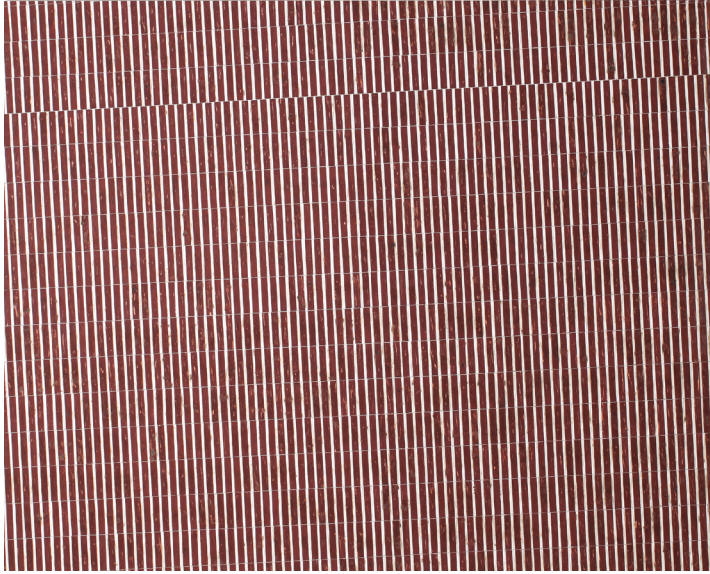
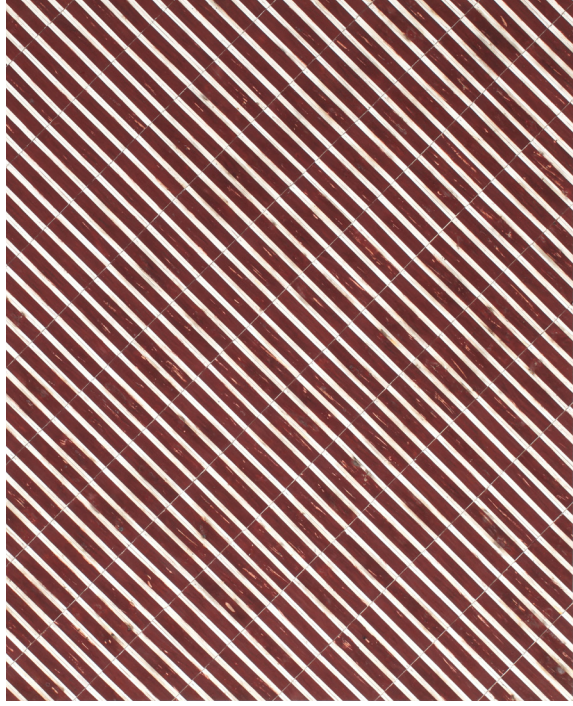


Gabriel de la Mora

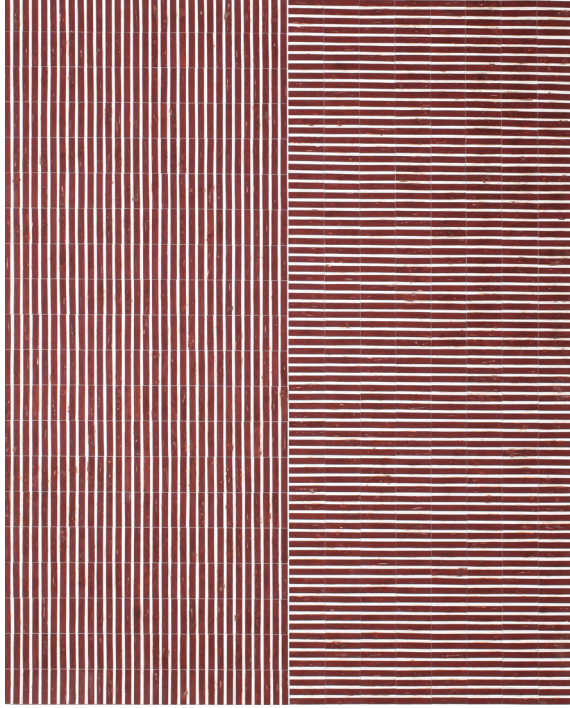
Lucíferos



A) Gabriel de la Mora, *31,000 D.*, from the series *Cerillos Cancelados*, 2014. 1,260 used sides of 630 match boxes from 31,500 burnt matches on cardboard, 39 3/8" x 31 x 11/16" / 100 x 80.5 cm.



B) Gabriel de la Mora, *9,200*, from the series *Cerillos Cancelados*, 2014. 360 used sides of 184 match boxes from 9,200 burnt matches on cardboard, 19.7 x 15.9 in / 50 x 40.3 cm.



C) Gabriel de la Mora, *30,900*, from the series *Cerillos Cancelados*, 2014. 1,236 used sides of 618 match boxes from 30,900 burnt matches on cardboard, 19.7 x 15.9 in / 50 x 40.3 cm.

