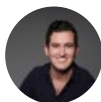


The ARTnews Accord: Curators Rita Gonzalez and Mari Carmen Ramirez Talk Supporting Latin American and Latinx Art



BY [MAXIMILIANO DURÓN](#)

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Rita Gonzalez and Mari Carmen Ramirez. ILLUSTRATIONS BY SCOTT CHAMBERS FOR ARTNEWS

Rita Gonzalez is the head of contemporary art at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#). She joined the museum in 2004 and has curated influential exhibitions there, including “Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement” (in 2008), “Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987” (2011), and “A Universal History of Infamy” (2017). She has also made important acquisitions of Latinx art for the museum’s permanent collection, including pieces by Laura Aguilar and rafa esparza.

Mari Carmen Ramirez is a curator of Latin American art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and director of the museum’s research arm, the International Center for the Arts of the Americas. She was hired in 2001 to build the museum’s Latin American art department and has grown its collection to 800 works, including key pieces by Lygia Clark, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Gego, Hélio Oiticica, Joaquín Torres-García, and Cildo Meireles, as well as Luis Jiménez, Daniel Joseph Martínez, and Teresa Margolles. Among the important exhibitions she has co-curated are “Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America” (2004) and “Hom—So Different, So Appealing” (2017).

Gonzalez and Ramirez joined *ARTnews* in October for a videoconference to discuss issues facing museum curators during the pandemic, the new buildings at their institutions, and the importance of Latin American and Latinx art.



Rendering of LACMA's forthcoming Geffen Galleries building, designed by Peter Zumthor. COURTESY ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR & PARTNER/THE BOUNDARY

ARTnews: The coronavirus pandemic has forced museums to connect with their audiences and community digitally, in ways never seen before. As curators, has this digital global reach impacted or changed the way in which you think about building or installing an exhibition?

Rita Gonzalez: I don't think that has changed the way I think or work, but it has impacted our travel and what we are exposed to. In the past, we would be on the road much more, looking at biennials and artist studios, taking groups to different places, and also getting to see domestically what our sister [and] brother institutions are doing, so I imagine I would have been in Houston to see the opening of the MFA's new building, and now I'm not. That impacts what I'm seeing and what I'm thinking for the future, and it's been stifling, I have to say. There is only so much you can keep up on in the virtual world. I mean, it's great to see images of the galleries online but it's not the same, and the kinds of conversations that we would have had if I'd gone to Houston or New York aren't the same, and that affects the research and the trajectory of exhibitions. But I will say that because of Covid, in terms of an economic turnaround, it's going to take years, and in that time, I think we are all being pushed to reassess the permanent collection. We are going to go really deep into our institutional histories, really deep into the kind of conversations we can have with our collections. We hope to go deep into acquisitions and really assess the gaps that need to be filled.

Mari Carmen Ramirez: This situation has really circumscribed us to the screen and to digital studio visits, but it is still not the same thing as being in front of the work or visiting in person. So that is certainly a limitation. In the field that I work in, Latin American art, I worry about the implications. We are suffering here in the United States, but the countries in Latin America are going to suffer even more and are already suffering. The possibility of building partnerships or continuing and consolidating partnerships with institutions down there is going to be impacted.

[And the same with] the possibility of doing large-scale exhibitions like “Inverted Utopias” or any of these big exhibitions that have been critical for our fields, because they involve assembling works that have never been seen in the United States before that come from many different lenders, collections, and institutions from many different countries. We will have to wait and see, but I think that one of the effects of this is going to be forcing our institutions to focus more on the local. I think we are both at institutions that like to think of themselves as global institutions, and we spend a lot of time looking to expand our purview and to bring artists from far-flung places to show in L.A. or Houston, but I think that this situation is also going to force us to look at local artists, and to reinvent the relationships of art museums to our local communities, be they Latinx, African American, Asian, or Muslim.



