

REFLECTIONS ON THE SELECTION

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Though any exhibition drawn exclusively from North American sources cannot be a completely representative sampling of Latin American art, it is equally true that no other country can boast a greater mix of nationalities from the entire spectrum of Latin American states. Without in any way denegrating the international recognition so recently won by North American artists, it should be recalled from the outset that the New World has been an extraordinarily hybrid environment, and that one of the great triumphs of American culture in general has been its ability to absorb other traditions. Artists such as the Mexican, Marius de Zayas, and later his compatriots Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, had a profound influence (possibly as much in their persona as in their painting) on the evolution of modern art in this country, and their early transAtlantic recognition quite considerably predates the ascent of New York into the international vanguard. It is not just the richness and diversity in local painting, but also its very excellence as art which has been nurtured with cultural infusions from all over the world.

It is pointless to consider the artists in this show exclusively in the light of Latin American art, since their assimilation into the local climate has been proven both by exhibition and acquisition. When the majority of the artists have received a significant, if not major, segment of their education here, it is not surprising that their work is compatible with tendencies typical of

the contemporary art of the United States. It is clear that this exhibition was not selected in pursuit of statistical balance, but some demographic observations are a worthy contextual prelude to analysis of the artistic currents, it reveal

Originating as they do from no less than 11 different countries where not even language is a common denominator, it is chiefly foreign birth-right and a loose hemispheric solidarity that the participants have in common. Ages are fairly evenly divided between the 15 under middle age, and the 13 above it: in that respect it seems to be an equitable demarkation between those approaching artistic maturity, and the others already secure in their stylistic language. Selection shows a clear bias towards New York whose artists account for half of the show, with California just under a quarter and the remainder made up by 5 other states

in deference to the large Latin populations that they also support. Fewer than a quarter of the participants are women, a percentage which is flattering neither to the present level of women's involvement, nor their gender's contribution to the evolution of Latin American art. Mexico and Cuba make the strongest presences accounting for not quite half of the show, then in descending order come Argentina and Puerto Rico, followed by Brazil and Chile (each with 2 artists), while the balance is made up with individuals from Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru and Uruguay. The absence of Venezuela is surprising, and the low representation of Colombia - which has an especially active and sophisticated art scene - reflects what may be the start of a new attitude: artists no longer necessarily feel compelled to leave their country in pursuit of international recognition. Today, when communications and travel facilitate the rapid exchange of ideas and information, is it not possible (and even desirable) to remain in the provinces and produce art which is both informed of international currents and faithful to local tradition? The exhibition divides itself fairly equitably into thirds - the first representing artists known only in the United States; the second group has shown abroad, but chiefly in their country of origin; while the final third have exhibited to a reasonable degree internationally. Many spend a fair percentage of their time outside the United States, but a minority of only 4 exploit the benefits of dual residence, which are feasible only when the country is as close as Mexico is to California, or when commercial success alleviates the burdens of commuting.

Though the overwhelming balance of the exhibition clearly documents the renewed interest in figurative modes which has dominated activity in the first years of the current decade, it simplifies matters to consider first the few artists whose work relates most directly to stylistic tendencies set earlier, and whose aesthetic is consequently more familiar.

Marcelo Bonevardi is one of the only 2 artists selected whose work is founded in abstraction, but the gentle geometry which exemplifies his art is in dramatic contrast to the more systemic abstraction that was pioneered across the Atlantic (by such Latin masters as Cruz-Diez, Le Parc and Soto) during the 60s. More in harmony with the dynamic art that emerged in New York over the same era, Bonevardi, though he avoids strict monochrome nevertheless leans to a restricted palette rather than polychromatic effect, and also (like Bontecou, Kelly and Nevelson) makes^a makes a bold move toward objectivity, away from the passive format of canvas. Similarly, it is through the hand rather than technology that he harnesses sculptural relief as a field for carefully modulated

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color. Invariably frontal and oriented to facade, Bonevardi's works, despite their articulated surfaces, ultimately remain paintings rather than sculpture, and as such, are still under the spell of illusion and evokation - in the realm of the magician so often alluded to in his titles. We know from his confessed admiration for Joseph Cornell that America has been the catalyst in shaping his vision, still, it is easy to detect echoes not only of his Italian ancestry (in the ^{metaphysical} furnishings of de Chirico and Carra) but also of the Rio de la Plata (through his spiritual mentor, Torres-Garcia). Although Bonevardi is senior in the context of this exhibition, he is junior to other artists (such as the Urugayans, Gonzalo Fonseca and Francisco Matto) with whom, despite his espousal of pure abstraction, he has spiritual affinities.

