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What We Talk About When We Talk About L.A.

BY Maximiliano Durón (http://www.artnews.com/author/mduron/) POSTED 09/05/17 9:01 AM

Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA puts Latin American and Latinx art at the center of art history

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Overlay: Clemente Padín's *Missings Miss*, 1993, black-and-white video stills. Background: A July 2015 protest in la Plaza de la Constitución, Guatemala City. OVERLAY: COURTESY THE ARTIST (6); BACKGROUND: EMILIANO VALDÉS

Emiliano Valdés, the Guatemalan-born chief curator of the Museum of Modern Art of Medellín, Colombia, had traveled back to his native country in July 2015 to research an exhibition, but shortly after landing in Guatemala City, he decided to attend a protest. It was, he said, “part of what people were thinking about and talking about.”

“¡Renuncia ya! ¡Renuncia ya!” the crowd roared over the clamor of drums and trumpets. It was a Saturday evening, and thousands of people had gathered in la Plaza de la Constitución, the capital city’s main square, to call for the resignation of the country’s then president, Otto Pérez Molina. Every week for three months, the protests had been going on in the square, first sparked by the revelation of a far-reaching customs scandal that defrauded the state of millions in imports revenue. The protesters carried posters and candles, and waved Guatemala’s flag. *The New York Times* captured the scene (https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/americas/guatemalas-corruption-investigations-make-swift-strides.html?_r=0), describing a placard in front of a pile of bananas that read, “We seized this fruit as a reminder that Guatemalans still own their history and can change it,” the bananas a reference to the U.S.-owned United Fruit Company’s history in the country that culminated in a U.S.-backed coup in 1954.

Valdés remembered the air being thick with tension—and hope. “After so many years of the confrontations and the war and a really charged and violent social and political atmosphere,” he said, “it felt like for once the whole country was working together, was speaking the same language, was fighting for a common cause.”

This September, the exhibition that Valdés has co-curated, “Guatemala from 33,000 km: Contemporary Art 1960–Present” opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara. The first major survey of contemporary Guatemalan art in the United States—and as much a political and social history as an art history—it is just one of more than 70 deeply researched exhibitions of Latin American and Latinx art at Southern California institutions comprising the Getty Foundation’s Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a four-month-long program that aims at nothing less than “flipping the history of modern and contemporary art, beginning with the Latino perspective,” as Getty Foundation deputy director Joan Weinstein put it. She hopes the initiative “will help complicate even the notion that there is such a thing as Latin American art. I think we’ll have achieved our goal if we get people to say, ‘This is much more complex, much more heterogeneous.’”

The unprecedented program will “put Latin America at the center of art history,” said Andrew Perchuk, deputy director of the Getty Research Institute and a co-curator of a hotly anticipated Getty Center exhibition of Concrete art from the collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros. From now on, he said, “when you’re doing a show on feminism or on video art or on geometric painting, it won’t be complete unless you include these artists from Argentina or Chile or Mexico.”



(http://1vze7o2h8a2b2ryah13i0r68.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PST_ERecinos.jpg)

Efraim Recinos’s 1960 *Guatemala vista desde 33,000 kms de distancia (Guatemala)* served as the namesake for the exhibition “Guatemala from 33,000 km: Contemporary Art 1960–Present” at MCA Santa Barbara. (Click to enlarge.)

COURTESY COLECCIÓN JOHN GODY, GUATEMALA CITY, GUATEMALA

PST: LA/LA is the third edition of Pacific Standard Time, and the largest. The first, in 2011, focused on art produced in Los Angeles in the postwar era; the second, in 2013, looked at modern architecture in Southern California. “LA/LA” can stand for any combination of Los Angeles, Latin America, and Latinx art. The exhibition has been in the works for almost six years, but it comes at a time when attention to art from south of the border is especially charged. Earlier this year, materials describing the initiative began carrying the tagline “A Celebration Beyond Borders,” an allusion to the U.S. president’s anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric, and his desire to build a wall along the border with Mexico.

