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Gonzalez, kids explore art and teamwork

BY MARGARET HAWKINS

Gallery Glance

Mexican artist Maximo Gonzalez collaborated with schoolchildren in the rural village of Chignahuapan to create what looks like a giant fish net woven from their old lesson books cut into strips and glued together. Up close, the children's painstaking handwriting is visible on each ribbon of paper, notes carefully made and then carefully re-made into something else. The joint project taught the children about art and teamwork, while the object itself stands as a testament to the way learning transforms lives and societies. It calls to mind the Christian parable of fishing for souls, in this case through education.

Mounted along with this installation are brilliant lightbox images of the children Gonzalez worked with, each one paired with a photograph of some local landmark or site. It's hard to go wrong photographing children, but these kids seem particularly radiant; maybe it has something to do with the back-lighting and the bright Mexican sun, or possibly just their joy in the project.

Maximo Gonzalez; Skestos Gabriele Gallery, 212 N. Peoria; (312) 243-1112. Through April 15.

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"Close Encounters of the Third Kind Meets the CSO" might be an alternative title for Michiko Itatani's series of huge paintings she instead calls "Cosmic Theater." In the largest of these, which is 8 feet tall and more than 12 feet long, a ring of rainbow-colored lights hovers strangely over a stage full of silhouetted performers.

Each painting features a strangely insubstantial theater or stadium that appears to have just landed from outer space — one might be an otherworldly football field, another an opera house, but all are lit up with unearthly rings of light that don't quite seem to match the physical details of the space.

Itatani's views are an odd but delightful combination of the architectural and the celestial. She seems to compare the lights in the night sky with the way a theater lights up at night, perhaps suggesting that the very energy of a performance leaves a trail of light in the world after the footlights go down.

Michiko Itatani: "Cosmic Theatre"; Flatfile Galleries, 217 N. Carpenter; (312) 491-1190. Through May 1.

Margaret Hawkins is a local free-lance writer.