Except for the columns of Ricardo Regazzoni, pure geometry, a great force in Latin American art over the past 2 decades, finds no disciples in the exhibition. Regazzoni though was drawn somewhat fortitiously to geometry, purely as a means to analyse spiral structure. His columns pay homage to the rich Baroque architecture of his native Mexico, not by imitation so much as translation into the clipped isometric jargon of our time. This motivation is not only remote to the mix of technology and materials which inspired so much optical art in the 60s, but equally reactionary to the reductive purity of minimal art. Material has no role in determining structure, and Regazzoni's designs are preconceived forms which may be executed in virtually any material, ^{since} they are concealed beneath a finish of gold leaf. His pre-determined program of formal analysis neatly sidesteps trivial and self-conscious issues of aesthetics. The investigative foundation is so close to conceptual art that it is not even important for Regazzoni to participate in the building process. The column, is a functional object which defies categorization as sculpture in the traditional sense: isolated from its legitimate architectural role, it has the power to conjure a much larger structural order.

In the way that the term surrealist also has very few legitimate ties with its European parentage, constructivist is an expression loosely applied in Latin American art to describe virtually all geometric art (planar or 3-dimensional) from the time of Torres-Garcia in the 20s, onwards. It has been of major significance not only as an alternative to the predominately figurative bias in regional art, but also for its association with the progressive, the intellectual and the international. Bonevardi and Regazzoni illustrate the continuance of this tendency as well as the diversity of philosophic and stylistic postures that it has shelter

Another stylistic trend barely represented, except for the work of Armandina Lozano, is the free, amorphous and organic abstraction which is the legacy of abstract expressionism. Perhaps as a concession to her Mexican background, Lozano's graphics border on representation - but they are obscure and far from specific, and even their titles give few clues to the artist's real meaning. The ambiguity of her images, their thematic restraint, and general simplicity both in color and design, demonstrate that this other less formal aspect of abstraction still survives.

The revival of representational art during the 70s was motivated to an extraordinary degree by the incorporation of photographic imagery. This phenomenon is hardly confined to artists of Latin America, but, given the regional affinity

for figuration, the difference between the distortions earlier found in the painting of artists such as Fernando Botero, and the mimetic exactitude later familiarized by photo-realists like Claudio Bravo, is strikingly obvious. As part of this development, photography itself became a legitimized art and finally began to appear as an equal beside painting and sculpture.

The camera lends itself naturally to the recording of fact, and one of the most ^{persisten} applications of photography in recent years has been in the interests of documentation. Eduardo Calderon and Antonio Tocora clearly illustrate this tendency in suites of photographs which are especially revealing about environment. Differences in approach seem tied to temperamental distinctions between the societies where they were born. For the sensitive and introspective nature of his images, and his mastery of black and white, Calderon is typical of the progressive and poetic school of photography which distinguishes Lima from the rest of South America. Tocora on the other hand was born in the Caribbean, but raised in the States since he was 13: his color prints of brightly painted facades so typical of Latin barrios are made quite specific by the street addresses which constitute their titles. Calderon is inclined to history, and Tocora to the present, but they both, no less than Bonevardi and Regazzoni identify with Latin traditions.

The illusionism inherent in photography has usually been more exploited by painters. Used for reference, photography can make objects appear more real, but an even more dramatic transformation takes place when the painting itself assumes the appearance of a mechanically produced image. 5 of the artists exhibited here are involved to varying degrees with illusion, and it is difficult to evaluate their work without considering their position in relation to photography, since it has even effected the viewer's powers of perception.

But it is through her subtle integration of toys and real objects that the paintings come to life.

In this idiom, Liliana Porter is outstanding: she has made the entire theme of her art the dialogue between reality and replication, and her lexicon of small objects, books, string, blocks, daubs, burns and smudges is chosen at least partially because of the possibilities it affords for convincing imitation. In addition to traditional painting techniques, Porter frequently resorts to the photo-mechanical device of screen printing, and sometimes increases the illusion by working directly on the wall surface. Known as a master printmaker, as well as a painter, it is easy to associate Porter's sophisticated art with the urbane and intellectual climate of her native Buenos Aires (with which the expatriate has been able to maintain unbroken contact), but she is admired equally in the many other parts of Latin America where her work is known.

