God's brain? No, wait, is it Gronk's?). This captivating thing appears at times to be a see-through phallus streaming from a see-through womb. Yes, I suppose, the brain is a kind of womb—ideas are born there, art is conceived there—in this case transparent, gorgeous art, not polluted by discordant dualisms. For moments the glass brain hovers in the center of the planetarium's dome pointing, directing, inviting.

Eventually one of the alien-figures is sucked up into it—ascending into heaven or disposed of down the drain (the brain drain?)—we don't know what to think. His body, or her body, then suddenly splits up into pieces, spinning out of and around the brain. The pieces morph briefly into other shapes. With a wink toward self-referentiality, they briefly allude to and suggest recognizable pieces of famous art (sculpted torsos, a surrealist image or two). They morph again, becoming abstract chunks of bright color. And then something totally different happens: while we're watching the center of the dome, the planetarium's rim becomes engulfed in flames—flames drawn, I assume, by the children working on the project with Gronk. They're child-like renderings of flame, pointed and rolling waves of red, orange, and yellow. They grow and move and soon the whole sky is a crazy fire, delightfully bright and full and richly colored, covered appealingly with the markings of human hands, with drawn lines and painted splashes. And then the entire sky becomes a Gronk painting—is covered with his colors, the muted earth-tones, dusky blacks and chalk-whites, and his strokes. And then it becomes another Gronk painting. And then it ends.

I might not have gotten all of this right—I’ve only seen it once, and that’s the frustrating thing about it—it’s got to be shown in a planetarium. This also made it an extremely difficult and time-consuming project to complete. According to Gronk, while the film was being made, the makers could only view it in small pieces at a time in the planetarium—between star shows and classes. The finished product, however, feels seamless.

What’s it about? Obviously, it’s about the creation of art. *Gronk’s BrainFlame* is Gronk’s ars poetica—the description and embodiment of what art means to him. It offers a myth of creation that involves both birthing and dying, the mutual interdependence of the sexes, organic and inorganic forms, figures and abstraction. It is human rather than specific to a particular culture. And it was made communally. Gronk, it seems to me, has always been a public rather than a private artist. He paints in public often, even on stage. He stages public art events. He works in conjunction with musicians, directors, animators, actors, filmmakers, and photographers. And students. He likes people. (Although at one point during the creation of the *Brainflame*, his collaborators argued with him about his choice of music, forcing Gronk to remind them that the piece was called *Gronk’s Brainflame*, not *Consensus Brainflame*. He’s not a wienie.)

These communal and public instincts of his explain why, while he others himself, removing himself from banal considerations like having a biography, or a family, calling himself “Gronk,” you always somehow feel that he’s willing to include you in his other-world. Again, and this is what I marvel about, what I adore and want to emulate more than anything else about him, is that he so very deftly and discreetly flips the cultural contract of perspective. He shifts subject and object. He makes the outside the inside, the bottom the top, as if to say, look, we’re in it together—all of us absolutely idiosyncratic, unknowable, indefinable beings—*los de abajo*, the underdogs, the others. It’s our world. We’re the ones whose opinions matter. We’re the artists. The ones whose brains are beautiful and on fire. The world belongs to us. Why aren’t we out there making and marking, performing identities, signing our names on the institutions which are trying like hell, and failing, to oppress us?

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The Artist Interview (December 2007, Gronk’s loft in downtown Los Angeles)

