

# Gego

An “artist’s artist” in her day, the abstract sculptor is gaining a new audience  
By Hilarie M. Sheets

“I DISCOVERED THE charm of the line in and of itself—the line in space as well as the line drawn on a surface, and the nothing between the lines and the sparkling when they cross, when they are interrupted, when they are of different colors or different types,” wrote Gertrud Goldschmidt late in her life. The Hamburg-born Venezuelan artist, who was always known by her childhood nickname, Gego, pioneered an approach to drawing in space by connecting networks of metal rods and wires in precarious balance. Today, her works are finding a resonance with collectors who have been driving the prices for her sculptures into the upper six figures since they

first crossed the \$500,000 mark at auction in June 2010, when one of her 1969 *Reticulárea* works in stainless-steel wire sold for £337,250 (\$507,831) at Sotheby’s London.

“While addressing abstraction as three-dimensional webs, Gego dared to return to the basics of craft, reintroducing notions such as trace and hand marks into the core of her structures,” says Luis Pérez-Oramas, curator of Latin American art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where Gego has been included in several exhibitions, most recently in “Transmissions” last fall. “Her role as one of the leading artists who opened new frontiers for abstraction

Gego’s *Dibujo sin papel 85/13*, 1985, achieved an artist record of \$701,000 when it sold at Christie’s New York in May 2015.

