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Thank you PAMM!

By Karen-Janine Cohen

Miami's newest museum is an architectural tour de force and is earning raves for how art from across the Americas is curated.

Consider the serape. That's what artist Adrian Esparza did. He scrutinized it from every angle. He cut it up. He rearranged it. Finally, he unraveled it, using its threads to create a wall-size design, titled *Wake and Wonder*, commissioned for the December opening of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, or PAMM.

In the process, the El Paso-raised artist explored his place in contemporary culture. He also told a new story through a familiar object.

"I slowly started to destroy it, using strings to make geometric forms," Esparza says in a video made for PAMM. The work speaks of "a cultural symbol being evaluated, transformed, deconstructed."

Esparza's piece is part of a six-gallery installation titled *AMERICANA*, one of PAMM's central opening exhibits. It brings together paintings, sculptures and installations by North, South, Central American and Caribbean artists from the mid-to-late 20th century through today. It highlights contemporary themes artists continue to explore, including identity, consumerism, craft, political violence and landscape.

"The program we are developing is trying to be responsive to...what makes Miami a unique place in the world, but then, looking at the larger questions Miami raises and how those questions dialogue with questions being asked in other parts of the world," explains Tobias Ostrander, PAMM's chief curator, who organized *AMERICANA*.

As its title suggests, *AMERICANA* invites viewers to consider how art from the United States, Mexico, Argentina, the Caribbean and beyond unite the hemisphere. Miami is the perfect place for them all to meet, says Ostrander. "I'm thinking about Miami as the cultural crossroads of north and south literally," he says.

And the thematic approach gave him the freedom to mix art from different time periods and mediums in service to larger ideas.

For example, in a gallery devoted to landscapes, a 1982 Fernando Botero painting, *El patio*—a sensual tropical Colombia courtyard—is shown with a piece by U.S. contemporary painter Lisa Yuskavage with her trademark provocative/innocent women.

Leandro Katz pairs photos of Yucatan ruins with 19th century counterparts in a piece that evokes colonialism and changing viewpoints over time. Mark Dion's *The South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit: Mobile Laboratory*, from 2006, which includes a yellow truck of a fictional animal welfare group, brings it all back to South Florida.

"Here we are [exploring] how the landscape has been used to talk about various desires—to control nature, and sexual desire," Ostrander says of the gallery.

Viewers may be more used to museum exhibits that organize shows by eras, Renaissance painting for example; school—think Abstract Expressionism—or regions, such as Cuba or the American Southwest.

Yet what works so well at PAMM is how Latin American art and art by those of Hispanic and Latino backgrounds are treated in a central yet inclusive manner. It's an approach being watched closely by other curators and museums. Art "should be about the ideas the works generate and shouldn't be beholden to a geographic location," Ostrander says. "Again, it depends on the context you are placing the work in. Miami [partakes of] Latin America and the U.S. at the same time."

Delightful Debut

PAMM's opening was timed to coincide with Art Week Miami, when collectors, artists and media descend on the city for Art Basel, satellite fairs and over-the-top parties. Visitors from around the world swooned at the Herzog & de Meuron structure, with its pergola-like overhangs. The architects got Miami exactly right, with open spaces evoking South Florida's inside-outside feel.

The opening exhibits thrilled as well. An Ai Weiwei survey, along with selections from Ruth and Marvin Sackner's works of "Concrete and Visual Poetry," shouldn't be missed. Visitors should also devote an hour or so to the works of Amelia Peláez del Casal, a Cuban painter who died in 1968.

Still, no new museum in recent history has fielded the coverage of PAMM. Miami's original art museum grew out of the Center for Fine Arts and only began collecting in 1996 when it was christened MAM. Backers of the idea to expand from the original Flagler Street location argued the city was tardy in undertaking a signature museum that would celebrate Miami's coming of age. In 2004, Miami-Dade County approved a bond that earmarked \$100 million to help fund a new structure. Former MAM director Terrence Riley, hired in 2006, helped snag Herzog & de Meuron but left in late 2009, telling the Miami Herald his one regret was that he wasn't able to get some of the city's marquee art collectors on board.

The board soon hired Thomas Collins, former director of the Neuberger Museum of Art at State University of New York at Purchase to take the top job. Ostrander was recruited in the summer of 2011, after serving as director of El Museo Experimental del ECO and previously, as curator of contemporary art at Mexico City's Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo.

Ground was broke December 2010 on the museum, named for real estate developer and Miami philanthropist Jorge Pérez, in consideration of his \$40 million gift in cash and art, announced in 2011.

That decision didn't sit easily with everyone. Several museum board members resigned, some in the arts community criticized the move saying the gift was too small to deserve naming rights—wouldn't a wing be enough? There was hand-wringing by those who said the move would discourage other donors—it hasn't. As of the opening, private donations topped \$94 million, which included a \$15 million anonymous donation and donations from Miami developer

Craig Robins, among others.

Some critics also worried that works in the Pérez collection might fall short of the artists' best works.

They need not have feared. Now, exquisite Wifredo Lam and Roberto Matta works share space with Carolee Schneemann, Rashid Johnson and José Bedia in the AMERICANA gallery titled Sources of the Self—a stellar example of how the museum is pairing Latin American art with U.S. artists—Latino and otherwise.

"We have to think about what are the ideas the art is expressing and start placing those in conversation," Ostrander says. "Cultural context and geography affects artists' work but they shouldn't be the limiting or defining reason you are presenting."

For years, he says, the conversation "has been about validating Latin American Art as [being] as good as European or North American." That work has been done, he says and now it's "more about placing work together that is Latin American and not Latin American based on the ideas or concepts they are talking about. That is what we are trying to do here."