In November, the MFA Houston opened its newest space, the Kinder building, as seen in an aerial view. ©RICHARD BARNES/COURTESY THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

ARTnews: Both of your institutions have major building projects in the works. At the MFA Houston, the new Kinder building will see Latin American and Latinx art get its first dedicated, permanent collection galleries. Mari Carmen, how does this building signal to the public what will be the future of the museum?

Ramirez: The collections of design and craft, photography, prints and drawings, and Latin American and Latinx art are the fastest-growing aspect of the museum. In 2003 we received a huge bequest from Caroline Wiess Law, who was one of our major patrons, and that translated into a very hefty acquisitions fund for 20th-century and 21st-century art, so the collection has been growing exponentially since then. But we have never had permanent galleries for these categories. We have been forced to show our collections on a rotating basis, basically treat them as temporary exhibitions. The new building is going to provide a space for these collections. For me, this represents the culmination of the project of building the museum’s collection of Latin American and Latinx art. I know LACMA has had in the past galleries dedicated to Latin American and Latinx art but there are really very few museums in the United States that have that kind of dedicated space.

Gonzalez: Houston and Los Angeles are really kindred spirits in so many ways. In Los Angeles you have the emergence of an encyclopedic museum in the mid-20th century—it’s a latecomer in terms of the United States’ history of general museums. So there’s a parallel between its history and the development of artistic communities in Los Angeles. Things have really shifted, especially in the last five years, in terms of how departments are losing that sense of these little fiefdoms. The ways in which we can work together across departments and collections have really expanded. That is going to be a part of what drives how we’ll work together for the Zumthor building, or the Geffen Galleries, as they’re called. We already have over 200 proposals that we’ve worked on together, so it’s going to be a process of going through all of these. The space is one floor, so it’s about a lateral version of art history, not entering through one particular vantage point but through this notion of multiple trajectories and parallel tracks. I am optimistic about the richness and complexity. I think you will see both a continuity of certain traditions and an opportunity to innovate and put things in proximity that probably would not have been in proximity before. The Zumthor building wasn’t made with only modern and contemporary art in mind. It will encompass the vastness of the collections, so the role of the contemporary will be intermittent, woven throughout. Those first few years of establishing the Geffen Galleries is going to be very heavy on the collection, especially leading up to the 2028 Olympics.

Ramirez: One aspect that I want to underscore about the art world here in the United States is the sense that everything that happens in the art world is basically about New York and not about other places. I think that has given major museums like LACMA and Houston a certain latitude and flexibility to really focus on other collecting areas. One of the things that we realized when we started making presentations for the Kinder building was that photography, prints and drawings, Latin American art, and 20th-century design and craft were areas that really came into their own in the 1970s. These did not exist as collecting areas, so it says something about the institution that [it] focused on areas that still had possibilities of development in terms of making very large, important accessions. As Rita said, these are young institutions in comparison to other encyclopedic museums in the States. When I started, the museum’s identity was still not fully defined, so Latin American art could bring something special to that identity. The fact that we’ve been able to build such an ambitious collection in such a short time speaks to that ambition to really place the museum in a strategic position of leadership.

ARTnews: How will the collection be displayed in the Kinder building? What are you most excited about displaying there?

Ramirez: It’s been a very long process and it was at times very difficult to navigate between doing something that was, from a curatorial point of view, very innovative, but at the same time, revealing, giving people a sense of what we’ve collected and how we collected it because they had seen only different fragments of it. The solution was to have a building with three floors: on the second floor we have dedicated galleries by department, and on the first and third floors we have thematic shows as well as a series of commissions that were done especially for the building. On the second floor, I decided to focus the whole presentation on constructivism in Latin America, which encompasses the Lerner collection, a significant part of which is being shown, and also work we have collected by Joaquín Torres-García and the School of the South.



