

DESTINATION: LATIN AMERICA

*Modern and Contemporary
Latin American Art from
the Collection of the
Neuberger Museum of Art*

Edited by **Patrice Giasson**



This publication accompanies the exhibition **Destination: Latin America**, curated by Patrice Giasson, with the curatorial assistance of Marianelly Neumann. The exhibition is conceived, organized, and toured by the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, SUNY. Generous support for this exhibition and catalogue has been provided by the Alex Gordon Estate, the Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art, and the Purchase College Foundation.

Exhibitions venues

Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, SUNY, Purchase, New York,
July 24, 2016 – January 22, 2017

South Bend Museum of Art, Indiana, November 2 – December 30, 2018.

LSU Museum of Art, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, October 24, 2019 – February
8, 2020.



Published by the Neuberger Museum of Art,
Purchase College, SUNY

Neuberger Museum of Art
Purchase College
State University of New York
735 Anderson Hill Road
Purchase, NY 10577-1400
www.neuberger.org

Neuberger Museum of Art SPACE | 42
State University of New York
SUNY College of Optometry
33 West 42nd Street, New York, NY 10036

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Photography © Jim Frank (unless indicated otherwise)

Printed in USA

ISBN 978-0-9906608-6-6

Cover Modified detail of Dulce Pinzón, *Superman. Noé Reyes from the State of Puebla. Works as a delivery boy in Brooklyn New York. He sends 500 dollars a week.* 2005–2010. See page 79.

Page 4 Detail of Nicolás de Jesús, *Paris*, 2003.

Page 6 Detail of Henry Bermúdez, *Pájaro con pinta de tigre (Bird with a Tiger's Appearance)*, 1991. See page 57.

Page 8 Detail of Betsabeé Romero, *Un oasis en el desierto de la ciudad (An Oasis in the Desert of the City)*, 2002.

Back Cover Detail of Teresa Margolles, *La huella (The Imprint)*, 2015. See page 75.

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Introduction

The Neuberger Museum of Art has assembled an extraordinary collection of art by Latin American artists working both inside and outside their homelands. These works include gifts from private collections¹ as well as acquisitions by the museum. Several works were also recently donated by the artists following exhibitions at the museum.²

Destination: Latin America originated with our desire to better understand the works from Latin American artists in the collection of the Neuberger Museum of Art. Rather than simply organizing a chronological exhibition, we approached the collection within the framework of certain criteria that reflect contemporary concerns in the study of Latin American art. As the works range in date from the early decades of the twentieth century to the present day, the

1. Collections and donors include: Helen and Paul Anbinder; Edith L. Calzadilla and family in memory of Luis P. Calzadilla; Arthur A. Goldberg; Janet Jaffin; Fritz Landshoff; Virginia and Herbert Lust; Roy R. Neuberger; the Dina and Alexander E. Racolin Collection; George and Edith Rickey Collection of Constructivist Art; Donna and Marvin Schwartz; and Jules Sherman.

2. Artists Nicolás de Jesús, Ignacio Iturria, Dulce Pinzón (who was invited to give a talk at the NMA), and Betsabé Romero generously donated works to the museum.

breadth of the collection offers an opportunity to address significant historical moments and several key topics relevant to Latin American art. However, the idea of Latin America as its own entity has been highly debated in recent years. How can we speak of such a large geographical space, one that covers twenty-four countries from North, Central and South America, and that includes approximately 618 million inhabitants speaking Spanish, Portuguese, Quechua, Guarani, Aymara, Nahuatl, Maya, and hundreds of other native languages? It is also clear that Latin America is not peripheral to the Western world, but an integral part of it. Nonetheless, despite the challenges of thinking about such a complex ensemble as a whole, there are indeed some overarching aspects of history and aesthetic concerns that can provide a framework for consideration of the art of Latin America, exemplified by the collection of the Neuberger Museum of Art and discussed in the present catalogue.

The book and exhibition *Destination: Latin America* thus offer a multifaceted, didactic journey through twentieth- and twenty-first-century Latin American art, organized in five sections. The first includes work by artists affiliated with the artistic revolution that emerged after the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20; the second features sculpture and

painting by key Latin American artists exploring color, form, space, and motion; the third section features work by Caribbean and South American artists inspired by African art, Surrealism, and Magical Realism; the fourth section addresses the challenges faced by artists living under the dictatorships of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, when most of South America was under military control; and the final section concentrates on contemporary artists looking at themes of history, globalization, violence, and social criticism.

