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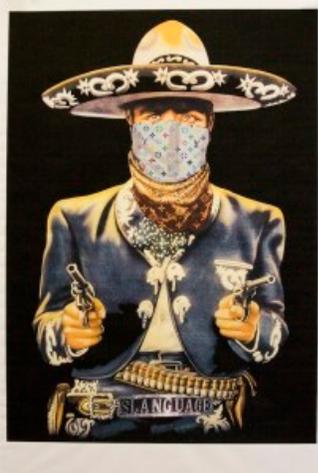
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Are U.S. Art Museums Finally Taking Latin American Art Seriously?

By [Carolina A. Miranda](#) Posted 05/15/14

When it comes to museum shows, the largest ethnic minority in the country has come a long way--maybe



Mario Ybarra Jr. and Juan Capistran, “Stick ‘em Up...” (*Slanguage Bandito*), 2003, digital print.
©JUAN CAPISTRAN AND MARIO YBARRA, JR.

Radical Latin American women artists. Latinos and science fiction. A survey of contemporary artists that covers a territory from Tierra del Fuego to the Mexican border. The fall of 2017 will see the launch of 46 exhibitions and events around Southern California devoted to artists and designers of Latin American descent. The initiative, funded in part by \$5 million in research grants from the Getty Foundation, is a follow-up to that organization’s successful “[Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980](#)” series of exhibitions from 2011–12, which focused on documenting and exhibiting the art of Southern California. The new wave of shows—collectively titled “[Pacific Standard Time: L.A./L.A. \(Los Angeles/Latin America\)](#)”—will draw an unprecedented level of attention to art from a region that has been spottily covered in the United States.

James Cuno, president and CEO of the [Getty Trust](#), says the Getty turned its focus to Latin America instead of Asia or elsewhere for a couple of reasons. “One, there is the historic connection Los Angeles has to Latin America,” he explains. “The other is the demographics of this soon-to-be Hispanic city.” According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates from 2012, Latinos make up more than 48 percent of Los Angeles County’s total population. At the national level, Latinos are the largest ethnic minority in the country, comprising almost 17 percent of the total population.

The Getty-funded shows join a spate of exhibitions in various stages of execution that also deal with U.S. Latino or Latin American themes. Last year, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) unveiled “[Under the Mexican Sky](#),” the beguiling retrospective of influential Mexican cinematographer [Gabriel Figueroa](#). Currently, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York has the first comprehensive North American exhibition devoted to the work of [Brazilian painter and installation artist Lygia Clark](#), and the Bronx Museum of the Arts is showing “[Beyond the Supersquare](#),” a broad survey that examines the ways in which Latin American artists have dealt with the influences of Modernist design. In Boston, the [Museum of Fine Arts](#) provides an overview in the ways that Latin American artists have been in dialogue with their contemporaries around the world. Other exhibitions are also in the works: This week, the International Center of Photography opens [an exhibition on six decades of Latin American photographic movements](#). In June, the Guggenheim Museum debuts “[Under the Same Sun](#),” a survey of more than three dozen Latin American contemporary artists from 16 different countries; and next spring MoMA will unveil a major show devoted to the development of [architecture in Latin America from 1955 to 1980](#).



Federico Herrero, *Pan de azucar*, 2014, acrylic, oil, spray paint, and felt-tip pen on canvas. SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK, GUGGENHEIM UBS MAP PURCHASE FUND COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHOTO: ISAAC MARTINEZ.

[Barry Bergdoll](#), who is curating MoMA’s architecture survey, believes it’s a show that is long overdue. “We’re incredibly ignorant of it, yet it’s an incredibly rich period,” he says. “There are names that should be up there with [Mies van der Rohe](#).” More significantly, Bergdoll aims to

demonstrate the ways in which Latin American architects were innovative and influential. “We have this notion in the north that ideas are generated here and that they then trickle down. That is simply not true.” As an example, Bergdoll points to Argentine architect [Clorindo Testa](#)’s radical, mechanical-looking exterior design for the Banco de Londres y América del Sur in Buenos Aires. “People look at it and might say that you can see the influences of the Centre Pompidou in Paris,” he explains. “Well, they’re wrong. Testa came first.” (Banco de Londres was built in 1960; the Centre Pompidou didn’t arrive until the 1970s.)

This cluster of exhibitions on both coasts represents a bit of a departure from how many major U.S. museums generally treat the subject of art and design by Latin American and U.S. Latino artists. (I am referring specifically to work produced from the 20th century through the present.) An examination of museums’ online archives shows that while artists of Latin American origin are frequently included in group shows (such as biennials) and do receive solo exhibitions—most often in project spaces—profoundly researched, years-in-the-making surveys and retrospectives that might put their work in a larger social, political, or artistic context tend to be a rarity.

