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By John Dorfman

As a burst of creativity emanates from Latin America, art from the region is getting new notice north of the border.



Marcela Cadena, *Entre Suenos*

On a recent evening of openings in New York's Chelsea, there was a distinctly Latin vibe in the chilly Northeastern air. From one gallery, works by 26 contemporary artists from South America, Mexico and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean beckoned to the crowds that packed the streets. Another dealer was showing paintings by a Peruvian Indian healer; while some visitors browsed through the gallery sipping wine, others honed in on a mini-seminar about art and shamanism that was being held off to one side. Last spring, a major contemporary gallery did a group show entirely devoted to artists from Cuba. And this month, the PINTA fair for modern and contemporary Latin American art, founded by a trio of Argentines, comes to New York (November 10–13, see page 26). Right now there's a huge amount of creativity in the south-of-the-border art scene (or, more accurately, scenes), coupled with strong and growing interest among collectors and aficionados here in the U.S.

It's hard to generalize about Latin American art today. Some of it reflects specifically regional imagery and cultural traditions, including indigenous or Pre-Columbian ones; much of it, though, does not. Some is abstract, some figural. Certain artists align themselves with the home-grown literary tradition of "magic realism," but many more are engaging with political and economic issues by using irony and satire, operating in a conceptual mode that is in line with the mainstream of contemporary art. All art today is more international than ever, in any case, since most artists are exposed to work from all over the world. Moreover, there is so much cultural

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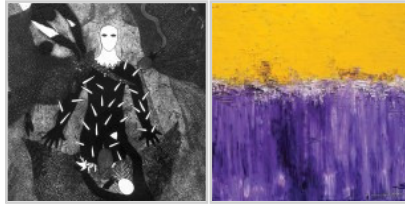
Ernesto Rancano, 'Noble Ser 2' Abel Barroso, *Visa Para El Dorado*



Roberto Diago, 'La energia del mundo,' 2009, Oil on aluminum and zinc metal sheet, 47 1/4 x 31 1/4 inches Miguel Florido, *Wherever We Are*

diversity within Latin America itself that it's nearly meaningless to speak of one overarching cultural entity. Nonetheless, at least from the point of view of American audiences, Latin American art is a distinct phenomenon. In the case of one of the most popular and vital areas, Cuban art, there are very clear reasons why it is both distinct and vital.

The artistic situation in Cuba is like no other on earth, and essentially paradoxical. On the one hand, there is a lot of support for artists: "The Cuban art scene is as rich as it is because the government has taken an interest in fostering the arts," says Pablo Vallecilla of Marlborough Gallery in New York. (Marlborough is the dealer that presented the show "Living in Havana" in May and June, featuring the work of five contemporary Cuban artists: Abel Barroso, Roberto Diago, Kcho, William Pérez and Ernesto Rancaño.) "In the schools, the students are being taught to believe that art is a very viable route for people in Cuba." And indeed, at least for those who can sell their work, art is a career that no concerned parent would warn their children away from. "Artists in Cuba are a privileged class, perhaps the most privileged," says Ramón Cernuda of Cernuda Arte in Miami. "They are authorized to sell their work directly to foreign countries and to receive payment in hard currency." (Permission to sell in the U.S. was granted in 1991, when the embargo on art from Cuba and several other countries was lifted.) Vallecilla adds, "Artists in Cuba are allowed to travel and therefore have greater mobility, and they are given art materials, too. So they have a somewhat special situation in society." Havana even has its own biennial—even though it tends to happen every three years rather than every two due to bureaucratic and funding snafus.



Marcela Cadena, *Entre Sueños*

The other side of the paradox is that there is still a great deal of privation in Cuba that affects everybody, not to mention the continuing restriction of freedom of expression. "These limitations are clearly perceived by artists, and that has been reflected in their artistic commentary," says Cernuda. The Castro regime is tolerant of some dissident expression—Pérez didn't get into any trouble for some irreverent depictions of Che Guevara—but artists still have to tread carefully and sometimes make their points indirectly.

Speaking of the artists in "Living in Havana," Vallecilla says, "All of them deal with very contemporary subjects such as migration and our everyday relation to work. These are really universal subjects, which is why the show had such wide acceptance." Universal, yes, but particularly pointed in Cuba. The work of Kcho (Alexis Leyva Machado) uses imagery that relates to the desperate attempts of so many Cubans to leave the island—his sculpture *M.* (2011) riffs on the wooden boats that brave the waves in search of South Florida. Other Kcho pieces use found objects like rubber inner tubes or driftwood to convey the uprooted existence of people who camp in huts in the countryside in preparation for exile. Rancaño's work has lately been focusing on the troubled status of work in a purported workers' state: a ladder full of thorns or a pail studded with nails on the handle speak to an unhealthy relationship between the worker and the task, full of danger and basically futile.