The collection of the Neuberger Museum of Art contains works by some of the most renowned modern and contemporary Latin American artists, including: Manuel Álvarez Bravo, José Raúl Anguiano Valadez, Julio Antonio, Henry Bermúdez, Leda Catunda, Carlos Cruz-Diez, José Luis Cuevas, Arturo Duclos, Lucio Fontana, Carlos Garaicoa, Florencio Gelabert, Ignacio Iturría, Alfred Jensen, Nicolás de Jesús, Wifredo Lam, Eduardo Mac Entyre, Teresa Margolles, María Martínez-Cañas, Roberto Matta, Almir Mavignier, José Clemente Orozco, Marta María Pérez Bravo, Dulce Pinzón, Betsabeé Romero, Jesús Rafael Soto, Gerardo Suter, Rufino Tamayo, Luis Tomasello, and Eugenia Vargas.

Patrice Giasson Alex Gordon Curator of Art of the Americas



ONE The Mexican Artistic Revolution

Mexico holds a central place in modern Latin American history. It was marked by a revolution (1910–20) that not only changed the country's political course, but that also triggered an artistic revolution that affected all modes of creation, including painting, photography, theater, and literature. The young artists of the Mexican mural movement, led in part by José Clemente Orozco, were central to this artistic revolution. They rejected the nineteenth-century academic style that predominated in Mexican art schools, which focused instruction on copying European models. Imbued with a new social and critical consciousness, these artists expressed an interest in local landscapes, daily scenes, and Mexican history. As art took to the streets, native Mexicans, common people, workers, peasants, and children became the subjects of art. José Raúl Anguiano, considered a member of the second generation of mural painters, attests to the influence of the pioneers of the Mexican mural movement.

International Roundabout

The Mexican muralists represented the first modern Latin American art movement to gain international recognition. For many, Mexico City was the Paris of Latin America. International artists—including

filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (Soviet Union), Surrealist master André Breton (France), and photographers Edward Weston (United States) and Tina Modotti (Italy)—came to Mexico to engage with Mexican artists. This international presence had an impact on local artists. The work of Manuel Álvarez Bravo, one of the most accomplished Latin American photographers of the twentieth century, relates formally to that of Weston and Modotti. In addition, a number of Mexican artists were invited to create works in the United States, Europe, and the former Soviet Union.

The Countercurrent

While José Clemente Orozco, like Diego Rivera, was commissioned to paint murals in the United States, Rufino Tamayo, during his long stays in New York and Paris, mainly created works on canvas or paper. Though Tamayo had previously painted sumptuous mural paintings in Mexico, he eventually denounced the ideological agenda of some of his countrymen. The institutionalization of postrevolutionary art impeded the advancement of new tendencies. By the 1960s, a younger generation composed of artists such as José Luis Cuevas began to challenge the climate of isolation that predominated in the country.

TWO New Art for the Modern City

Whereas the work in the section dedicated to modern Mexican art attests to an interest in local themes rendered through figurative imagery, the work in this section, dating from the second half of the twentieth century, demonstrates Latin America's interest in abstraction and a newfound enthusiasm for contemporary European artistic trends. The end of World War II opened new artistic frontiers for a generation of Latin American artists eager to move away from representational traditions. This advance was reinforced by economic prosperity, leading to the development and modernization of large cities and a boom in the construction industry.

Adopted by Latin American artists living abroad, and by European artists coming to South America, Geometric abstraction, Concrete art, and Kinetic and Optical art laid the groundwork for a new means

of artistic expression. Artists such as Almir Mavignier (Brazil), Luis Tomasello, and Lucio Fontana (both originally from Argentina), were influenced by these trends before immigrating to Europe and developing their own style. In Caracas, Venezuela, experimentation in Geometric art was also taking place. Jesús Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez, who lived in Paris in the early 1950s, rejected the landscape painting popular in Venezuela and were crucial to the development of Kinetic and Optical art. Eduardo Mac Entyre, who founded the Generative art group in Argentina in 1959, also embraced Optical art. The impact of Geometric abstraction, Concrete art, and Kinetic and Optical art on contemporary South American art remains visible today, and Cruz-Diez's recent explorations with light and space continue to engage new audiences.

THREE African Legacy, Totems, and Magical Realism in Latin America

It is impossible to speak of Latin American art without acknowledging the contributions of African-American culture and the influence of African art. In countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, and Venezuela, where the African-American presence predominates, African traditions and religious beliefs have coexisted and intermingled with indigenous and Western practices, shaping a Creole identity. The work of artist Wifredo Lam epitomizes this trend. Strongly influenced by Cubism and Surrealism, he also was fascinated with the traditions of his Afro-Cuban ancestors. Lam's work combines family stories and memories of Afro-Cuban mysticism with dreamlike imagery associated with Surrealism. In this way, his work is akin to that of Chilean artist Roberto Matta, whose imaginary landscapes are imprinted with a cosmic energy and inhabited by strange mystical characters.