## VITAL STATS

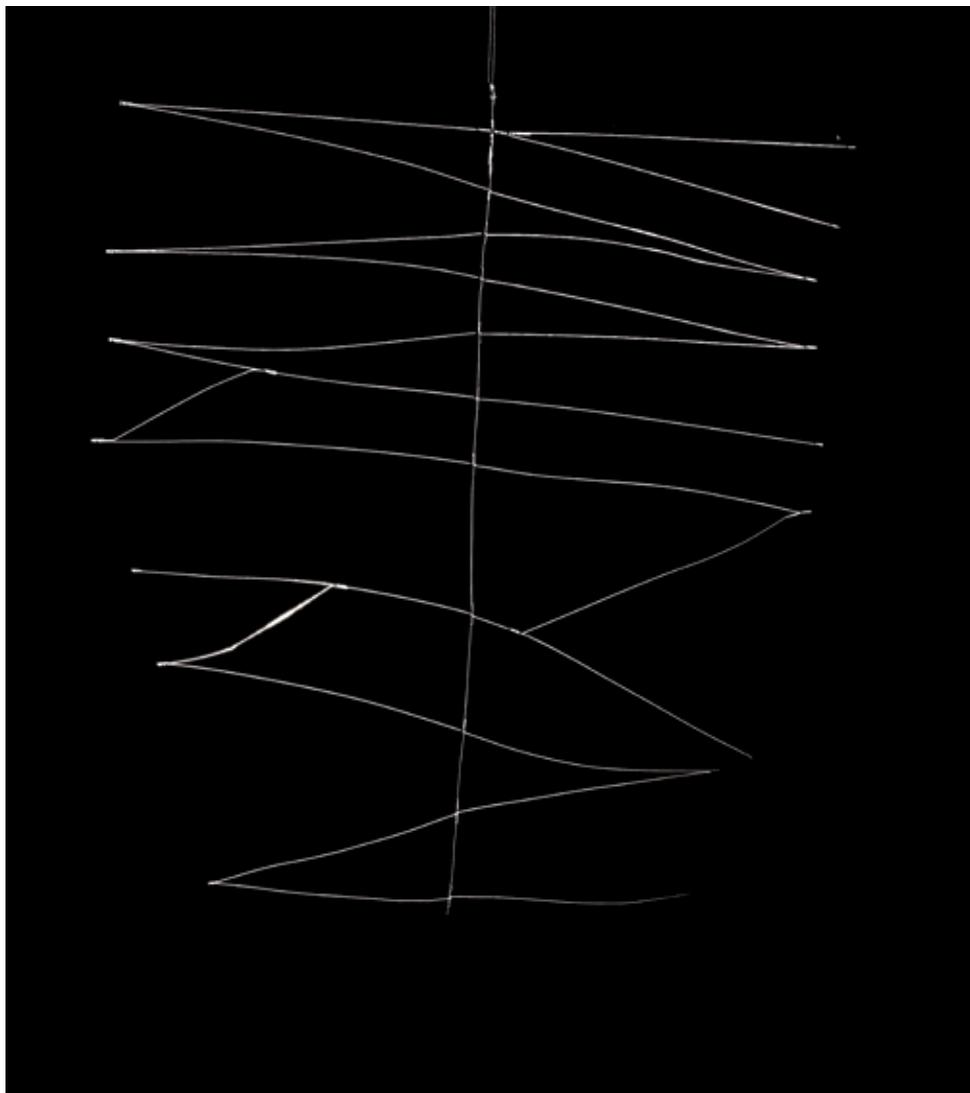
**ARTIST:** Gertrud "Gego" Goldschmidt

**NATIONALITY:** Venezuelan

**DATES:** 1912–1994

**AUCTION RECORD:** *Dibujo sin papel 85/13*, 1985, sold for \$701,000 at Christie's New York in May 2015.

**HONORS:** In 1979 Gego was awarded the National Prize of Plastic Arts of Venezuela.



*Reticulárea*, 1975, the largest of the artist's environmental sculptures of interlocking grids and triangular forms suspended from the ceiling and walls, which was given to the museum by the AT&T Foundation. "She transcends Latin American art," Ramírez adds. "She's really a universal artist."

The Fundación then entered into a long-term agreement with the MFAH to house more than 400 of Gego's works. This precipitated a major 2005 retrospective in Houston that traveled to the Drawing Center in New York, the publication of four books on Gego by the MFAH, and its acquisition of many additional works by the artist.

Others have followed suit. Museums including MOMA, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Tate in London have acquired Gego's works in recent years, as has the collector Ella Fontanals-Cisneros. The FEMSA Collection of Latin American art purchased *Dibujo sin papel 85/13*, 1985, for \$701,000 last May at Christie's New York, setting an auction record for the artist. That same piece, one of her highly prized "drawings without paper" of twisted wires suspended in a grid within a metal frame that floats in relief from the wall, had sold at Sotheby's New York in 2004 for just \$75,000.

Virgilio Garza, head of Latin American art at Christie's New York, compares Gego's steady

compares in Latin America with very few names—Lygia Clark or Hélio Oiticica, maybe." Gego, who had committed herself to abstract art by the late 1950s, had trained as an architect and engineer in Stuttgart in the 1930s before emigrating to Venezuela in 1939 to escape growing anti-Semitism in Germany. Arriving in South America at age 27 without knowing a word of Spanish, she lived there until her death in 1994. And in that time, her name became synonymous with Venezuelan contemporary art.