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Phillumeny

On Friction and Abstraction, Or John Walker’s Devilish Invention

A Short Meditation on Fire Making and Gabriel de la Mora, 1826 & 2014

“John Walker kept records of his sales in ledgers, though he did not record every sale. The ledger for the period 19th November 1825 (1825-11-19) to 23rd September 1829 (1829-09-23) still exists today and an entry under *Die Saturni April 7th 1827* (1827-04-07) records the sale: *Mr Hixon No. 30th Sulphurata Hyper-Oxygenata Frict. 100 Tin case 2d.* for 1 shilling and 2 pence. This may be the first recorded sale of friction matches but it was actually the thirtieth dispensing of his invention. It is known that “Dr Walker” and a new kind of match was being talked about in Stockton before this date. Analysing subsequent sales in the ledger shows that prior sales must have taken place during 1826 and proves that JOHN WALKER INVENTED THE FRICTION MATCH IN 1826. Incidentally, the second recorded sale of his invention occurred on 7th September 1827 (1827-09-07) where John Walker uses the term Friction Lights. Except for three entries during 1828 for Attrition Lights all other recorded sales are also for Friction Lights.”¹

There is a moment when the conceptual framework collides with the object. The *Lucíferos* in Gabriel de la Mora’s new exhibition of work at Sicardi Gallery suggest minimalist precedents: their geometries and the push-pull between two and three dimensions bear an affinity with the early black canvases of Frank Stella, for example. Layered rectangles, alternating between red and white, create an immediate visual impact, what Stella might call an imprint. These carefully composed lines and planes regulate the surface, regulate the eye’s movements, and resolutely deny the tradition of three-dimensional

representation from its Renaissance-era roots to the present. And yet de la Mora’s enigmatic patterns are not complete abstractions. Within each composition, small rectangular grids—the used sides of matchboxes, marked by the thousands of matches they have sparked—break the lines into their component parts. Drawing from Zen philosophy and meditation, de la Mora is fascinated by the idea of repetitive actions. The *Cerillos Cancelados* (*Cancelled Matches*) come from an action *sinsentido* (nonsensical), but of endless duration. De la Mora lights a match and immediately extinguishes the flame, over and over, endlessly, for a period of years, negating the intended function of the object through a reiterative practice. “Repetition,” he writes, “becomes the base of originality... I truly believe my definition of art is a parallel to a definition of energy: Art is not created or destroyed, it is just transformed.”² In these works, small burned spots and patches of white where the striker has been rubbed away offer an organic antidote to the totalizing effect of geometry. The materials of the canvases suggest the duration of the work’s creation, the meditative component of its making, while also pointing to a long history. In 1826, the industrialization of fire began, somewhat accidentally. *Sinsentido*.

Phillumunist:

“The etymology is from the Greek philo (love) and Latin lumen (light). The word was coined by Mrs. Marjorie S. Evans in 1930s. ... As well as many English dictionaries recognising the word phillumunist, we must acknowledge that phillumunist has entered many other languages in forms English speakers will readily recognise such as: philuméniste, fillumenista, Filumenist, филуменист. ... Phillumunist is a truly international term.”³

Mrs. Marjorie S. Evans would eventually become the president of the British Matchbox Label & Booklet Society, now renamed as the British

Matchbox Label and Bookmatch Society, founded in 1945. Lovers of light across the world continue to collect the detritus of fire making, elevating the disposable object to a prized possession.

Collecting is an important part of Gabriel de la Mora’s artistic process, and he trawls the many markets, antique shops, and bodegas in Mexico City, gathering abandoned things, organizing them, and thinking about their pasts. To collect is to accumulate, to bring together. It is a daily invocation, a prayer. In the past year, de la Mora has been collecting the soles of shoes from local cobblers; more specifically, he gathers soles marked by large holes. He trims the used leather to a standard size, installing the pieces in large grids on the floor, or as wall installations with remarkable shadows. The resultant nod to Donald Judd and Carl Andre is marked by the organic nature of the object: the soles are used leather, scarred (and discarded) from lives of walking, working, dancing. Similarly, the *Cancelled Matches* bear the traces of their use. They are burned, scratched, blackened, collected.

Striker:

“The part or portion of a matchbox, matchbook or match holder that provides a friction surface for matches to be struck against and ignited.”⁴

John Walker, accidental inventor of the friction match in 1826, was a British pharmacist and chemist who had studied medicine before discovering that the sight of blood made him nauseous. An 1897 edition of *The New York Times* tells the story of his most notable invention: “Walker was preparing some lighting mixture in his shop for his own use. He had dipped a splint into the mixture, and it afterwards fell on the hearth and was accidentally rubbed violently against the stone. It ignited, and at once gave the idea to Walker of the friction-match. He carried out the idea by selling matches in boxes, on

the side of which he fastened a piece of doubled sand-paper; the flaming being produced by a pressure of the thumb and a sharp pull of the match between the papers.”⁵ Although the apparatus did spark fire, and in a manner much more user-friendly than previous inventions, it was far from perfect. Walker’s friction match was prone to falling apart while burning. The flaming tip would often detach itself and fall to the ground, marring whatever surface it landed upon. Considering this fire-making appliance a rather insignificant invention, Walker never patented his design and he only sold it in his pharmacy for a few years before moving on to other projects. For many years, the invention was attributed to another man: Sir Isaac Holden.