LACMA’s planned Geffen Galleries building will have one level to show its holdings from various departments together, where varied art-historical periods and styles are sure to bump up against each other. COURTESY ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR & PARTNER/THE BOUNDARY

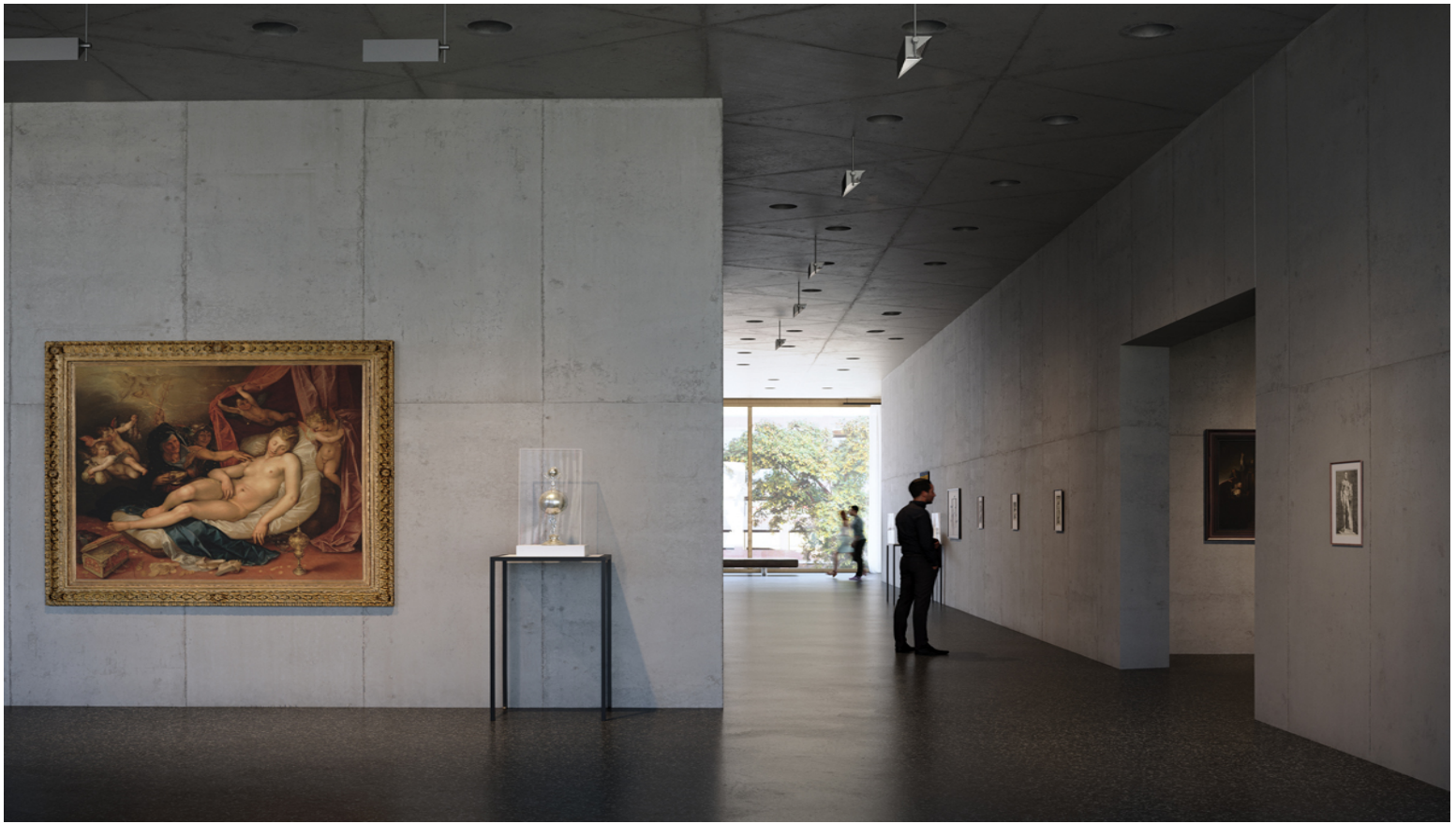


The MFA Houston’s new dedicated galleries for the Latin American art department in the Kinder Building. ©RICHARD BARNES/COURTESY THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