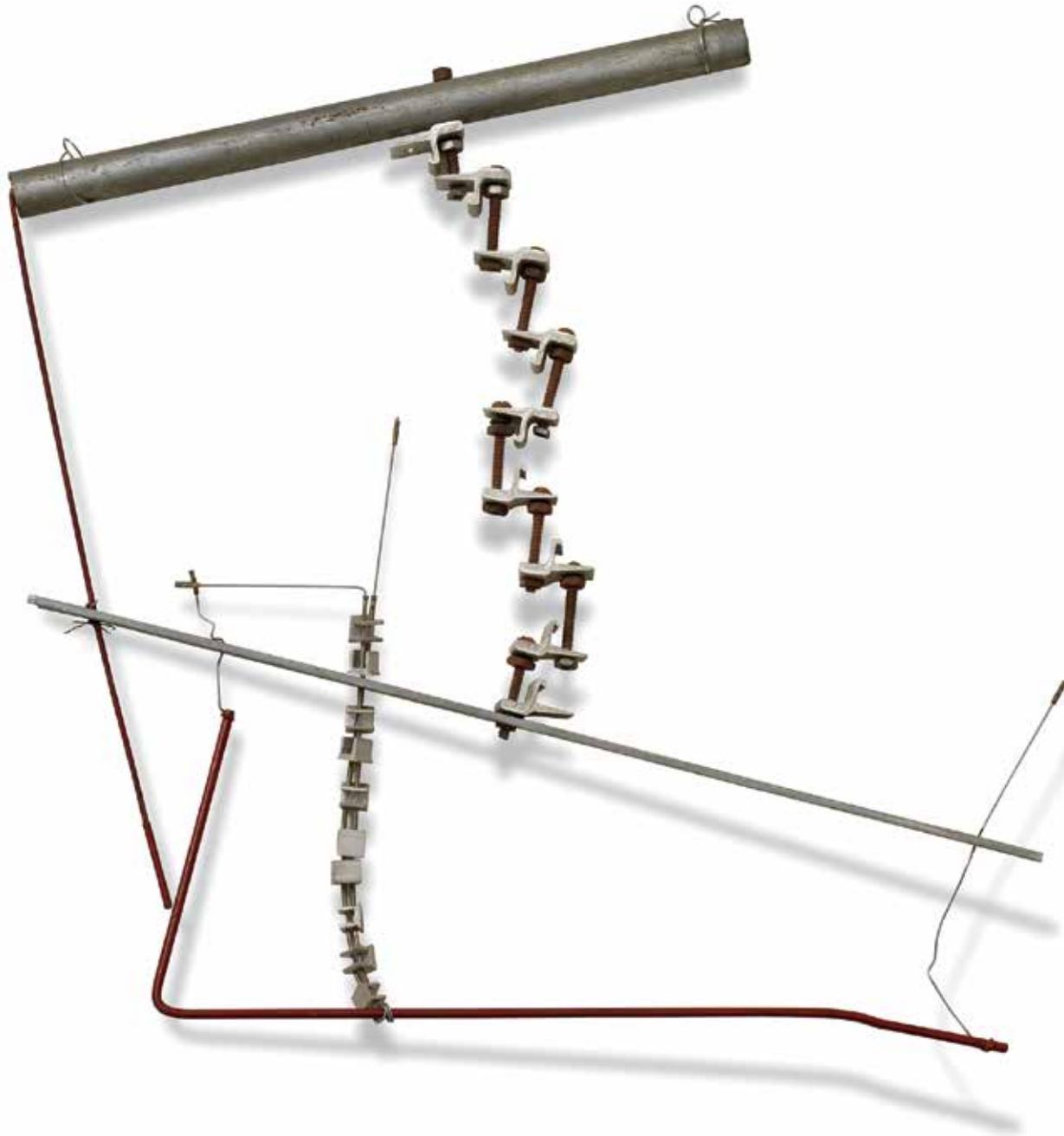
Pérez-Oramas notes that Alfred Barr presciently acquired Gego's 1959 tabletop sculpture *Sphere* for MOMA after it was shown in New York in a group exhibition at Section Eleven, a branch of the Betty Parsons Gallery, in 1960. This was during a period from 1959 to 1967 when the artist exhibited and traveled extensively in the United States. Yet after a 1971 solo show at Betty Parsons of her "Chorros" series—delicate streams of intertwined line segments in aluminum, stainless-steel wire, iron, and bronze that rain down from ceiling to floor—Gego did not aggressively pursue a career outside Venezuela, where she was revered by a generation of her students from the Instituto de Diseño de Caracas. In her lifetime, "Gego was an artist's artist, and her collector base was constituted of artists and friends," says Pérez-Oramas.