The approach is also enthusiastically endorsed by Pérez. "I'm thrilled with the curatorial vision that Thom and Tobias showed by incorporating the donated works into the Americana galleries, giving them a new and deeper context amongst the other great pieces in each thematic space," he writes in an email. "Their direction will undoubtedly produce incredible exhibitions for PAMM, combining new and donated works."

Another Perspective

A few miles west of the museum, Carol Damian, director and chief curator of the Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum at Florida International University, is cheering on Ostrander's approach. "I've been teaching the art of Latin America for 20 years and I'm always defending the fact that there is no Latin American art," she says. "You can't possibly compare what is happening in Mexico with what is happening in Peru and what is happening in Venezuela."

Still, she says, organizing exhibits that showcase artists from one or more Latin American countries is how to reach mainstream notice in the first place. The same argument has been made when showing women artists, she says, though critics claimed such shows ghettoize women, "but that is what you need to do to put them in the mainstream."

Still, she says, there is no question that patrons are increasingly interested in the art of Latin America and it is time to think about it more organically.

For years, says Damian, she has encouraged students and museum visitors to "look at work thematically, not geographically." Meanwhile, she shares with Ostrander a determination to shake off outdated ideas, such as Latin American art depends entirely on the fantastic and is derivative of European art movements. Indeed, South American artists, such as Uruguay's Joaquín Torres García (who has a piece in AMERICANA) influenced their continental counterparts.

And consideration of contemporary artists such as Argentine-born Guillermo Kuitca left regional identities behind long ago. "This idea of transcending the border and being recognized and included in international and global work is really inspiring," Damian says.

In a nice coincidence, visitors to Miami in the spring will get a chance to see for themselves two different approaches to art with ties to Latin America.

In late March, the Frost welcomes Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art. The works focus on Latino artists from the 60s, 70s and beyond and how their work influenced U.S. art movements. The pieces are drawn from the Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection. It debuted in Washington and will also travel to Sacramento, Calif., Salt Lake City, Little Rock, Ark., and Wilmington, Del.

Our America was organized by E. Carmen Ramos who joined the Smithsonian art museum staff as curator of Latino art in October 2010. She says she chose the exhibit's title to highlight the idea of ownership, and situate Latino art in the larger U.S. art culture.

Ramos notes that there is meaning in the show originating at the Smithsonian, "known for being the repository of our cultural patrimony as a nation."

She explains in a phone interview that she organized the exhibit to challenge "the notion of what America is, in the context of this institution that represents the hallowed ideas of our culture and history."

The show rests on two related ideas: that "Latino art has participated in movements in American art and recalibrated key themes in American art and culture."

One example she cites is Jesse Treviño. His painting titled Mis Hermanos, in the show, uses photo realism to raise questions about who fits the concept of the typical American.

"He turns to what might be called street portraiture," Ramos says, noting Treviño was using a genre movement to represent Latinos "in a way Latino life was not represented in American culture."

Yet Ramos also agrees with FIU's Damian and Ostrander, that it's also time that Latino and Latin American art find a home in larger contexts.

"I don't believe in either-ors," she says. "You have to have both." Still, she says, a history often must be told in isolation before it can be integrated. "I think that is an aspect of this debate that gets lost...There is [still] a lot of criticism around culturally specific exhibits."

Indeed, Our America ignited controversy after Washington Post art and architecture critic Philip Kennicott raised questions about whether it is now possible to organize a show dedicated to an ethnic or minority group, noting that 50 million-plus Americans of Hispanic heritage come from a variety of cultures. "Latino art, today, is a meaningless category," he wrote, while also noting a more focused program with a narrower parameters, such as Nuyorican art movements might in his eyes be more successful.

Such thoughts sting, because, say Ramos and others, they seem to miss the point that shows like Our America highlight otherwise neglected artists.

"It is frustrating," she says, because "the goal is to explore a history that is little known, and in the future the history of American art, or contemporary art can be told in a more complete way."

Art By The Numbers

Chon Noriega is the director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center. He developed numerous arts projects, including L.A. Xicano: five exhibitions focused on the post-1945 contributions of artists of Mexican descent.

It was part of the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time initiative, an ambitious project involving scores of museums and other institutions showcasing the overall history of the Los Angeles art scene.

Speaking from Los Angeles, Noriega says he is not surprised by the criticism of Ramos' show, or the concerns about how PAMM would display its Latin American or Latino art. "I think it is a bit disingenuous," he says. "It only gets raised in instances like this."

It's still necessary to give space to artists who deserve wider attention. "Latino is a functional category trying to account for a part of the population that has reasons to be looked at for other [reasons] than the exclusion that happens to them."

Still, both he and Ramos point out that exhibitions of Latin American art and Latino art is changing as U.S. demographics change.

More universities are funding Latino studies programs and, notes Ramos, museums are increasingly creating curatorial positions in Latino and Latin American art.

Back at PAMM, Ostrander also works with the knowledge that Hispanics over time are likely to become a larger share of museum patrons.

"You see more museums paying attention to Latin American culture and history as a way of building an audience," he says. "The models we create here in Miami are models for the rest of the country."

Some people, he says, were nervous that PAMM would become a museum overly focused on Latin American art. "From my point of view that would be very boring—and I come from a strong Latin American background. It's much more fascinating looking across cultures, or for common ground, or what are the ideas that are shared or provoked. It's more interesting for me to put a Latin American artist next to a Chinese artist and start creating those dialogues. That is how we live now."