

'A World of Laughter, A World of Fears' at Pomona College



Instagram Photo: [winonabug](#)

By Jian Huang

Fire is the element of potency. This ever-changing force can both destroy and create, to burn and to enlighten. The discovery of it by our ancestors has led our survival as a human race: to cook, to keep warm, and to see in the dark are all part of our discoveries of higher consciousness that places us above all other animals. It is no accident then that our affinity for this element seems incomprehensible. Jose Clemente Orozco might have tapped into this primal part of our psyche when he painted *Prometheus at Pomona College in 1930*, a politically-charged fresco depicting the mythical Greek Titan stealing fire from the Gods and giving it to the people. And what did the people do with this fire, both after Prometheus and after Orozco himself?

Mexican-born artist Adela Goldbard's ephemeral performance, *A World of Laughter, A World of Fears*, carried on the inquiry of our complicated relationship with this dualistic element of force through her retelling of an explosive and violent history of Mexico's student protests.

Staged at Pomona College, Goldbard set the stage with a recreation of her 2014 sculpture *Microbus* along with papier mache cacti, a sound recording component, and orchestrated pyrotechnics.

In a crowd of hundreds of students and faculty, the performance began with a night scene evocative of what one might find in the barren deserts of Mexico. Subtle recordings of protesters chanting in Spanish accompanied the arrival of *Microbus* onto the amphitheater-like stage. Progressively, the chanting grew more voluminous as recordings of helicopters and sirens amplified through the speakers.

A loud explosion inside *Microbus* took the crowd by surprise. Then, recordings of gunshots, screams, cries for mercy, and sobs that could only be associated with a kind of terror as instinctual and primal as fire itself. At one point over the audio someone shouted, "*Puto*," a Spanish expletive directed at whomever fired the shots.

As the recordings of gunfire progressed from single shots to continuous ammunition, the sounds of human voices dimmed until there were only the sounds of machines. Coordinated pyrotechnics accompanied the scene with each papier mache cactus exploding in fireworks and engulfing in flames, lighting up the silent night skies over Pomona College with the eerie remnants of ghostly black smoke.

Where would we be without fire? It is an element which destroys, yet through its flames we experience rebirth. Violence is an unpleasant subject of which to be reminded. What does a student protest that happened in Mexico, or elsewhere in the world, have anything to do with us here in the United States? When we can so easily turn our televisions on and off, ignore our social media feeds, and switch to news about entertainment, Goldbard leaves us all with a question to ponder: now that we have seen the light, what will we do with it?

Goldbard concluded her multi-media performance with another familiar recording: the Disney song, *It's A Small World*. What was just minutes before a noisy crowd of Pomona undergrads talking about soccer and which roommate was the most annoying was all but silenced as we listened to its lyrics.

It's a world of laughter, a world of tears
It's a world of hopes and a world of fears
There's so much that we share
that it's time we're aware
It's a small world after all

Goldbard's use of this song at the end of the performance was no accident. It asks the question of "Why?" Is it sinister? Is it kind? Are we guided by a fantasy of a world that doesn't actually exist? Does our society care more about spectacle and entertainment than action to help our fellow man? Or is it something else altogether? Maybe *A World of Laughter, A World of Fears* returns us to the moments, as children, we realized that the world was actually not very nice.

Prometheus 2017: Four Artists from Mexico Revisit Orozco

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Pomona College Museum of Art

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