It has been 25 years since Los Angeles saw such an extensive focus on art from anywhere in Latin America. Artes de Mexico, a multi-venue festival of more than 200 events that took place over four months in 1991, was prompted by “Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries,” a traveling exhibition that made a stop at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that year. Artes de Mexico was an effort to draw attention to the city’s Mexican roots and away from undertones of exoticization, which were present in the marketing campaigns for the exhibition’s stops in other cities.

“Los Angeles itself has been, and to a certain degree still is, a Mexican city,” Rubén Ortiz-Torres, an L.A.-based Mexican artist, told me.

For decades, Southern California has had a significant Latino presence, and it has recently shifted even further, with Latinos now comprising 44.7 percent of the state’s eight southernmost counties, according to July 2016 estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau. In L.A. County, Latinos account for 48.5 percent.

PST: LA/LA looks to further the outreach of the city’s cultural institutions to a demographic that, according to some estimates, will be just shy of the 50 percent mark statewide in 2060. Michael Govan, LACMA’s director since 2006, said that although his museum is focused on programming that addresses a Latino audience, there is still work to be done. Currently, 80 percent of LACMA’s visitors are locals, and while a handful of exhibitions at the museum have passed the 30 percent mark for visitors with Latinx heritage, only 20 to 21 percent of visitors in that demographic visited the recent “Picasso and Rivera: Conversations Across Time.” For PST, LACMA will host five exhibitions, including a retrospective of the Chicano artist Carlos Almaraz, “Painted in Mexico, 1700–1790: Pinxit Mexici,” and “Home—So Different, So Appealing,” a thematic exhibition that takes the concept of home as a starting point and organizing principle.

“The elephant in the room, culturally, is the giant and growing Latino population,” Govan said. He sees that as being the very subject of PST: LA/LA: “a celebration and an awareness of those cultures that represent so much of our contemporary population.”

“One of the biggest things that will come out of this is an amazing amount of new research,” Govan added, “which hopefully will be the seeds of other art historians and curators finding so many other things to do in art history. You can build on that research for other programs.”

As with previous editions of PST, [commercial galleries in the area have gotten involved](http://www.artnews.com/2017/07/11/galleries-partner-to-present-latin-american-and-latinx-artists-as-part-of-pacific-standard-time-lala/) (<http://www.artnews.com/2017/07/11/galleries-partner-to-present-latin-american-and-latinx-artists-as-part-of-pacific-standard-time-lala/>), with 66 of them putting on concurrent PST: LA/LA–related exhibitions. And two venues—a [warehouse in downtown](http://www.artnews.com/2017/08/08/proyectosla-fair-exhibition-hybrid-timed-to-pacific-standard-time-lala-reveals-artists-title/) (<http://www.artnews.com/2017/08/08/proyectosla-fair-exhibition-hybrid-timed-to-pacific-standard-time-lala-reveals-artists-title/>) and an exhibition space in Glendale—will host pop-up shows from galleries based in Latin America. Some of the gallery shows have direct—and locally resonant—crossover with the PST: LA/LA program. Craig Krull

Gallery is featuring Gilbert “Magu” Lujan, a cofounder of the Chicano collective “Los Four,” the first Chicano artists ever to have an exhibition at LACMA in 1974. The show complements UC Irvine’s University Art Gallery’s survey of Lujan’s work, “Aztlán to Magulandia: The Journey of Chicano Artist Gilbert ‘Magu’ Luján,” opening in October.

The best measure of the investment in PST: LA/LA might be the financial muscle the Getty has thrown behind it. More than \$16 million went into planning the program, a significant portion of it in the form of two-year research grants for curatorial teams. Valdés and Miki Garcia, the curators of “Guatemala from 33,000 km,” used theirs not only to visit museums, galleries, private collections, and artists’ studios throughout Guatemala, but also to traverse the country’s rural parts. They wanted to better understand what life was like in contemporary Guatemala’s countryside, where, during the country’s brutal civil war, an estimated 200,000 people, mainly indigenous Mayas, were disappeared.

