

Shifting Curatorial Strategies for Art from Latin America and Latino  
Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

1956 - 2004

S. B. Kogler-Heimburger

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

School of Philosophy and Art History

University of Essex

2017



## Abstract

This thesis explores changing curatorial strategies at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. This is preceded by an assessment of the Museum of Modern Art's earlier role in systematizing and defining this field throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Three exhibitions of art from Latin America and Latino art will illustrate how the MFAH contributed to shifts in this field proposing parallel and expanded readings to those first introduced at MoMA.

Firstly, the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* (1956) was a collaboration with the Pan American Union. This exhibition was framed by Cold War modernist approaches and a re-imagined geographical conception of the Gulf region. Secondly, *Hispanic Art in the United States- Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* (1987) sought to include Latino art and reflect the community in Houston within this mainstream institution. This led to traditional museum practices emphasizing the quality of artworks, while the criteria for selection was based on the ethnicity of the artists.

Finally, *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (2004) revised curatorial structures that were based upon the geographical and national survey format. Six constellations emphasizing nodal connections between movements from Latin America disrupted established narratives of this field. The extensive use of archival documents further aided this historical review.

I will answer how political, diplomatic, social, and art historical contexts have influenced the curation of these exhibitions and the outcomes of each. I will argue that through the location of the MFAH in the south of the United States, this institution is able to experiment with curatorial approaches and contribute to reviewed readings of art and art history in the United States.



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## **Acknowledgements**

Many people have contributed to this project over the past years. I am deeply grateful for my supervisors, Dr Joanne Harwood and Dr Natasha Ruiz-Gómez, who have always had constructive comments and encouraging words for me during some of the tougher times in this process. I also want to extend my gratitude to Dr Michaela Giebelhausen and Dr Rebecca Breen who supervised me in the early stages of this project and helped me to focus my research. My deepest appreciation also goes to the Essex Collection of Art from Latin America (ESCALA) and the University of Essex Silberrad scholarship for their significant support, which allowed me to embark on this exciting journey and continue to work toward its completion. Furthermore, I want to thank Dr Mari Carmen Ramírez and Margo Gutierrez for spending precious time with me in Texas and providing me with invaluable first-hand insight into their work that helped furnish this thesis.

I want to thank my closest friends, and those who stood by me during stormy weathers. This includes the artists and colleagues at Firstsite, Colchester, whom I have had the indisputable pleasure of working with, laughing with, and sharing ambitions. To the British Grenadier, its regular visitors, and 'Lord of the Pub' Simon Foulds for welcoming me to their community. I want to especially thank Dr Sarah J. Demelo, who provided me with the happiest home and the best Mac and Cheese. We shared many memorable moments and gin over the years. I could not have completed this journey without her tireless support, time, ear, and unquestionable friendship.

Finally, to Matthias, who is always supportive, kind, patient, and motivating. Thank you for hiding the remote control and changing the internet password, it has saved me from much procrastination. To our future together!

## Introduction

We know that the history of art is not neutral, but it is a territory of continuous conflict between forces and interests, North and South, East and West, and other multiple and divergent notions of what art is that confront each other and determine the conditions of its visibility.<sup>1</sup> (Freire 211)

Freire encapsulates the tensions inherent in the exhibition of artworks, the canonization of art history, and the pursuit of control over shifting curatorial strategies and narratives in history. The quote situates these tensions in geographical terms which is a significant aspect of this thesis as I discuss selected exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, (MFAH) in Texas, and how these forged curatorial approaches and historical accounts of art from Latin America and Latino art in the United States. I will refer to this institution as MFAH for the remainder of this thesis.

I discuss and analyse three exhibitions that took place at the MFAH between 1956 and 2004. They are the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* (1956), *Hispanic Art in the United States-Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* (1987), and *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (2004). In each case, the MFAH expanded the vision of art from Latin America and Latino art, contributing to the conditions of their prominence in varying ways. This occurred under the leadership of its directors, Lee Malone (1953-1959) and Peter C. Marzio (1982-2010), as well as the curators for each exhibition. They are Jose Gómez Sicre (1916-1991) for the *Gulf- Caribbean Art Exhibition*, John Beardsley (b. 1952) and Jane Livingston (b.1944) for *Hispanic Art in the United States-Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*, and Héctor Olea (b. 1945) and Mari Carmen Ramírez (b. 1955) for *Inverted Utopias- Avant-*

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Spanish by the author: 'Sabemos que la historia de arte no es neutra, sino un territorio de conflicto permanente de fuerzas e intereses, norte y sur, occidente y oriente, y otras nociones múltiples y divergentes de lo que es el arte se enfrentan y determinan la condición misma de su visibilidad.'