That began to change 15 years ago when the Fundación Gego, run by her children, Tomás and Barbara Gunz, partnered with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston to organize the first Gego museum exhibition in the United States. "Gego had to be rediscovered completely," says Mari Carmen Ramírez, the MFAH's curator of Latin American art, whose first acquisition for her department, launched in 2001, was Gego's

*Dibujo sin papel, No. 10*, 1976, above, in stainless steel with lead joints, goes on the block May 24 at Sotheby's New York with an estimate of \$200,000 to \$300,000. *Reticulárea Circular (Gato o Rosa)*, 1981, at right, a watercolor, is available for \$260,000 from Dominique Lévy in London.



FROM TOP: SOTHEBY'S; FUNDACIÓN GEGO AND DOMINIQUE LEVY; NEW YORK



92

escalation at auction with those of her Venezuelan contemporaries Carlos Cruz-Diez and Jesús Rafael Soto, who broke \$1 million at Sotheby's in 2012. "While their markets boomed and have since softened, it is quite the contrary with Gego," says Garza, estimating that a major sculpture by her comes to auction only every couple of years.

Gego worked meticulously without assistance and produced approximately 350 sculptures, about 20 percent of which are in private hands, according to Tomás Gunz. "We have pushed that more people consider works on paper by Gego because of the quality and the difference in price," says Gunz, who facilitated MFAH's purchase of a large cache of drawings and prints a few years ago. Gego played with the illusion of volumetric shapes in her two-dimensional paper creations, which number more than 1,500 and can sell for anywhere from \$20,000 to more than \$200,000—a relative bargain when compared to her sculptural works. Commanding the top prices are her major pieces with watercolor and her late "Tejeduras" series, woven from cardboard and found papers, including cigarette wrappers.

This month, Sotheby's will offer two works titled *Dibujo sin papel* at its Latin American sale in New York. One, with horizontal wires hung

from a vertical spine, dates from 1976, the year Gego began the series; the other, from 1985, is a more complex and organic-looking wire construction evocative of a sea creature.

Both carry estimates of \$200,000 to \$300,000.

"We achieve better prices when the estimates are kind of conservative," says Axel Stein, head of Latin American art at Sotheby's. He points to the house's 2012 sale of a 1985 *Dibujo sin papel* measuring roughly 36 by 36 inches for \$602,500, more than double its \$300,000 high estimate. That year Sotheby's also sold *Reticulárea cuadrada*, 1971, a 38-by-38-inch corner installation, for \$638,500. If a large-scale *Reticulárea* were to come on the market, or one of the impressive "Chorros" works, which can hang down eight feet, Stein said he would be comfortable setting an estimate of \$1 million to \$1.5 million. "There would

*Dibujo sin papel*  
86/12, 1986,  
was offered in  
March by the  
London-based  
Mayor Gallery for  
\$508,000 at  
the European  
Fine Art Fair  
in Maastricht.

THE MAYOR GALLERY, LONDON

certainly be competition, because nothing like that has ever come up,” he says.

That notion will be tested when dealer Dominique Lévy opens a Gego exhibition in her London gallery on May 20. The centerpiece, offered at more than \$1 million, is *Columna, Reticulárea cuadrada*, 1972, an ethereal netting of steel and iron wire, nylon, and lead weights suspended from the ceiling and expanding to about 11 by 4 feet. It is showing with a constellation of related works on paper starting at \$100,000, including the rosy-hued watercolor and ink *Reticulárea circular (Gato o rosa)*, 1981, for \$260,000, as well as other three-dimensional works.

Lévy sees both personal and universal themes in Gego’s oeuvre. “There’s an anxiety and a loneliness in her work that I’ve felt in that of very few artists—mostly women—including Agnes Martin and Eva Hesse,” says Lévy. “Being expelled and making a new culture as an immigrant influenced Gego’s work. A lot of these wires are about roots—displacement and dismantlement and re-creating roots.”

The London exhibition comes on the heels of Lévy’s critically acclaimed Gego show in New York last fall, where she reunited the majority of the “Chorros” sculptures from the 1971 Betty Parsons exhibition (none were for sale), along with a selection of drawings on offer from \$50,000 to \$200,000, and three-dimensional works starting at \$300,000, including *Dibujo sin papel 86/15*, 1986, which sold for about \$500,000. It was the first time the Fundación had collaborated with a commercial gallery in an effort to bring Gego’s work to a broader international audience in a coherent manner as individual pieces have continued to appear on the secondary market, albeit sporadically.