On the third floor we have a gallery where Gego is the leading artist. I presented to my colleagues 30 works by Gego, and they responded with works from their collections that dialogue with Gego. It’s a beautiful gallery that has everything from jewelry to furniture to work by Ruth Asawa [and] Josef Albers. Then we have another gallery about color and light, where artists like Carlos Cruz-Diez and Hélio Oiticica have leading roles in dialoguing with Albers, Hans Hofmann, and Kenneth Noland. We are showing the strengths of the collection and the strengths of some very important historic movements in Latin America, but at the same time, we’re placing Latin American and Latinx artists in dialogue with European and American artists. I think that that’s also something that we can do here in Houston that perhaps other museums cannot really do as easily or with the same flexibility.

Gonzalez: You cannot overemphasize how truly significant and groundbreaking it will be to have that, because for so many years, Mari Carmen, you had to face this notion that Latin American art was “derivative of” or “secondary to.” So, to have the primacy of Gego in that space and then have that constellation sort of emanating from Gego is going to be really marvelous, but also so significant to the museological space and to art history. I can’t wait to see it.

Ramirez: You also have decorative arts and design, which are also areas that have never really been considered on the same plane as painting and sculpture. In everything we have been doing for the Kinder building, particularly the third floor, they are completely integrated. It was a very hard push to have this kind of interdisciplinary integration.



LACMA's planned Geffen Galleries building will have one level to show its holdings from various departments together, where varied art-historical periods and styles are sure to bump up against each other. COURTESY ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR & PARTNER/THE BOUNDARY

ARTnews: Rita, that interdisciplinary integration seems to be the goal of the Geffen Galleries when the Zumthor building opens, correct?

Gonzalez: The proposals are still in development but there will be, I think, as Mari Carmen described, some consistent units in terms of the strengths of LACMA, like the art of ancient Americas or a focused space on the colonial Latin American collection that [curator of Latin American art] Ilona Katzew has been building. There will be things that are quite concrete that will be expected as showcases of the collections, but the course visitors take in terms of the architecture and the layout of the building will provide these collisions or adjacencies that we wouldn't have had in the days of a Beaux-Arts building with different wings. Now, you'll have these parallel and contingent presentations.

Ramirez: It sounds like that building will give you the flexibility for those kinds of intersections between older art and modern and contemporary art. In our case, we'll still be divided by the buildings, so we're not trying to mix Old Masters with modern and contemporary, but I think it should also be on the table because those are the ways of reenvisioning all these narratives.

ARTnews: You have both been instrumental in expanding your museums' collections through acquisitions. What has been your approach regarding what to add, which gaps to fill, where to go deeper?

Ramirez: In my case, I was invited to establish the Latin American department in 2001, so, at that point, we were starting completely from scratch. The museum had throughout the years acquired works of Latin American art, but without any kind of systematic effort to build the collection. There is significant representation of Latin American photographers in the collection, because Ann Tucker, who was our maverick curator of photography for almost 30 years, traveled in Latin America and bought a number of photographs. In terms of everything else, this was an overwhelming task in many ways, trying to build a collection, because you have over 20 countries as well as the

Latino population.

The criteria that I established at the time was to collect art that was pushing the limits, that was in the avant-garde tradition, and to focus on paradigmatic works that would tell that story. My approach has been to have exhibitions serve as a matrix for building the collection, like with “Inverted Utopias.” One of the things that was interesting about “Inverted Utopias” is that we presented so much art that was really important, but had no market here in the United States. We were able to acquire a lot of those works because we were ahead of the curve, and the prices were really amazing. We bet on artists that have no market here in the United States, but because we have a research center, the International Center for the Arts of the Americas, we knew that these artists were really important in their countries and for the development of Latin American art or sometimes even modernism in general.



