

HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

Latin-American artists explore themes of belonging and displacement in a tour-de-force show in Los Angeles.



By Peter Schjeldahl



“Home—So Different, So Appealing” is a big, keen show, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, of works made since 1957 by forty-two mostly topnotch Latino and Latin-American artists, spanning styles from Pop to Conceptual. It tells many stories and is a story in itself. The Getty Foundation contributed funds for it, as part of a push, called “Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA,” to highlight Latino and Latin-American art in and for Southern California. The worthiness of the aim—politic, if not political—is one thing, boding more rectitude than rapture. But another is the tour de force that the show’s curators have brought off by putting multifarious works—paintings, sculpture, photographs, videos, installations—in orbit around a primordial idea: home, where you hang your hat, if you have one, and where the heart is or, for some grim reason, fails to be. The theme befits impressions of place—half a dozen Latin-American countries and, in the United States, various sites of diaspora, chiefly from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba—and facts of displacement: the immigrant kind, so troublous today, and the optional kind that we term “cosmopolitan.” Willful modernity has always amounted to finding, or inventing, a home in nomadic rootlessness. Museums symbolize that vaporous destination.



“Maria Waiting for Her Check” (2013), by Ramiro Gomez. Ramiro Gomez / Courtesy Charlie James Gallery

The show’s title borrows from “Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?” (1956), a collage by the English artist Richard Hamilton, deemed by some historians to be the first iconic instance of Pop art. The work pictures a bodybuilder wielding a giant Tootsie Pop in a living room packed with flashy consumer goods. It is sarcastic, in a word, about postwar U.S. culture—unlike U.S. Pop art, which tilts toward the celebratory. The LACMA curators have picked up on Hamilton’s pique by starting with a piece by the Colombian Miguel Ángel Rojas which spells out Hamilton’s title on a wall with little disks punched out of coca leaves. This is pretty heavy-handed—cocaine and its depredations being major U.S. imports from south of our borders, see. Beating up on “the American Dream,” which is now ebbing everywhere, lacks the frisson that it once had. But the sally proves to be only one bass note in the show’s concerto. Another artist, Miguel Ángel Ríos, who was born in Argentina, attains a pitch even more dire, but less aloof, in his video “The Ghost of Modernity (Lixiviados)” (2012). Shacks made of wood and rusty corrugated metal fall from the sky, banging down onto barren landfill soil. Vultures flap loudly overhead. A large, pristine plexiglass cube appears to drift, a few feet off the ground, among the shacks: the titular ghost, plainly, which haunts the world’s innumerable shantytowns with utopian longings but can do nothing to relieve their squalor. The video’s elegance graces without softening its adamant despair.

Even upbeat works in the show may scald a bit. “Polyptych of Buenos Aires” (2014/16), by a pair of artists (Juliana Laffitte and Miguel Mendanha) who go by the name Mondongo, re-creates at full size the stupendous “Ghent Altarpiece” (1432) of Hubert and Jan van Eyck but substitutes vigorously painted scenes of an impoverished neighborhood in the Argentine capital for the sacred figures of the Northern Renaissance touchstone. You are invited to walk on an outdoor piece, set in a lawn, by the Cuban-American Maria Elena González, “Magic Carpet/Home” (2003/17)—a black, undulating rubber surface that resembles asphalt and has the floor plan of a public-housing apartment painted on it. The superimposition of those cramped quarters on a structure that’s fun, amid a setting of grassy luxuriance and architectural splendor, is laconically unsettling. Also conflating the humbly domestic and the grandly public is the Puerto Rico-based team of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. In their video, “Under Discussion” (2005), a man is seen cruising around the island of Vieques, which served as a bombing range for the U.S. Navy until protests put an end to that function in 2003. His craft is an upside-down dining-room table.



“47,547 Homes,” by Livia Corona Benjamin, from 2000. Courtesy the artist and Parque Galeria

“Home” is a type of contemporary show that dates to 1993 and the game-changing Whitney Biennial of that year, in New York: an aggressive celebration of multiculturalism and identity politics in work that was long on installational spectacle and short on traditional mediums. At the time, I deprecated the event for politicizing aesthetics. Now I see that it had to happen, for urgent social reasons, and that it energized a then pepleless art world. The Los Angeles artist Daniel Joseph Martinez was a chief provocateur in the Biennial, producing buttons, which were handed out to visitors, that read “I can’t imagine ever wanting to be white.” (Incendiary then, the jape seems fairly mild in today’s crossfire of sulfurous political incitements.) Martinez is back at LACMA, unbowed, with the oddly titled “the west bank is missing: i am not dead, am i”: two huge, wheel-shaped aluminum structures, each with eleven facets that frame, in vacuum-formed plastic relief, contours of plans for Israeli West Bank settlement homes and for houses in Irvine, California. What is Martinez saying with these things—and is it troll bait? At any rate, they’re handsome.