Abel Barroso's conceptual pieces, which inventively combine printmaking and sculpture, "explore the relationship between the Third World and the developed world," says Vallecilla. Barroso has made a wooden cell phone, a hand-cranked visa-stamping machine, and a variety of other gadgets covered with writing and imagery that evoke the awkward and often humorous interaction between very different economic and political realities. "The content is so pointed, with a terrific sense of humor, which is typical of Cubans," says Darrel Couturier of Couturier Gallery in Los Angeles. Couturier has been taking Americans on art tours of Cuba since 1997, and he says he never fails to take his groups to see Barroso. "The reaction early on from American collectors was that it was cute, because they couldn't figure out what these objects were about," says the dealer. "People are finally getting it, figuring out what he's been doing all these years." Couturier emphasizes the attention to detail in Barroso's work. "All of his wood sculptures are cedar wood held together with cedar wood—no screws, no nails. The level of craft is very high, which is unusual given a lot of the art I see today in the U.S." He relates this concern for craft to the fact that Cuban artists "actually address something concrete. They're not cynical. They haven't reached that point; they don't have that luxury. Their work is informed by very real and dire circumstances, even though they are an elite in Cuban society."

Another Cuban artist whose work Couturier champions is Belkis Ayón, a printmaker who committed suicide in 1999 at the age of 32. She was a schoolmate of Barroso's at Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte. Her work, mainly monochromatic, used a technique that combined woodcut, lithograph and collograph to print on rough paper. Ayón's chosen subject was Abakuá, a Cuban men's secret society, based in African traditions, whose rituals date back to the 1830s. The original function of Abakuá was to help slaves protect themselves against their Spanish overlords, but it still exists today. Ayón was fascinated by this group, which bars women from membership, and created evocative, mysterious images based on its ritual and symbolism. After her death, a rumor went around that she was killed by Abakuá outraged by her intrusions—which Couturier, who knew her well, calls "nonsense."

Inspiration from indigenous traditions, as in the case of Ayón, has been a common trope in Latin American art from the early modernist era until today. The first generation of Latin modernists, including Rufino Tamayo, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Joaquín Torres García and Wilfredo Lam, spent time in Europe (or the U.S.) absorbing the language of the avant garde, only to find themselves marginalized or even rebuffed by it. Returning home, they reconnected with the Pre-Columbian or African strains in their native societies, discovering that the visual language of these cultures dovetailed very nicely with modernist aesthetics, and that the acknowledgment of the repressed non-European heritage added social relevance to their work.

Milton Becerra, a Venezuelan artist who lives in Paris, can be firmly situated in the op and kinetic school established by his countrymen Jesús Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez. However, says his West Coast dealer, Bill Sheehy of Latin American Masters in Santa Monica, Calif., Becerra uses stones and cords in his constructions, alluding to nature rituals of Venezuela's Amazonian tribal cultures. (Becerra's show "Nature and Geometry" is on view at the gallery through December 3.) The late Pablo Amaringo, whose paintings were shown this fall at ACA Gallery in New York, never had to research or rediscover indigenous traditions; as a bona fide shaman from the Amazon region of Peru, he was on solid ground when it came to depicting his visions, achieved with the help of the psychoactive drink ayahuasca, in a unique candy-colored, surrealist style.

Agora Gallery's recent group show "Masters of the Imagination" (the latest in an annual series mounted by the New York dealer) revealed just how disparate Latin American styles can be. Some of the 26 artists on view drew on pre-Hispanic sources for iconography and inspiration: Jimena Vilchez, from Argentina, makes collages on canvas that evoke indigenous Native American textile patterns, and Paloma Bernaldo de Quirós, from Mexico, references cave paintings and Maya hieroglyphics in her mixed-media works, which incorporate acrylic and sand. On the other hand, Mexican painter Maria Cadena's oil-on-canvas works are purely abstract, while Raúl Cantú (also from Mexico) uses his scientific expertise to create intricate non-representational giclée prints on canvas that seem to glow like an aurora borealis when viewed through 3-D glasses. These are simply contemporary artists who happen to be from Latin America.

Even some Cuban-born artists make work that cannot be classified as "Cuban" or "Latin American" in any way. Ramón Cernuda, the Miami dealer, cites émigrés such as Julio Larráz, whose work, in the surrealist

mode of Magritte, is "totally disconnected from the original roots," and Tomás Sánchez, a Cuban-Costa Rican artist "whose landscapes have evolved into imaginary landscapes that are no longer anchored in the mother country." That evolution away from local influences is completely natural in today's world, says Cernuda.

So what accounts for the growing popularity of Latin American art in the U.S. today? Specialist dealers give various answers. Cernuda believes that historical and cultural commonalities between Cuba and the United States cause art from there to resonate here. "Cuba is a country with a significant European-descended population and also an African-descended population, which makes it similar to the U.S., aside from language barriers. So the crossover has been easier for contemporary Cuban artists than for many in other parts of Latin America." For Couturier, it's the strong commitment of Cuban artists to issues that are local but also universal that makes their work appealing abroad.

Sheehy points out that affordability is definitely a factor: Both classic Latin American modernists and contemporary artists, he says, "are not very expensive compared to their American or European contemporaries." He adds that "a shifting demographic in the U.S. has been putting pressure on institutions to show more Latin American art," which raises awareness among the general public. However, says Sheehy, the best artists from Latin America are "tapping into something that is very lasting and powerful. It's work that is singular and universal at the same time." Angela di Bello, the director of Agora Gallery, believes that the real appeal has to do with emotion and energy: "In Latin American art," she says, "feelings tends to be very passionate. There's no pulling back."

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