Carlos Cruz-Diez's *Cromosaturación MFAH* (Paris 1965/Houston 2017) in the MFA Houston's new Kinder building. PHOTO THOMAS DUBROCK/COURTESY THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON.

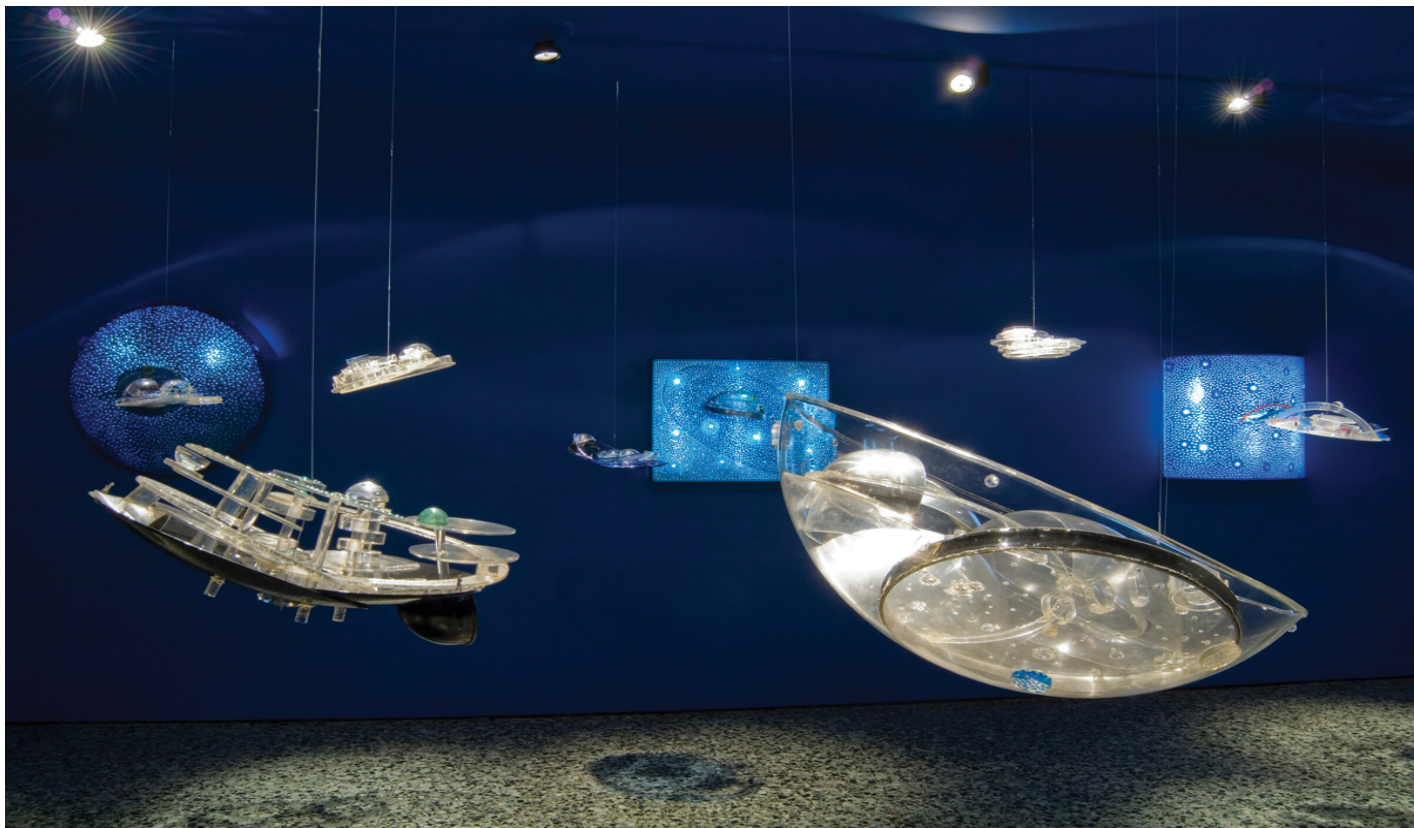
Gonzalez: This is the sort of double duty that Mari Carmen has had to do and that we've tried to do too: you have to make the case to the donors, to the public, before you even get to the possibility of an acquisition. You have to do the years of research and the presentation, the scholarly publication, because you have to establish that importance. At LACMA, acquisitions have come after important scholarly exhibitions. Before I was here, “The Road to Aztlan” was a groundbreaking exhibition that Virginia Fields and Victor Zamudio-Taylor did to establish an argument about transhistoricity, about the importance of indigeneity for the Chicano Art Movement, and to look at the links between contemporary Mexican art and Latinx art. That was established in their argumentation, and after that we were slowly able to acquire works. Or Lynn Zelevansky's “Beyond Geometry,” where she was able to slowly bring in works by Cildo Meireles and Hélio Oiticica and others to globalize the history of conceptual art. With “Phantom Sightings,” we laid the groundwork for a generation of Chicano artists that emerged in the '80s and '90s, and then we were able to acquire a lot. And then both PSTs [Pacific Standard Time exhibition initiatives] funded so much new scholarship, to be able to represent the diversity of the history of art-making in Los Angeles. We have had to, little by little, take advantage of these exhibitions and other collector events to educate the collectors to be able to support these acquisitions, because these are often outside the canon.