Not only in his preference for humble subject, but also in his predilection for monochrome, Luis Serrano has aspects in common with Porter. But the authenticity of his renderings is rooted less in the mechanical accuracy of photography than academic draftsmanship. Domestic articles are presented in such a way that accentuates their shape and genus, not volume. Educated in the United States, it is difficult to find traces of specifically Ecuadorian sensibility, but Serrano like Bonevardi, has a feeling for the spirit and enigma of the object which transcends representational exactitude and regional identity.

Furniture and domestic debris figure prominently also in the constructions of Maria Brito-Avellano, her pieces though are ^{assemblages} and almost always actualized in 3-dimensions, ^{using} illusionist props - including photography, reproductions, and even modelling - in her repertoire to evoke human presence. She deals more directly with the individual (and particularly her own Cuban legacy) than Porter whose comments are usually more literary. In spirit her works are introspective and hover close to the sub-conscious, yet Brito-Avellano is less ^{concerned with} the mystery of objects plucked from their true anthropological context, than a dialogue with ghosts of the human traffic and events which cling to them. Despite their tangible form, the pieces are highly ambiguous and with the acute perception of a feminine sensibility, refer to enigmatic legacies of the past.

Juan Gonzalez, another artist involved with illusion, also reached his stylistic maturity over the last decade, but has set himself distinctive limitations in production, scale and theme. Because his works are so small, there is no scope for the trompe l'oeil effects so characteristic of Porter. The fine, meticulous and

time-consuming precision that he demands in execution necessarily limits output to only a few items a year. Even if it is not easy to grasp the deep personal significance of the motifs Gonzalez draws together, it is because his subjects are all biographical and self-referential that photography is an important reference source - especially to reconstruct the past and aid recollection. In the way that he manipulates images as well as the dimension of time, Gonzalez, like Brito-Avellano, is closer to the surreal current in Latin American art than the pragmatic realism which was rampant during his artistic evolution.

A similar spirit pervades the work of Jorge Pardo, who like Gonzalez and Brito-Avellano, left Cuba in his youth, though his work is set apart by its greater ebullience in color and design, as well as devotion to religious and spiritual subjects. His technical preference for paper finds many parallels in contemporary Latin American art (including Gonzalez, Porter and Serrano, among the representational artists) for whom paper, if not the exclusive support is at least both characteristic and recurrent. Pardo freely combines the observed with the invented, and is not especially dependent on mimetic appearances. The painstaking manual duplication of motifs extracted from reproductive media (books, magazines, postcards, etc.) is seen close to eclipse in the work of both Pardo and the Chilean, Edgardo Catalar whose attitudes are marked by an informality responsive to the climate of the 80s.

The 10 artists who represent various aspects of recent expressionism and figuration may be grouped according to general collective traits. The new genre commonly identified as neo-expressionism is marked by certain stylistic hallmarks; a return to primitivism and almost fetishistic imagery, wild execution, a rainbow palette, superimposition and layering of imagery, as well as a sense of urgency and drama - many of them until recently, more customarily the province of regional than international art.

Luis Cruz Acazeta and Refael Ferrer are pioneers in the new aesthetic and well known from over a decade of exhibiting in New York galleries. Ferrer's recent figurative compositions are not as primitive in appearance as his earlier work, though in color and free handling they still retain the energy of graffiti. Color and brushwork become ferocious in the canvases of Acazeta, but in his art no less than that of Ferrer, the figure is linked to episode and narrative by subjects which come from the head and defy logic. The current of narrative exemplified by so many artists in the show (including Almaraz, Alvarez, Romero and Sierra) is typical of Latin American art, with numerous precedents in the persistence of anecdote and the survival of surrealist fantasy. As with verbal narrative, a story depends

upon its telling, and in painting, episode and action can be stifled by draftsmanship if it becomes too literal and over descriptive.

Paul Sierra, like many artists from the Chicago area, has developed a highly individual interpretation of the figure. By maintaining a degree of simplicity and order in the structure of his images, he is successful in subordinating these appealing stylizations to the general dark and dramatic mood of his pictures. As with his compatriot and contemporary, Acazeta, it is essentially because of his endless reserves of invention in design that his works are successful pieces of art. Much the same is true of Carlos Almaraz, whose wild technique is invariably complimentary to the diverse character of his subjects. His work is diffused with the violent polychromy of the tropics and remarkable for the energy of its urgent execution. Because color and the traditional expressionist baggage are so important with this group of artists - Acazeta, Ferrer, Serrano and Almaraz - it is intriguing to speculate whether their common roots in the latitude of the Tropic of Cancer is a contributing factor.