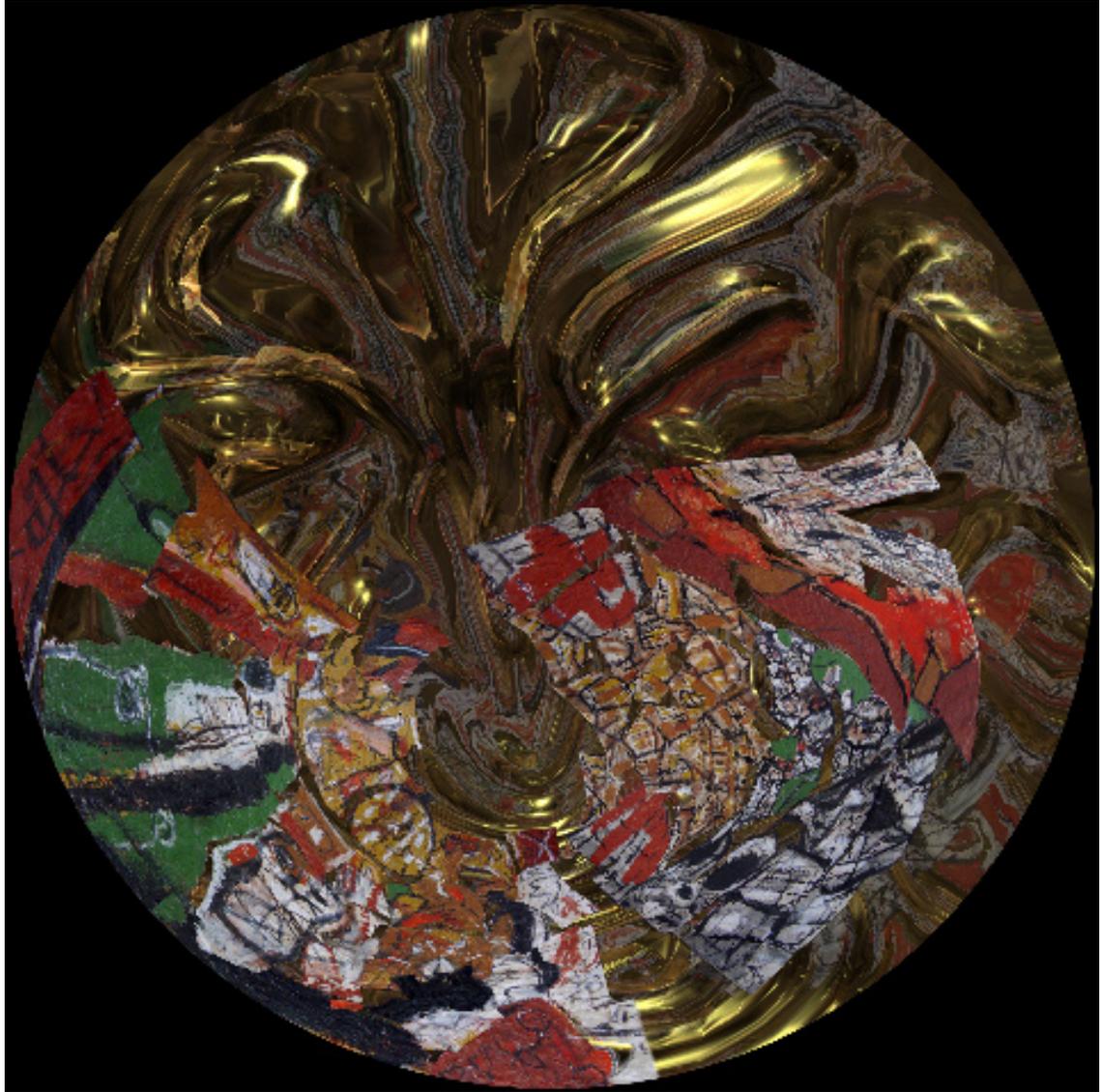
Gwronsky: *What’s your favorite adjective?*

Gronkie: (after thinking for a few seconds) *Pry.*

Gwronsky: *Pry? Do you mean prying?*

Gronkie: *No. I like pry. It was a very pry day. It was pry tonight.*

Gwronsky: *Why pry?*



Gronk. *Brain Flame*, projection size 4750 sq. feet, 2005, digital animation.

Gronkie: *It's small. It's just three letters. P R Y. And . . .*

Gwronsky: *And?*

Gronkie: *It means to open.*

Gwronsky: *And it means to spy on.*

Gronkie: (slyly forming a Cheshire cat grin) *Does it?*



Gronk. *Putá's Cave*, 72" x 48", 1988, acrylic on canvas.

Sources

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