Ramirez: Exhibitions in our area of Latin American and Latinx art have been fundamental. That's one of the reasons why I was expressing earlier my concern about our ability to continue to do exhibitions like this for the next few years, because these are fields that don't have a market here, don't have a collecting base; we're the institutions that are introducing these new values, and we are doing it through exhibitions and carefully researched catalogues that establish a market for these artists. This is a fundamental role that institutions like LACMA and the MFAH play.

ARTnews: Both of your curatorial work has placed Latin American and Latinx artists in conversation and dialogue. Recently, there has been criticism regarding this. Can you talk about your approach to this and why it makes sense for the work you do?

Ramirez: Right now, Latin American art and Latinx art are seen as separate fields, and there are vociferous proponents of keeping it that way. I am not one of them. Since we began this program here in Houston, we took a hemispheric approach to this art. We see Latin American and Latinx art as sharing some basic and fundamental features, and to me, that is the agenda for the future. You are dealing obviously with very heterogeneous and extremely diverse communities and there is a disparity between those two communities. Over the past two decades, Latin American art has emerged as a market phenomenon, and it's in the process of becoming mainstream. That is not the case for Latinx art. It doesn't have a large collector base, or a strong institutional base, or a market, but I think it will get there. Our role is to explore the many affinities between these two groups and the many differences, and bring the two groups together, because the reality is that the field of Latinx art is completely different from how it was in the 1960s and '70s. It is a community that has exploded exponentially. The artists are intermingling and we don't know what is going to come out of that. It is our role as institutions to support that and to investigate it, to go deep into it by displaying it, by creating publications, by inviting artists, without necessarily breaking it down into two separate areas.

Gonzalez: I think it's a failure of mainstream art criticism and the mainstream art world in general, not to acknowledge the transculturalism within the Latinx experience. There has been an assumption that these are hyper-localized identities and that they weren't in contact with or influencing or influenced by a global network. That is something that C. Ondine Chavoya and I explored in the retrospective of Asco and why we included the interface that they had with No Grupo or the conceptual art groups in Mexico City or the connections that they had—because they were all involved in correspondence art—so they were communicating with artists in Uruguay and Tokyo. There was this assumption that someone like Rupert Garcia was not aware of Third World struggles in Vietnam or in Cuba, but he was. There is a global dimension to Chicano/Latino art, just as there was communication among Puerto Rican artists and California Chicano artists. I would never just do a Latinx-art-for-Latinx-art's-sake type of approach. It has to be grounded, and we have to be mindful of our curatorial methodology. I think that Marcela Guerrero's presentation at the Whitney was incredible and really pushed buttons, because it was looking at discussions of indigeneity in the Americas. We could really see these relationships between disparate artistic practices, but through adjoining conceptual interests.