Superimposition is a technique best expressed in the photographs of Roberto Gil de Montes and the paintings of Edgar Franceschi. In both cases, it is motivated not in the pursuit of annihilation and obliteration, but by the integration of motifs which
 A enrich and change context. In radical form, images are located quite literally on different planes, so that juxtaposition boosts thematic complexity with additional shades of meaning - or contradiction. Disparity in execution as well as the type of image, means that it is relatively easy to extricate the separate motifs and reassemble them in isolation. Ultimately, of course A the success of such works (and neo-expressionism in general) is measured in fairly traditional formalist terms, according to their unity and visual integration.

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The 2 A painters most radical in their use of scale, make an illuminating contrast. To a degree, they both work from mythology, but Frangella's torsos, limbs and heads uncompromisingly executed in a harsh contrasting light, are close to monochrome and dramatically opposed to the regiments of anthropomorphic spirits which inhabit the frieze-like dimensions of Carlos Loarca's canvases. Where one artist is from the cosmopolitan milieu of Buenos Aires and reflects cultural heritage which is predominately European, the other represents a more regional New World society, rich in Indian tradition and folklore. The disparity between their styles shows the tremendous diversity of viewpoints and philosophies which is united under the term Latin American.

A final group of 7 artists subscribe to attitudes outside the conventional boundaries of painting and sculpture. Seeking a deeper sense of engagement than is permitted by passive frontality, these artists fall into 2 major divisions - installation and performance - which are rooted in developments of the last decade. In all instances the thematic ideas behind the work transcend the form of the piece itself, eroding traditional beliefs about the objectivity of art; although there is still plenty of ~~specatcle~~ left to delight the eye. The ~~artforms~~ themselves are still developing, since by nature they are obliged to keep pace with the technology which they exploit, as well as the society which is being addressed. Essentially, both metiers are subversive, not simply because they reject formats previously established in the visual arts, but also quite frequently for the outspoken nature of their comment. ^{1 paragraph} Luis Camnitzer and Alfredo Jaar, have for instance been linked with political art works, though a closer inspection will reveal that their installations deal more usually with issues of morality than questions of party. Such a restricted view is misleading not only because it considerably underestimates their thematic diversity, but also because the poetry and ~~poignance~~ as well as the structural beauty (both in detail and total) is missed. Latin America in any case, is commonly the focus of their attention, as it is with Leandro Katz and Regina Vater, whose art shows even more involvement with current technology. Vater, because she deals with contemporary propositions, and analyses them in the language of our time, is free to place herself in either the Brazilian or US context. Like Jaar and Camnitzer, her pieces deal with known fact, concerning the structure of our environment, behaviour and beliefs. It is principally her involvement with film which has in common with Katz, for whom the media has become a major commitment. Katz though, tends to deal with the past; he is fascinated not only by the symbols, signs and language which constitute our system of communication, but by the ^{pace and} passage of time itself. Manipulation of projector speed enables him to produce movies which actually change the rhythm of time for artistic effect, while in his installations, he is equally a master, taking theatrical licence in his use of light and projection.

Despite the importance of action and movement in his work, Katz though is not a performance artist, and this activity is more accurately described by the work of Marilia and Papo Colo. Colo's pieces are motivated more by the wish to act out an idea (which can be captured in photographs) than to manipulate an audience in person. Frequently also his art takes quite tangible physical form as assemblage that still betray a performer's acute sensitivity for drama and suspense. An even more theatrically oriented attitude is apparent in the performances which Marilia makes in conjunction with her husband's readings of his poetry - but her background is unlike the other artists, in that she was trained primarily in the performing arts.

In a way radically different from the body artists of the 70s, Ana Mendieta has taken her own body as the subject of her art. Using the raw organic textures of the earth as her media, the artist visits remote sites to construct, excavate and model stylized bodies - which are gauged to her own petite physical stature. The form of these private, symbolic and ritualistic images is predicated by site. Their design as well as the process of their manufacture relates to primitive tribal heritage, the cycle of birth, life and death, and the harmonic rapport of humankind with the earth. Quite naturally, our fragmentary knowledge of these sculptures can only be based on drawings and photographs, since the pieces themselves become immaterial with the passage of time. Interaction with the natural environment is something notable especially in the work of women (including other Latin Americans such as Cecilia Vicuña and Alicia Barney). Quite apart from the extremely sexual form it assumes in Mendieta's work, her activity in general may be identified with current feminine sensibility.

As previously noted, the exhibition reveals attitudes which are essentially in harmony with the recent art of the United States. It proves that Latin Americans have bequeathed a rich heritage to their adopted land.

John Stringer

New York/July 1984