*Garde Art in Latin America*. This thesis argues that the directors and curators, through the MFAH as platform, shifted curatorial approaches toward art from Latin America and Latino art by re-framing the conditions for their exhibition and established this institution as an equivalent node in the network of powerful cultural organisations in the United States.

To be clear, I discuss curatorial strategies within the context of selection of artworks and their interpretation put forward by the various actors in each example. Although I discuss some aspects of the installation of artworks within the spaces of the MFAH, this thesis focuses mostly on the selection criteria and the shifting attempts at presenting the history of art from Latin America and Latino art in the United States. While the installation of artworks contributes to an ephemeral and immediate way of experiencing a curator's ideas, it became clearer to me during the research undertaken for this thesis, that it is the selection of artworks and their elucidation through exhibition catalogues, press releases, clippings and reviews that remain after the event and provide insight into lasting ideas proposed and promoted by the curators and directors. These in turn influence how art history is reviewed and rewritten. In this sense, this thesis poses a historical review of the selection criteria and the influence exerted by individual actors forming lasting curatorial strategies.

The exhibitions pose examples that adhere to diplomatic, political, and scholarly parameters prevalent in that country at the time of their respective showcases. They also highlight how their individual approaches have contributed to changing the interpretation of art from Latin America and Latino art. The changes encompass, firstly, for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, the blurring of hemispheric borders and the establishment of a temporary southern network encompassing the Gulf-Caribbean region. This consisted of five Gulf States and several nations in the

Caribbean, central, and northern Latin America.

Secondly, the MFAH attempted to root Latino art within its institutional fabric through *Hispanic Art in the United States-Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*. The premise for this exhibition was based in the prevalent cultural policies born out of multiculturalism and pluralism in the 1970s and 1980s. By establishing this field of art as a hallmark of technical and aesthetic quality through inclusion in a mainstream curatorial framework, the MFAH proposed, as the first mainstream institution in the United States, a reviewed reading of Latino art in the context of a wider narrative of United States art history.

Thirdly, *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* decidedly moved away from attempts at inscribing art from Latin America in United States art history. This exhibition disrupted the linear and inclusive approach adopted previously and proposed an equivalent reading of 20<sup>th</sup> century art from Latin America. This emphasised the origins of theoretical and artistic ideas in Latin America through extensive inclusion of archival documents. Further, a constellation model consisting of overlapping terms framed the artworks of this exhibition creating connections across geographies and chronologies. In all cases, the MFAH became a platform through which the curators altered specific curatorial aspects introducing their unique approach to presenting art from Latin America and Latino art in renewed and bold ways.

This thesis traces crucial points at which this institution introduced new ideas and worked to establish a narrative that continues to run parallel to that of other institutions in the United States, and especially, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. The exhibitions will illustrate vital contributions made by the MFAH as an institution located in the southern State of Texas, and in contrast to MoMA's

centre position as tastemaker and establisher of art histories in the east of the country. At the heart of this thesis rest the following questions:

How have curatorial strategies changed at the MFAH between 1956 and 2004?  
To what extent have these presented reviewed ways of looking at art from Latin America and Latino art?

As the second-largest State in the United States, a major producer of oil, and sharing borders with Mexico, Texas is located within a geographic, political, and economic key area. This State is coloured with diverse cultural influences including the Tejano community, Mexicans who remained in the region after the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), which saw the annexation of Texas to the United States. Continued immigration from Central and South America result in Spanish being spoken alongside English, and traditions such as the Day of the Dead, amongst others, are celebrated throughout Texas.

Further, the coastline extends in a curve along the Mexican Gulf, sharing waters with not only Mexico, but also Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Cuba, and several countries and islands in Central America and the Caribbean. Houston is the most populous city in Texas with 2.1 million inhabitants, and situated in the southeastern corner of the state. This city expands in a wide sprawl across the flat terrain and is interconnected with several interstates, freeways, speedways and highways. They slice through the city, often extending several floors upwards creating visions of swooping concrete roads. Within this breathtaking maze, and circled by the Interstate no 610 enclosing Houston, the city is divided into several areas.