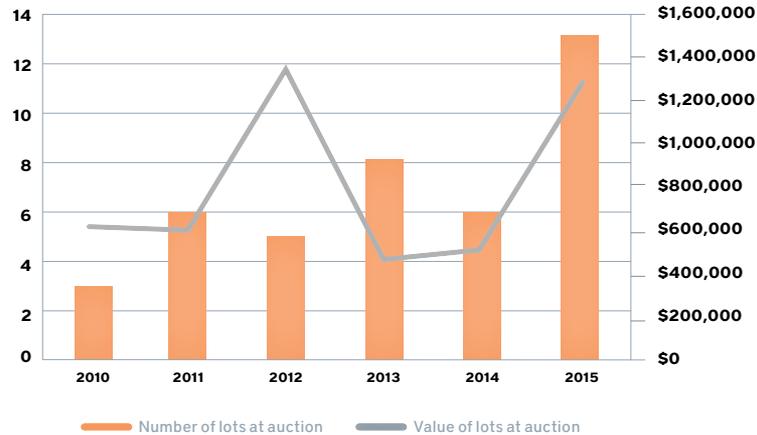
During Armory Week in New York in early March, New York gallery Adler & Conkright Fine Art offered *Dibujo sin papel No. 4*, 1963, a wire and spring construction in a clear acrylic box, for an undisclosed price, while Marianne Elrick-Manley tendered a small steel wire hanging sculpture *Untitled (Modulo Triangular 6)*, 1977, for \$575,000. Later in the month, another small wall assemblage, *Dibujo sin papel 86/12*, 1986, in aluminum and stainless wire, was available from the London-based Mayor Gallery at the European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht.

“In Latin America, Gego is like a goddess—in the same way Frida Kahlo has a myth around her—but she is not so well known in America,” says Lévy, who was particularly gratified to see the response to the show from non-Latin American specialists and the general public just discovering Gego. Lévy has found a discrepancy at present between Venezuelan collectors’ estimation of the market value of Gego’s pieces and the wider

## AUCTION MARKET PERFORMANCE: GEGO

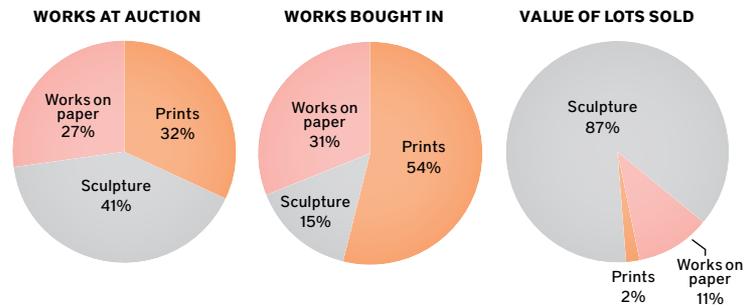
### MARKET SIZE AND VALUE

In 2015, a banner year for works by Gego at auction, 13 lots came on the block, of which 8 sold, including the artist record-setting *Dibujo sin papel 85/13*, 1985, which commanded \$701,000 at Christie’s New York in May.