Among the historically significant works by Latin American artists that Ramirez has acquired for the MFA Houston is Gyula Kosice's *La ciudad hidroespacial* (The Hydrospatial City), 1946–72. ©MUSEO KOSICE, BUENOS AIRES

Ramirez: We went through this experience at the International Center for the Arts of the Americas when we built up its archive. We had teams in different cities throughout Latin America and the U.S., and at the early stages of the project, we used to do these annual conferences where we would bring all the researchers together. We would have, for instance, a team in Chile who were trying to track down artists who had left Chile because of the dictatorship and fled to the United States, and our team in L.A. would realize that those Chilean artists were part of a graphic arts collective in L.A. The history of colonialism, the history of racism, the history of Catholicism, the Spanish language—there are a number of things that unite these two groups and I think that the efforts to separate them have to do more with political strategies than with the actual reality of the way that the two intermingle.

ARTnews: I think it also has to do with this sense of specificity and feeling of erasure. And how there can be invisibility and a need to carve out space, similar to what you have done with Latin American art over the past 20 years in Houston.

Ramirez: Latinx art still lacks institutional support. I am hopeful that some of the displays here in Houston, where we are going to have Latinx artists next to American and European artists, will bring attention to that. But we need more institutions that show the artists and showcase them. The problem is that Latinx art doesn't have an infrastructure. There are very few museums that are actually doing this work. It's like a vicious cycle of the chicken and the egg because if you don't have that visibility, then you don't have a market, then you don't have exhibitions—and we went through that with Latin American art. Many people want to say that Latin American art has already made it. I don't think that is true at all. That is true for a few select artists who are part of the global circuit, but not for the majority of artists in Latin America. And if you open up any textbook of 20th-century art or 21st-century art, you will find no Latin American artists, or, maybe just Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Wifredo Lam, and that's it.

ARTnews: Rita, how do you see the position of Latinx art within the global contemporary?

Gonzalez: As Mari Carmen was saying, there need to be more institutions that are carving out a space and making a platform for Latinx artists.

It can't just be Houston, Miami, and L.A., because the truth of the matter is that Latinos are in every state and every region.

Ramirez: They are everywhere—and they are here to stay.

Gonzalez: Exactly. I am hopeful too because I think the philanthropic foundations are starting to address this, and with that kind of solidity of support, we will be able to get more recognition and more support for individual artists. Pilar Tompkins Rivas and I were the curators of the special commissions at Frieze L.A. [in February 2020], and we really wanted to give it primacy. When you walked to the back lot of Paramount, the first thing you saw was the work of Gabriella Sanchez. There is this book that has just come out by Arlene Dávila [*Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics*], which offers an interesting sociological, anecdotal perspective—a much-needed perspective because it is based on the many conversations that she's had, and you get the sense that people have shared things with her that they might not have shared in public forums, so you are kind of privy to these backdoor conversations where collectors are telling her what they really think. This kind of airing is important because now we know what we are up against. This year, the Black Lives Matter movement has really pushed commercial art galleries to address issues of social justice and diversity in their programs.

[\[Read an interview with Arlene Dávila on her recent book about Latinx art and the market.\]](#)

Ramirez: I think we are at the point of no return. It should definitely transform gallery practices, curatorial practices, and institutional practices, and lead museums to reinvent themselves. I think that both Latin American and Latinx art have been thought of as a kind of added value to museums. But it is not just an added value. These communities are transforming these museums' cities, their states, their regions, and the country itself. The white population is decreasing in the United States. It is already the minority in many places. And it is all these other diverse and complex communities that are going to be the audiences in the future. For encyclopedic museums in particular, there is an urgent need to reimagine who they are, their function, their objectives in relation to these communities. Ultimately, it's about the survival of the institution.

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