That horrific event is addressed in “Historia sitiada,” a series of work in various mediums by Guatemala City–based Isabel Ruiz. The piece in the exhibition, a mixed-media installation dated 1991–92, comprises a scattering of wood chips, coal, and wax, on top of which two rows of chairs, each bearing a candle, face one another. Ruiz began the project about five years before the peace accords that ended the country’s civil war, when survivors had begun uncovering mass graves in and around their villages. Ruiz intended it as a way of mourning. “It’s really meaningful in terms of allowing art to create a collective wake,” said Garcia, who is executive director and chief curator of the MCA Santa Barbara.



View of Stela C at Quiriguá, an archaeological site in southeastern Guatemala that dates to the Maya classic period and is the location of the United Fruit Company’s former banana plantations.

EMILIANO VALDÉS



Isabel Ruiz, from the series “Historia Sitiada,” 1991–92, installation view, 2013, at La ERRE, in Guatemala City.
ANDRÉS ASTURIAS/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE 9.99 GALLERY, GUATEMALA CITY, GUATEMALA

Even more extensive travel went into “Video Art in Latin America,” co-organized by the Getty Research Institute and LAXART, which will host the exhibition. In planning for it, GRI curator Glenn Phillips and his co-curator Elena Shtromberg, a modern and contemporary Latin American art scholar at the University of Utah, crisscrossed the region, from Mexico to Brazil, from Cuba to Ecuador and Colombia.

“Despite the limitations and despite the political difficulties,” Shtromberg said, “artists are producing work that really is on par with any work that you would see at a biennial in a global setting. The artists may not be known globally but they *should* be.”

Like “Guatemala from 33,000 km,” their exhibition covers painful history. Clemente Padin’s video *Missing Miss* (1993) concerns a group of protesters in Uruguay holding signs showing the faces of people who disappeared during the country’s 1973–85 dictatorship; their bodies were never accounted for. Originally captured on analog VHS tape, “Padin played this tape over and over and over and over again until he destroyed it,” Phillips said. “He played it to death.” The present form of the video is condensed to about six minutes, a process that Phillips estimates took Padin hundreds of hours to do.

“[Padin] throws into relief how poignant or even how politically loaded just the notion of remembering—or the notion of forgetting—can be,” he added.

Another work in the show, Dominican artist Joiiri Minaya’s *Siboney* (2014/2017)—part video, part installation—documents a process that will be re-created for the exhibition, in which Minaya paints a wall to look like a tropical print ubiquitous in the Dominican Republic. As she mixes her paints, text appears on the screen: “Does one interpret what one sees? Or does one see what one imagines?” As she looks over her shoulder, at the viewer, in the manner of a classical odalisque, the screen reads: “I see the way you look at me, but I’m not here for you.”

The piece, Phillips said, “looks at how Caribbean women are objectified, sometimes equated with these tropical plants and fruits. It is about her staking out an area that’s separate from that and defiant of that and trying to look back.” In a final act, Minaya douses herself in water and rolls her body against the wall, destroying the tropical image.



Joiiri Minaya, *Siboney* (still), 2014.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE COLECCIÓN EDUARDO LEÓN JIMENES DE ARTES VISUALES, SANTIAGO, DR

In 2011, for the first edition of Pacific Standard Time, filmmaker Jesse Lerner and artist Ortiz-Torres co-curated the exhibition “Mex/LA: ‘Mexican’ Modernisms in Los Angeles 1930–1985,” which looked at the artistic exchanges between Los Angeles and Mexico. Ortiz-Torres titled his catalogue essay “Does L.A. Stand for Los Angeles or Latin America?,” a question that, he said, served as an unofficial inspiration for PST: LA/LA. The two have collaborated once again, this time on “How to Read El Pato Pascual: Disney’s Latin America and Latin America’s Disney,” an exhibition at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles and the Luckman Fine Arts Complex at Cal State L.A. that looks at how Latin American artists absorbed and reinterpreted Disney imagery.

The show is the outgrowth of a project Lerner and Ortiz-Torres worked on together earlier, a 1995 film called *Frontierland/Fronterilandia*; one piece of found footage had theme park performers dressed as Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse doing an interpretation of a traditional Mexican hat dance. “How to Read El Pato Pascual” takes as its starting point the trip Walt Disney made to Latin America in the early 1940s. Disney and members of his team of animators, writers, and musicians traveled throughout the region in search of inspiration for Disney’s 1942 animated film *Saludos Amigos* and its follow-up, *The Three Caballeros* (1944). Their trip was sponsored by the U.S. Good Neighbor Policy, an attempt by the United States to foster reciprocal exchanges that ultimately reinforced the country’s dominance and influence in the region, making way for destabilizing interventions.