One of those is Montrose situated alongside Midtown and River Oaks. This area of Houston is alive with bars, shops, restaurants and a lively LGBTQ community. It is here, that the MFAH is situated near Hermann Park and nestled within the museum district, which houses several cultural institutions within a radius

of a few miles including the Menil Collection, Rothko Chapel, and the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

The MFAH, established in 1900, owns collections of artefacts from Europe, Africa, North America, Asia, South Pacific and Mexico, Central, South America, and the Caribbean. The main campus, located in the museum district, includes the Audrey Jones Beck Building and the Caroline Wiess Law Building, in which all major exhibitions take place. Further, the Glassell School of Art and the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden are housed there. The Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens, as well as Rienzi are a short drive from this part of Houston and located in the River Oaks district (see fig.1). It becomes apparent that this institution is sizeable and occupies a significant role in Houston's and Texas' cultural sector.

The early period in which this institution became particularly active in showcasing art from Latin America coincides with the Good Neighbour Years (1928-1947), a time during which the United States intervened much less aggressively in Latin America than at any time before, or after. Art and culture increasingly served as vehicles to promote better understanding between nations. Institutions including the American Federation of Arts (AFA), MoMA, and the MFAH were instrumental in forming a national network for housing exhibitions.

During the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, the MFAH placed emphasis on exhibiting and collecting art from Mexico. Under the leadership of its first director, James H. Chillman Jr. (1924-1953), a series of exhibitions were showcased there and predated MoMA's efforts to exhibit art from that part of Latin America. The earliest display held at the MFAH was *Modern Mexican Art* (1927) of which no records exist at that institution's archive. Their focus continued with *Work of Students of the Mexican Free School* (1930). This was a direct collaboration with the Ministry of Public Education of Mexico City and exhibited a selection of works by



various students from that school (West). In the same year *Drawings and Lithographs by José Clemente Orozco* (1930) was showcased. This exhibition was curated and circulated by Delphine Studios, a gallery situated in New York.

Other institutions that worked with the MFAH included the AFA in Washington. This non-profit organisation has been active since 1909, and aims to bring art to audiences through educational activities including lecture series for museums and institutions (*American Federation*). In the 1930s, it began to organise itinerant exhibitions which it continues to disseminate throughout the country. *Mexican Arts* (1932) was one of them and consisted of a selection of contemporary and early fine, and applied art. The geographical proximity and shared border between Texas and Mexico favoured the MFAH as an exhibiting institution. This becomes evident in a letter from 1930 to Chillman. Frederic Allen, the President of the AFA states that the MFAH serves 'as the best point from the standpoint of a better understanding with Mexico' (Allen). This underlines the aim to foster relationships between both countries and Houston as a favourable location to do so.

In the same year, *Oils, Watercolours, Drawings, Prints by Roberto Montenegro of Mexico* (1932) exhibited a selection of this artist's works and was a collaborative effort between the artist and the MFAH. This was the first monographic exhibition of Montenegro's work in the United States and was met with positive reviews locally from the Houston Post ("First American"). This brief outline of the MFAH's early efforts to exhibit art from Mexico shows their active engagement with several institutions nationally and internationally, as well as direct partnerships with Montenegro to organise an exhibition of his artworks in Houston. It also underlines the MFAH's significant geographical location which was nationally recognised and utilised as a strategic point to improve bilateral relations.

Nevertheless, the MFAH's focus did not continue in this way after 1932. The establishment of MoMA in 1929, began an initiative to include art from Latin America in its collection and programming in New York with increased zeal diverting funding and focus away from Houston as a geographic key position and institution. This was followed by decades of intermittent exhibitions of art from Latin America at the MFAH. These included showcases of its own vast collections of artworks and artefacts, as well as continued collaborations with institutions nationally and internationally to house temporary exhibitions. Examples of these are outlined throughout the following chapters to provide context and illustrate the changing relationship to art from Latin America at the MFAH.

The most important change in this affiliation occurred in 1987, when concrete plans for the integration of Latin American and Latino art at the MFAH were introduced by its then director, Marzio. He undertook an extensive research trip to Latin America visiting several museums in the region to establish direct relationships with institutions.<sup>2</sup> It was his aim to bring art from Latin America to Houston and 'establish an exhibition exchange program between South American museums and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston', he also asserted that 'approximately thirty-five percent of Houston's population has its heritage linked to Latin America. Exhibitions from Latin America would be meaningful to our community' (Marzio, "Grant Application"). Marzio sought to seriously integrate this field institutionally, and respond to Houston's communities by creating multilateral cultural exchanges.