“Badge of Honor” (1994), a dazzling installation by the Puerto Rico-born Philadelphian Pepón Osorio, might have been a standout in the 1993 Biennial, had it been made a year earlier. Thirty-eight feet wide by twelve feet high and deep, the work pairs the glamorous fantasia of a teen-age boy’s bedroom with a stark prison cell. In facing video projections—separated by a wall—a young man conducts a strained conversation with his father, who has been jailed for an unspecified crime. (Osorio had met youths in Newark for whom having a father behind bars was a “badge of honor.”) Again, as with Angel Ríos’s “The Ghost of Modernity (Lixiviados),” hopelessness is given a baroque and even an antic spin. The ambivalent effect points up an irony endemic to museum presentations of politically refractory art: whatever discontent the artists express is cushioned by their inclusion in—say it—élite institutional culture. This takes nothing away from anyone’s sincerity, but it seems worth noting at a moment when, in the United States and elsewhere, the most potent form of political insurgency is populism.

Central to the show’s concept is a famous work by the late New Yorker Gordon Matta-Clark, a son of the Chilean painter Roberto Matta: “Splitting” (1974), the documented sawing in half, from top to bottom, of a banal two-story house in New Jersey. The act is metaphorically rich to an almost absurd degree, resonant with domestic disasters that include abandonment and divorce. Thematically less apt but exceptionally moving is one of the Cuban-American Félix González-Torres’s installations of electrical cords studded with fifteen-watt light bulbs, made in the nineties. Why do those works often all but bring tears to my eyes? Apart from their beauty, it is likely their frequent association with the dimmed fates and wan hopes of the victims of the AIDS epidemic—which took his life, in 1996, at the age of thirty-eight. At LACMA, hundreds of bulbs glow along twelve cords that hang from the ceiling and bunch up on the floor.

The show’s youngest artist, Ramiro Gomez, is also among the most affecting. Born in California in 1986, to Mexican undocumented-immigrant parents who have since become U.S. citizens, Gomez worked for a time as a live-in nanny in West Hollywood. The experience may explain not only the subject matter but also the persuasiveness of his eleven small pictures, all from 2013, which feature images of Latino domestic servants in posh homes. At first glance, the works suggest photographs, but they are actually delicate acrylic paintings on pages taken from upscale shelter magazines. Fiction blended with fact generates truths of life as it is lived and felt—or, perhaps, numbly not felt—by so many who labor in the penumbra of wealth. Gomez commands a Vermeer-esque, held-breath aura of transfigured ordinariness. He brings “Home” into alignment with a social order in which fissures of class, becoming chasms, begin to seem normal. ♦

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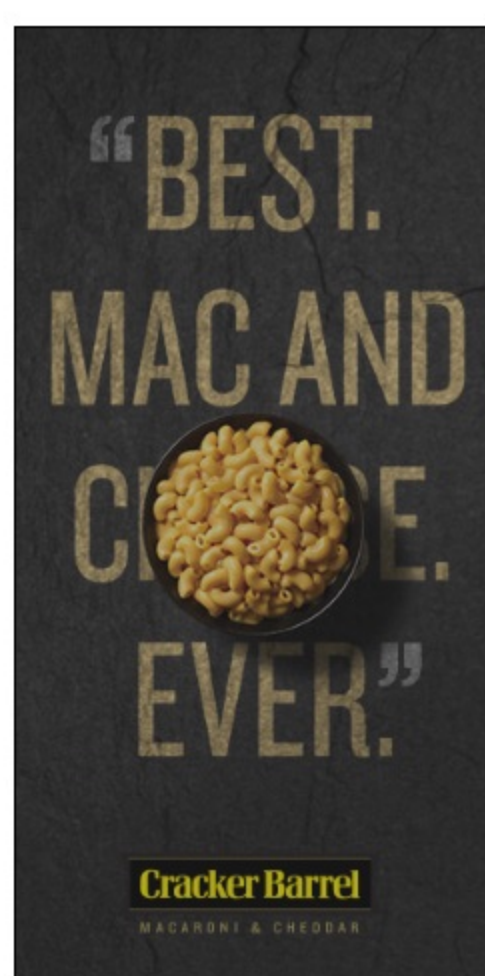
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