Case in point: over the last ten years, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles has had half a dozen solo exhibitions for various artists (from Brazilian [Ernesto Neto](#) to Mexican Damián Ortega), but it has held only one survey that dealt with Latin American themes. That was “[Poetics of the Handmade](#),” in 2007, which examined issues of craft. During this period, only one artist of U.S. Latino origin has gotten a solo show at MOCA: graffiti artist RETNA, who is half Salvadorean, [painted two murals at the museum in 2013](#).

Some institutions have done more. In addition to the Figueroa retrospective, LACMA has organized a couple of important surveys: one on [women Surrealists working in the U.S. and Mexico](#), the other on [art produced after the Chicano movement](#). Likewise, in the last decade, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago has organized broad surveys on [contemporary art in Mexico City](#) and on the [Brazilian cultural movement Tropicalía](#). Both museums have also held numerous smaller solo exhibitions featuring artists of Latin American origin.



Gabriel Figueroa, still from *María Candelaria*, directed by Emilio “El Indio” Fernández, 1943.
©GABRIEL FIGUEROA FLORES ARCHIVE.

It's in New York, the center of the U.S. art world, where the topic of Latin American art seems to have been most overlooked. In the last decade, the New Museum has had only one solo installation by a Latin American artist ([Carlos Motta's "Museum as Hub" piece in 2012](#)). Over the last eight years, the Whitney Museum has had no surveys that deal with Latino themes and has done only one solo exhibition featuring an artist of Latin American origin . . . sort of. That'd be the 2007 Gordon Matta-Clark exhibition, "[You Are the Measure](#)." (The artist's father was born in Chile.) Even MoMA, home to the current Lygia Clark retrospective, is spotty. Most of its Latin American shows consist of solo exhibitions and installations. In the last decade, the only synthetic exhibitions tied to Latin American art have consisted of works drawn from the collection—such as the small survey of [Latin American abstraction shown in 2007](#).



Lygia Clark, *Planos em superfície modulada no. 2, versão 01* (Planes in modulated surface no. 2, version 1), ca. 1957, industrial paint on wood.
LUIZ PAULO MONTENEGRO COLLECTION. PHOTO: EURIDES LULA RODRIGUES CARDOSO, COURTESY ASSOCIAÇÃO CULTURAL "O MUNDO DE LYGIA CLARK," RIO DE JANEIRO.

Certainly, part of the reason big survey shows aren't more common is because they can be difficult to organize. For his architecture show, Bergdoll says he combed the continent in search of original material. "We have to do fundamental research to invent the topic," he says. "It's been a hunt: going to architects' offices, libraries, foundations. It's not like you can just pluck all of this information out of a book." Bronx Museum executive director [Holly Block](#), who cocurated "Beyond the Supersquare," echoes the sentiment. "This show really came out of us making many studio visits and noticing that there was work being made that dealt with Modernism—some of it critical, some of it quite complimentary." (For the record, the Bronx Museum has a strong record showing Latin American and U.S. Latino artists.)

This may be the moment that marks a shift away from Latin America's consistent underrepresentation. Curator [Cecilia Fajardo-Hill](#) is organizing one of the more prominent "Pacific Standard Time: L.A./L.A." shows for 2017. It's called "[The Political Body: Radical Women in Latin American Art 1960–1985](#)" and will be shown at [UCLA's Hammer Museum](#).

Fajardo-Hill notes that the field of Latin American studies has grown exponentially in recent decades. “What’s happening with the Getty, that is a result of what’s been happening academically over the last 20-something years,” she says. “It’s the U.S. recognizing the incredible relevance of Latin America and Latino culture on our continent.”



Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*, 1972, 35mm color slide. This work will be included in the Hammer Museum’s upcoming show “The Political Body: Radical Women in Latin American Art 1960–1985.”

COURTESY GALERIE LELONG, NEW YORK. ©THE ESTATE OF ANA MENDIETA COLLECTION, L.L.C.

Fajardo-Hill’s show will add to the scholarship. “Political Body” will examine conceptual works by women artists from 12 countries during a highly tumultuous period. It’s the type of exhibition that has never been done—not in the U.S. or Latin America. “Latin American art is such a large field and it is so underrepresented and misrepresented—where it’s all about the tropical or the indigenous,” she explains. “When I think of the women that will be featured in our show, there’s this level of experimentation, originality, resilience, and innovation that subvert all the stereotypical ideas about Latin American art and women’s art.” She adds, “These are great artists who have been excluded from the dialogue of contemporary art. We need to include them.”

That is the purpose of the many Getty-funded shows that will debut in 2017. LACMA will explore work by contemporary Latin American artists. [The Chicano Studies Research Center](#) at UCLA will look at Latino artists working from the 1950s to the present. The University of California, Riverside, will delve into Latin American sci-fi. [The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego](#) will pour through the work of artists who have operated outside of institutional spaces. And the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A. will do a comprehensive survey of Latin American abstraction covering a span of half a century. All of these together will paint a more complete picture of Latin American history and influence. “Our hope is that this isn’t a one-off,” says Cuno. “This isn’t the end of the story—it’s just the beginning.”

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