Though the European avant-garde masters widely appropriated the formal structures of traditional African art, Wifredo Lam wished to recontextualize the African legacy by bringing it back, not to Africa, but to Cuba: "Since my stay in Paris I had a fixed idea: to take African art and to make it operate in its own world, in Cuba. I needed to express in a work combative energy, the protest of my ancestors." Some critics believe that Lam was the first modern artist to offer a vision of the African man living in America. But perhaps the greatest testament to Lam's success is his tremendous influence on later generations of Cuban artists, including Julio Antonio, Florencio Gelabert, María Martínez-Cañas, and Marta María Pérez Bravo, whose works are included in this exhibition.

FOUR The Dark Years: Latin America in the Age of Military Regimes

In the 1960s, 70s, and part of the 80s, South American countries were dominated by military regimes, including: Paraguay (1958–89), Brazil (1964–85), Bolivia (1964–82), Argentina (1966–73 and 1976–83), Peru (1968–80), Uruguay (1973–84), and Chile (1973–89). This occurred during the peak of the Cold War when Operation Condor, a campaign of political repression designed to eliminate left-wing activists, was carried out with the support of the United States. During those same years, civil wars inflamed Central America. In Guatemala a war lasting from 1960 to 1996 resulted in the killings of 200,000 people. Although Mexico had a civilian government, the 1960s were dark years there as well. In 1968 the army opened fire and killed hundreds of civilians in what is remembered as the Tlatelolco massacre.

Self-imposed Censorship and New Strategies

These years of turmoil had a serious impact on art, as most art schools and several universities were viewed by authorities with a suspicious eye. In order to avoid persecution, artists practiced self-imposed censorship.

They developed artistic strategies such as spontaneous and anonymous actions, and created conceptual works that expressed their opposition to authority through allusion. These new art forms also challenged the conservative tendencies that dominated certain art schools. Groups of like-minded young artists simultaneously emerged in various countries. Though their practices frequently coincided, local artists did not always know what their neighbors were doing due to censorship. The Chilean artist Arturo Duclos was a member of one of these groups, the Escena de Avanzada, a multidisciplinary collective from the 1980s that opposed the political regime of Augusto Pinochet.

Eugenia Vargas also grew up during the Pinochet regime but left for the United States and later settled in Mexico. Vargas and Gerardo Suter, an Argentine artist who likewise moved to Mexico, are both multimedia artists who explore questions of identity and memory, perhaps reflecting their nomadic existence. They each produced photographs featuring enigmatic scenes that combine history with nudity and eroticism, and played an important role in the new direction taken by contemporary Mexican art after 1968.

FIVE Latin American Art in the Age of Globalization

In an era when individuals may live in multiple locations, often outside their native country, we may ask if it remains relevant to think in regional terms. This question is essential, as many Latin American artists prefer not to carry a national banner, but instead consider themselves actors engaged in a universal dialogue. Many of the concerns that Latin American artists address today—identity, sexuality, political struggle, consumption, pollution, violence, and repression—appear in the work of artists worldwide.

In *Mudéjar Traces* (2007–12), Betsabeé Romero carved a Moorish pattern into a rubber tire. She filled the recesses with colored chewing gum, merging Iberian-Islamic decorative patterns with popular Mexican culture as well as the materials of industry. Teresa Margolles, who spent a decade exploring the results of violence on Mexican society, has, in last five years, focused her attention on problems emerging in different parts of the Americas. In *La huella* (2015), she turns her gaze toward the United States, exploring police brutality resulting in the deaths of black men. Like Margolles, Carlos Garaicoa wanders the streets of the city in order to understand society. His photographs of decaying Havana serve as a social barometer, analyzing the political failure of the local government. They also function as

a metaphor that could be applied to other parts of the world, including certain American cities.

Dulce Pinzón, who is part of a new generation of Mexican photographers to gain worldwide recognition, has lived for several years in New York. Her best-known series, *The True Story of Superheroes*, features undocumented workers in the United States whom the artist converted into superheroes. The works by Ignacio Iturria, one of Uruguay's most distinguished painters, seem to escape any form of local generalization as they could also reflect Spanish or Italian painting traditions. Furthermore, the artworks by Iturria presented in this exhibition were created in the United States under the gaze of the American public, and composed with materials found on site during his two-month residency at the Neuberger Museum of Art.

Finally, Nicolás de Jesús, who was born in rural Mexico, goes beyond traditional art to address global problems. In *World Crash* (2008), porous figures inhabit a world compromised by financial crisis and a deteriorating environment. De Jesús's personal story as an artist of Nahuatl descent who gained international recognition testifies to how some native Mexicans have progressed from being the subject of artworks—like those featured in modernist paintings—to becoming creators in their own right.