These steps culminated in the institution's latest, and most encompassing change which took place in 2001. The MFAH founded the International Center for

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<sup>2</sup> These included: Museu Nacional de Belas Artes/National Museum of Fine Art, Rio de Janeiro; Galería Nacional de Artes Visuales/National Gallery of Visual Arts, Montevideo; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes/National Museum of Fine Art, Buenos Aires; Museo de Arte Moderno/Museum of Modern Art, Bogotá; and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas/Museum for Contemporary Art, Caracas. Marzio, "Report on Trip to South America".

the Arts of the Americas (ICAA). This branch focuses its research, exhibition programme, and collection on art from Latin America and Latino art exclusively, acting as a key institution that investigates this field in the United States. Ramírez, a Puerto Rican scholar and curator, is the Wortham curator of Latin American Art and director of the ICAA. This division of the MFAH consists of a specialized collection of approximately 400 artworks of 20<sup>th</sup> century art by Latin American and Latino artists which is accessible online. The objective of the ICAA is stated on the MFAH website and aims to:

Pioneer research of the diverse artistic production of Latin Americans and Latino artists from Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and the U.S.; educate audiences about the field; and open new avenues of intercultural exchange and dialogue.

The inclusion of Latino art and artists is significant in setting the ICAA apart from most other institutions in the United States that focus solely on art from Latin America or Latino art respectively. This poses a significant effort to integrate these fields at the MFAH through research, exhibitions, symposia, and publications. Spearheaded by Ramírez, the ICAA regularly undertakes large-scale projects based on the curator's motivation to put this field on the institutional and art historical map. She emphatically states:

This is a field that has not been taught, has not been systematized, has not been collected, and you can't embark on a serious effort unless you have the research being done. (Lubow)

In this quote and as will be shown, Ramírez ignores the early efforts undertaken at MoMA, and under its founding director, Alfred H. Barr (1929-1943), to systematise this field as early as the 1940s. Moreover, Gómez Sicre stands out as another key figure who consolidated and promoted this field in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the MFAH far extends these initiatives to its latest, and perhaps biggest endeavour, which includes the ICAA Documents Project, a digital archive of primary documents by artists, curators, writers, and critics from Latin

America and the United States.

The online repository was officially launched in 2012 and, to date, consists of over 8000 digitized documents that are freely accessible and downloadable. Through their far-reaching effort in research and document accumulation, the MFAH and ICAA enact their above outlined aims and have become a central institution in this field today. This has been preceded by the individuals discussed throughout this thesis who paved the way for current and future developments such as this to take place.

The ICAA aims to re-constitute and develop the narrative of Latin American and Latino art (Lubow). The institution achieves this through its multi-layered approach encompassing research, exhibitions, and publications. Ramírez recognised the potential of curating and being located within a mainstream museum to promote shifts in the perception of this field early in her career: 'I had discovered a space, which was the curatorial space, the curatorial practice, which to me offered far more possibilities' (Personal Interview). She assumes a powerful role that employs curating as a mode to re-visit and re-write this field making the ICAA a unique platform to do so.

Moreover, Ramírez claims that her appointment at the MFAH in Houston meant that she did not succumb to similar restrictions such as those imposed by, for example, MoMA. She maintains that MoMA's approach is steeped in traditional conceptions of this field (Personal Interview). Nonetheless, this institution remains a key actor and initiator of collecting, researching, and exhibiting art from Latin America as will be shown.

Notwithstanding this, my thesis is not a comparative study between MoMA and the MFAH. MoMA, however, acts as a starting point and parallel thread from which I explore nodes and moments in the MFAH's exhibition and curatorial history

that significantly expanded upon MoMA's early conception and its continued approach. The relationship between New York and Houston is outlined by Ramírez in candid terms:

There is a lot of prejudice against Houston here in the United States. Everything outside of New York is biased, particularly here in Texas from the point of view of New Yorkers. We are a wild state with reactionary politics and a whole bunch of cowboys. There has been a lot of resistance to accepting our project in New York in particular because they feel they have always been associated with Latin American art [through] MoMA. The reality is that the real innovative and sustained work has happened here since 2001. Whatever is happening in New York is just patching here and there. I'm not saying that there has not been important work generated. The important thing is that Houston has put millions of dollars into Latin American art which none of these institutions have. The ICAA would have been unthinkable in any of those institutions. It's annually six hundred [to] eight hundred thousand dollars out of the budget of this museum [that] goes towards the ICAA. That's not sustainable in today's economy. So, only Houston can do that. (Personal Interview)

This telling assessment illustrates a somewhat opposing position asserted by the MFAH within the United States museum network. Reports confirm the noteworthy overall financial investment of \$60 million for the ICAA and its activities (Atwood). Still, Ramírez underlines the significant historic role assumed by MoMA to investigate and collect art from Latin America as the first institution to do so in the United States. Nevertheless, she suggests that through the sustained investment in Houston the ICAA sets itself apart from MoMA and can innovate the field substantially due to not being bound by its institutional history and established conventions, which will be outlined in chapter one in more detail.