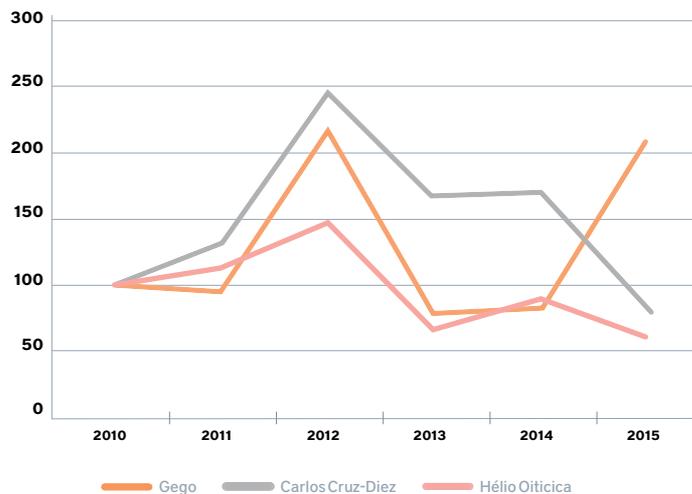
### GEGO’S MARKET SHARE BY MEDIUM

Of the 41 lots that have come to auction since 2010, 28 sold, for a total of \$4,814,406.



### LATIN AMERICAN ARTISTS, COMPARED

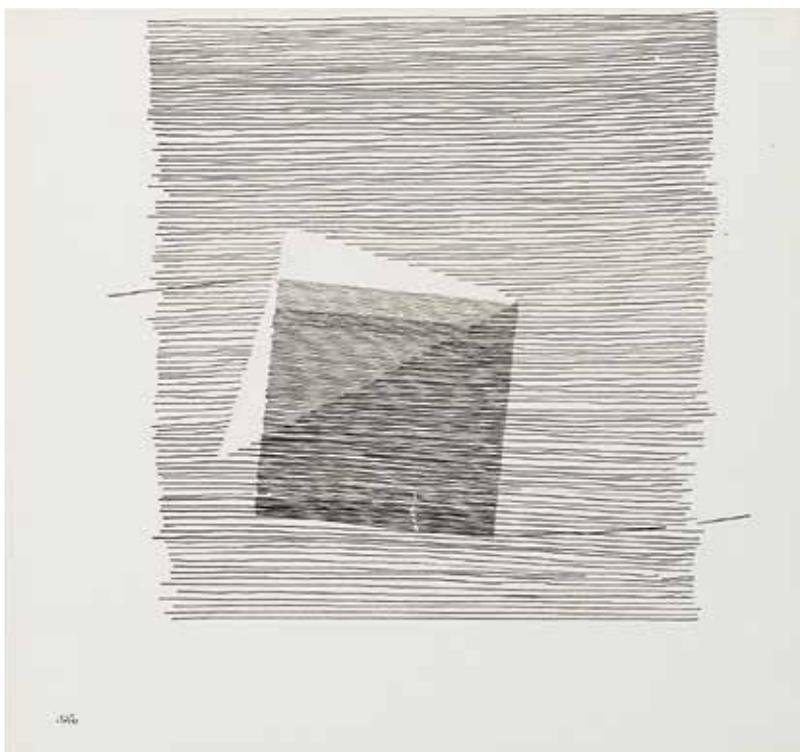
While the market for Gego’s works at auction mirrored that of male contemporaries Carlos Cruz-Díez and Hélio Oiticica from 2010 to 2014, their markets have since softened while hers has been on the rise.



(Source: Blouin Art Sales Index)



Installation view of "Gego: Autobiography of a Line," above, at Dominique Lévy in New York last fall. Gego's line drawing *Untitled*, 1963, sold for \$30,000 at Sotheby's New York this past November.



perception. "For the moment, I would like to maintain a level where new collectors and new museums can acquire the work," she says. "What we need is to see a great example changing hands at a very strong price or, more important, to see if her work is coming up in non-Latin American auctions."

Curatorially, Gego is appearing more outside the Latin American context. The artist is part of "Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016," the inaugural show currently on view at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel in Los Angeles. It puts Gego in the company of more than 30 modern and contemporary artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, another Jewish immigrant from Hamburg who made tactile, immersive installations from nontraditional materials. Garza believes that including Gego in the larger conversation in galleries and museums will make a difference in what collectors are willing to pay. "The fact that Dominique Lévy or Hauser & Wirth are looking at Gego's work creates a kind of confidence," he says. ▣