In the October 1897 issue of *The American Monthly Review of Reviews* Mrs. Emily Crawford writes an encomium to the life of inventor and parliamentarian Sir Isaac, who, the editors explain, “as one of the merest incidents of his career, conferred upon the world the inexpressibly useful invention of the lucifer match.” Mrs. Emily writes, “Sir Isaac looked forward, though not in his time, to profound industrial changes in the world, and perhaps transfers of industrial strength from the British empire to other parts of the world.”⁶ In other words, he was an industrial revolutionary.

Fire-making Appliance:
“Strictly any device designed to make fire...”⁷

In 2007, de la Mora began a series of *Papeles Quemados* (*Burned Papers*), in which he caught fire to a single sheet of paper, allowing it to burn entirely until only a blackened residue remained. The singular thing about these burned pages was that only one in a thousand maintained its structure; the rest crumbled into ashes. The resulting burned pages, incredibly delicate, become sculptural objects that are constituted—ironically—by their incineration. “Such a proce-

sure,” writes curator Willy Kautz, “intertwining the language of conceptual art and monochromatic universal metaphysics, is reverted into a melancholic practice, now referring to the temporary nature of images and fragments, the traces of these objects and the precariousness of these vestiges of infinity... This process of making materials ever more precarious leaves vestiges behind of what we no longer see but reconstruct in seeing.”⁸

The incendiary nature of de la Mora’s practice is both literal and conceptual. Much of the artist’s recent production has been about breaking apart the structures of the art market and museum conventions, or at least offering an alternative practice: one marked by the passage of time, natural elements (fire, water, earth, and air), and histories of use. For de la Mora, the artwork comes into existence even before the artist. There is an alchemical process, a series of discoveries, an invention. The “alleged purity” of the white cube is broken, transmuted. De la Mora starts a fire.

Laura A. L. Wellen, PhD

Notes

1. British Matchbox Label and Bookmatch Society (BML&BS), <http://www.phillumeny.com/faq.html>.
2. Email with the author, Thursday, October 23, 2014. “El arte ni se crea ni se destruye tan solo se transforma.”
3. Glossary of the British Matchbox Label and Bookmatch Society (BML&BS), <http://www.phillumeny.com/glossary.html>.
4. Ibid.
5. *The New York Times*, May 9, 1897.
6. Emily Crawford, “Sir Isaac Holden,” *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*. October 1897: vol. XVI, no. 4: 419-425.
7. Glossary of the British Matchbox Label and Bookmatch Society (BML&BS), <http://www.phillumeny.com/glossary.html>.
8. Willy Kautz, exhibition didactic. *Lo que no vemos lo que nos mira*, Amparo Museum, Fall 2014. De la Mora’s *Influences* (2009), part of the *Papeles Quemados* series is included in this exhibition.

Gabriel de la Mora

b. 1968, Mexico

After studying architecture at the Universidad Anáhuac del Norte from 1987 to 1991, Gabriel de la Mora began his career as a practicing architect. After five years, he redirected his work, focusing instead on visual art, and in 2003 he received a Master of Fine Arts degree in painting at Pratt Institute in New York.

Since the early 2000s, de la Mora has collected detritus and ephemera ranging from hair to found photographs, shoe soles to painted ceilings. He transforms these objects, using meticulous craftsmanship to call attention to their original uses, while also making conceptual investigations into the nature of art. Much of de la Mora’s production focuses upon the intimate functions of objects that, outlasting their usefulness, have been discarded. By repurposing found things, de la Mora points to the actions of time upon the object. In his collected chips of paint and fabric painted ceilings, for example, he suggests that the painting came into existence long before the artist came into contact with it and placed it upon a canvas. In this way, he is also drawn to the visual and affective power of archival collections. He often works with old photographs and found papers. These materials are weighted with mysteries from the past—their hidden narratives are central to de la Mora’s conceptual and formal interests.

Gabriel de la Mora’s works are represented in several major collections including Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, USA; Art Museum of the Americas, Organization of American States, Washington, DC, USA; ARTIUM, Centro-Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporáneo, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain; Centro Gallego de Arte Contemporáneo, Santiago de Compostela, Spain; Cisneros

Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO), Miami, FL, USA; Colección FEMSA, Monterrey, Mexico; Colección SIVAM, Mexico City, Mexico; Colección; Universidad de Colima, Mexico; El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY, USA; Fundación/Colección JUMEX, Mexico City, Mexico; Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, Mexico; Museo del Palacio del Arzobispado, Mexico City, Mexico; Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA), Los Angeles, CA, USA; Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA), Long Beach, CA, USA; Richard E. Peeler Art Center, De Pauw University, Greencastle, IN, USA; Secretaría de Cultura del Estado de Colima, Mexico; and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), Houston, TX, USA. The artist lives and works in Mexico City.