In considering Disney’s influence, Lerner and Ortiz-Torres draw on Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattel’s 1971 book, *How to Read Donald Duck*, which takes on Disney comic books that were widely distributed in Latin America, and critiques them as imperialistic and neo-colonialist. Ortiz-Torres remembers reading the book as a child in Mexico, then rereading it as an assignment from his professor Michael Asher, while a student at CalArts, the Los Angeles art school founded by none other than Walt Disney.

The “Pascual” in the show’s title comes from the story of a Mexican fruit juice manufacturer of that name that licensed the Donald Duck character as its mascot. After a long labor strike, the owner went bankrupt and the workers took over the company in a sort of “Marxist dream,” as Lerner puts it. “There were these leftists in Mexico who said, ‘Donald Duck doesn’t represent cultural imperialism or the Yankee cultural influence anymore. Now Donald Duck represents the triumph of the proletariat and the workers taking over the means of production.’”



Rafael Bqueer, *Alice and the tea through the mirror*, 2014.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MAK CENTER

A number of artists in the show use Disney’s fairytale imagery to draw attention to poor living conditions. Argentine artist duo Mondongo’s 2013 mixed-media piece *Me Conformaría Con Poder Dormir (Escultura)*, (“I’d Be Okay with Just Being Able to Sleep [Sculpture]”), shows Snow White slumbering against the backdrop of a dilapidated shantytown. In photographic documentation of Rafael Bqueer’s 2014 performance *Alice and the tea through the mirror*, the artist walks through Rio de Janeiro’s favelas dressed as a Disney version of Lewis Carroll’s Alice. In one shot, he has his back to the camera as he traipses across a seemingly endless landscape of trash. Ortiz-Torres added the photographs to the exhibition after the checklist had closed, because it was an image that was literally keeping him up at night.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he said. “It’s an image that illustrates this relationship I have with Latin America because I still see Latin America as this wonderland. Even though the wonderland is this place of poverty and social disparity, it’s still a wonderland, somehow.”

Ortiz-Torres wants “How to Read El Pato Pascual” to go beyond the neo-colonial narrative that is generally employed to understand the relationship between Disney and Latin America. “One of the things we’ve learned is that you cannot simplify things in those terms,” he said. “And maybe at some point these distinctions might not be relevant when you look at the work.”

“The show that we’re doing is not really a show of how the United States sees Latin America,” he added. “If anything, it’s an American interpretation of Latin America’s interpretation of the United States.”

And yet, how the U.S. views Latin America is one of the central questions raised by PST: LA/LA. Garcia looked into traveling “Guatemala from 33,000 km,” the only show in PST to focus exclusively on a Central American country’s art, to other U.S. institutions after PST. She received responses from a few venues saying, she paraphrased, “We don’t really have a Guatemalan population here, so this doesn’t really apply to us.”

That didn’t make sense to Garcia. “A, I would question their assumptions about Latino populations in their cities,” she said, “and B, I wonder, do you have to have a Guatemalan population to want to know and understand this art and part of the world? I don’t see any other museum say, ‘Well, we don’t really have a French population, so we’re not going to do their show.’”

Nevertheless, Valdés hopes their exhibition reveals to a wide audience Guatemalans’ persistence in the years during and following its 36-year civil war—a persistence that could carry lessons for all cultures. “Unearthing the country’s recent history and its past and the source of all these problems and positions could potentially have an impact on society at large,” he said. “This is exactly the context in which the exhibition wants to place itself: that of a country that, despite its horrible and tragic story, is still finding the energy and the possibility of coming together and fighting for a better future.”

Maximiliano Durón is a Los Angeles-born reporter and photo editor at ARTnews. He covers artists of color, particularly Latinx/Chicano artists, as well as queer art, digital art, and breaking news in the art world.

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