MoMA's critical role continues today as, for example, in October 2016, another key actor in the field of art from Latin America, namely the Colección Patricia Phelps Cisneros (CPPC), in New York, donated 150 of its artworks to MoMA. CPPC is a noteworthy institution that funds the study and collection of Latin American art focusing on geometric abstract art throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. CPPC announced plans for close collaboration with MoMA to organise events, encourage

research, and work on a series of publications regarding art from Latin America (Pogrebin). This institution hopes to 'build on MoMA's history of collection, exhibition, and study of the art and artists of the region' ("Transformative Gift"). The role of both institutions continues to be significant and should be viewed as further established contributors through which this field continues to be studied.

Notwithstanding this, the innovation proposed by the MFAH in this field adds a new dimension. Ramírez asserts that the MFAH and ICAA have taken on a leading role in this field in recent years. The obvious dissonance between these institutions, articulated by her, allows the MFAH to undertake serious forward thinking, investment of resources, and focus on this field of art and its historical and theoretical enquiry through its own unique approach. A close discussion and analysis of, not only this recent history, but also, what came before the ICAA, is equally significant to recognise the forays of this institution into new and unexplored areas.

The following pages reach to the MFAH's involvement with the Pan-American Union (PAU) during the Cold War, and its inclusion of cultural policies steeped in multiculturalism and pluralism during the 1980s. I will refer to the Pan-American Union as PAU for the remainder of this thesis. These developments will illustrate the MFAH's continued efforts to develop and deviate from established narratives and curatorial strategies. This investigation is timely and will provide a differentiated institutional narrative of Latin American and Latino art in the United States, and that focuses on the south of that country.

For this dissertation, I anchor this history in the consequences of United States interventionist approaches and the often-cited Monroe Doctrine established in 1823. This policy asserted the right for the United States to intervene in Latin America should the former perceive a threat to its security (*US Nat'l Archives*). Further, the founding of PAU in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is of significance, since this

organisation continues to operate through a unifying notion spanning across the Americas to promote collaboration between all countries encompassing diplomacy, business, economic, and most importantly for this thesis, art and cultural exchanges (Lamontagne 7). The location of this institution in Washington and near MoMA and CPPC in New York, places historic emphasis in that part of the country to the detriment of other institutions including the MFAH.

The early developments at MoMA, and under Barr, as well as the later shifts in the framing of art from Latin America, under Gómez Sicre, as the Chief of the Visual Arts section at PAU from 1946 onwards, are the subject of chapter one. This is underpinned by a discussion of the political, diplomatic, and economic motivations behind the increased interest in art from Latin America. It will become apparent that this is anchored in the initiation of the Good Neighbour Years, which mirrored a positive and collaborative approach that was reinforced through soft power strategies. These involved increased exchanges in the cultural sector, including exhibitions of artworks, with Latin America.

Another significant aspect, which is of central concern here, is the re-visioning of the continent into a cohering hemisphere, rather than separate countries. The geographical conception during those years changed to evoke a closer relationship through the metaphor of the neighbour. These methods promoted business and diplomatic collaboration throughout the continent in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This marked a change in the approach from one that was aggressive and interventionist, following the Monroe Doctrine, to one that was more appeasing and cooperative.

The MFAH's early efforts outlined above, followed by MoMA's efforts to exhibit and collect art from Latin America, are examples of soft power strategies adopted during that time. MoMA's increased activities in this area occurred through

funding received by the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) and its chief Nelson Rockefeller, who was also crucial in founding MoMA. Through the support from this government body, MoMA organised early major exhibitions of art from Latin America in the United States, among them was the first retrospective of the work by Diego Rivera (1886-1957) in 1931, and *Modern Cuban Painters* in 1944.<sup>3</sup> This exhibition was organised together with the Cuban art critic and curator Gómez Sicre after he spent time studying in New York, and working with Barr at MoMA during the early part of the 1940s.

