

Waking up to a new Los Angeles

Pacific Standard Time LA/LA: 1,100 artists from 45 countries

The endless ripples of America's biggest Latin American artfest



de Altabad Art Collection/C. de la Rocha & Z. D. Escobar.

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IT IS night and you are barefoot, stumbling across cold desert sand. A ragbag of humans almost crashes into you. They are so close you can see that the child who has lost a shoe is curling her little toes inward to avoid the thorns. A man drags her by the arm, doubling himself over to escape the helicopter searchlights scissoring the landscape. Too late. A snapping mastiff dives off the chopper. Two border guards lift their automatic weapons and take aim at you, yelling: “Geddown! GEDDOWN!”

“Carne y Arena” (Flesh and sand) is a virtual-reality (VR) installation by Alejandro Iñárritu, a Mexican artist and film director, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Each visitor dons the VR mask and earphones for six and a half minutes, but the sense of terror lingers for hours. Mr Iñárritu wants you to feel the trauma of the migrant who abandons home and braves danger, all in the hope of a better life across the border.

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The show is part of “Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA” (PST: LA/LA), the biggest exploration of art from Latin America ever put on in the United States. It is no surprise that it is centred on Los Angeles, where it opened on September 14th. California was once part of Mexico. Los Angeles is the biggest Latin American city outside the region and it is permeated by the language, culture, food and music of the south. This is a city “that exists and thrives on diversity”, says Ann

Philbin of the Hammer Museum.

It is hard not to see PST: LA/LA as an antidote to the divisiveness of American political debate about immigration. More than 1,100 Latin American artists are taking part in shows in 70 cultural institutions throughout southern California. “We are tearing down walls,” said Michael Govan, the director of LACMA, at the opening.

PST: LA/LA follows “PST: Art in LA, 1945-80”, which took place five years ago. The Getty Foundation provided \$16m of seed money for the project. Those early grants, often the hardest to secure, helped 50 institutions start developing shows that cover photography, film, dance, music, performance, architecture, sculpture and visual art from 45 countries, as well as the Japanese and Chinese diasporas of Peru and the Caribbean and the black communities of Bahia in Brazil. Acting as enabler rather than overseer, the Getty has ensured a remarkable collaboration between institutions. Its only stipulation was that each show be underpinned by serious art-historical research to ensure that the effects of PST: LA/LA are far-reaching.

Despite the broad range of ideas and artistic practice, home emerges as an overarching theme. “Home: So Different, So Appealing” at LACMA is one obvious example. Another is “Found in Translation—Design in California and Mexico: 1915-85”, which traces the stylistic exchanges of vernacular architecture between the two regions. The artists who make up the magnificent collection put together by Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, a Venezuelan-American, show how European modernism gained a new home in South America in the 1930s and 1940s and made it its own. And the exhibition at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, “Condemned to be Modern”, asks uncomfortable questions about the home-grown taste for brutalist architecture in Latin America and what happened when the promised modern future turned into dictatorship and economic stagnation.

But home is also where the heart is. And for many 20th-century Latin American women who were determined to be artists, choosing between home-making and making art was often a struggle. To see the dozens of artists who travelled to Los Angeles and whose work makes up “Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-85” was to see a group of women—most now in their 60s and 70s—who knew of each other but had rarely met, and had never expected to be exhibited together in America.

A highly academic show, as befits the Hammer’s position as part of University of California, Los Angeles, “Radical Women” is no walk in the park. Common themes include silence, loneliness and the many sufferings of the female body, from childbirth to rape. For a more personal narrative, head instead for the retrospective of Anna Maria Maiolino, a Calabria-born Brazilian artist, at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA LA). A collaborator of Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica, three of Brazil’s best-known artists, she was long overshadowed by her more famous former husband, Rubens Gerchman. Undaunted, she carried on working, drawing, sculpting and making installations. Having raised her daughters, she took a new artistic turn working with clay. At 75, Ms Maiolino is now one of Brazil’s most important artists.

The Maiolino retrospective is one of many exhibitions that will be shown elsewhere. The Getty’s own landmark show, “Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas”, will open next year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. “Radical Women” will travel to the Brooklyn Museum and then to São Paulo, and LACMA’s “Home: So Different, So Appealing” will open in 2018 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. James Cuno, president of the J. Paul Getty Trust, points out that much of the research the Getty insisted on will form the basis of an array of courses on Latin American art throughout American universities, testimony to the ripple effect of PST: LA/LA.

But the most important long-term outcome may turn out to be a shift in perspective. A small show at the Craft & Folk Art Museum shows the Mexican-American border not as a wall but as a place of imagination and possibility, and the artists who inhabit it as makers of “cross-border art”: artists like Raquel Bessudo, who makes polyester jewellery based on the route followed by the deadly immigrant train, *La Bestia*, or Ana Serrano with her village “Cartonlandia” (pictured) and Ronald Rael, who playfully reimagines the border wall as a cycling track, a xylophone or a place to hang a seesaw. No longer the home only of snapping mastiffs and armed guards, Donald Trump’s wall could become an inspiration to creativity, proof of a common humanity.

Correction (September 28th, 2017): An earlier version of this piece said that the exhibition at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery is entitled "Learning from Latin America: Art, Architecture and Visions of Modernism". It is, in fact, entitled "Condemned to be Modern". This has been corrected.

This article appeared in the Books and arts section of the print edition under the headline "Waking up to a new world"

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