This chapter also outlines Barr's aesthetic criteria based on the idea of quality in art, and art historical narrative of Modern European art. Gordon Kantor asserts that MoMA became imbued with the idea of a 'broad international modernism' embedded in European ideas and works of art. She states that 'intellectual curiosity about the "new" and "opportunism" gave modernism its broad artistic base and its international scope' (Gordon Kantor 126). Barr expressed this approach in the catalogue for the landmark exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936). He praises these movements as ultimately embodying high art, quality and international style.

The innovations expounded by earlier artists such as Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) and Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) were crucial in forming the origins for artworks to be accepted for exhibitions and into MoMA's collection. Two of their works will be discussed as part of this chapter to illustrate the technical and visual criteria adhered to by Barr. The artworks are Gauguin's *Te aa no Areois/The Seed of the Areoi* (1892) and Cézanne's *The Bather* (c.1885). Both remain part of MoMA's permanent collection.

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<sup>3</sup> Other notable exhibitions at MoMA include works by Inca, Aztec and Maya pre-Columbian art (1933); a solo show of the work by Brazilian painter Cândido Portinari (1903-1962), and festivals of Mexican and Brazilian music, both staged in 1940. *Organic Design* (1942) was the result of the *Industrial Design Competition for the 21 American Republics* initiated in 1941; *United Hemisphere Poster Competition* (1942); and *Brazil Builds* (1943) among others. Barr, Foreword, p.3.



Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, MoMA collected and integrated art from Latin America in its programme and began to research this field. This anchored the aesthetic, intellectual, and interpretative origins of Latin American art in this institution, and constitutes early systematisation and collection efforts. The director recognized los tres grandes/The Three Great Mexican muralists, David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) and Rivera as significant proponents of quality art leading to their overshadowing prominence in the United States and throughout accounts of art history in Latin America. Barr supported these artists despite the overt communist visual language they employed in their works. Through Barr's disinterested approach he recognized the technical and aesthetic merits as quality in the works of these artists.

This contrasts with Gómez Sicre's curatorial strategy that decidedly rejected Mexican Muralism and its associated artists. He found their art to be palpably political, reactionary, and retardataire in their approach to techniques and aesthetics in painting. Moreover, he saw in that movement a pandering to expectations generated in the United States of picturesque art from Latin America. His rejection of Mexican Muralism also coincided with the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War during which communist leanings were increasingly precluded in the United States showing the curator's alignment with national political views.

Gómez Sicre was born in Matanzas, Cuba. Previous generations of his family were involved in the Spanish-American War and the Independence War of 1898 in which Cuba fought to assert liberation from Spain only to become a protectorate of the United States until 1934 (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 16). It is perhaps also for this reason that during Gómez Sicre's tenure at the PAU, the category for art from Latin America began to shift. The curator's approach insisted upon parity within the hemisphere and recognized art from all Latin America as a contribution, rather than

derivative of European art as was asserted by Barr. Innovation and quality in art were especially highlighted by Gómez Sicre.

In conjunction with this development, I will take a short detour and discuss the controversy surrounding the exhibition *Oils and Watercolours by Diego Rivera* at the MFAH in 1951. In this case, the Houston chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) argued for this artist's works to be banned on the grounds of his communist leanings. Although the exhibition went ahead to great acclaim, this episode is indicative of the increased censorship exerted upon overtly political themes in art and against artists that were perceived as communist and oppositional to the democratic values represented by the United States. This also illustrates the MFAH's deviation from predominant political sensitivities and this institution's willingness to take risks in its programme.

Conversely, Gómez Sicre advocated, among other movements, AfroCubanismo, as a significant programme of the Cuban Avant-Garde. Close analysis of artworks by two of its most prominent artists, Jaime Valls Díaz (1883-1955) and Victor Manuel (1897-1969), will illustrate Barr's assessment of the artworks which did not consider the theoretical grounding of this movement. He emphasised the technical and aesthetic rendering of these artworks according to his established narrative of quality Modern art. On the other hand, Gómez Sicre contributed a more differentiated assessment and established significant precedents that paved the way for his later curatorial work at PAU.

Unlike Barr, Gómez Sicre possessed extensive experience travelling throughout Latin America and working intensely with artists before he arrived in the United States. He recognized the origins of art from Latin America as autochthonous in that region, and introduced Latin American discourses in his art criticism. These included the insistence upon Abstraction as a technique that was first employed by

pre-Columbian cultures and long before European and United States artists did so (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 19). He also advocated corporate sponsorship throughout the region to support exhibitions, while establishing a market for artists from Latin America in the United States, additionally adhering to PAU's aims to improve commercial relations in the hemisphere. Both Barr's and Gómez Sicre's early efforts contributed to the cohering and research of this field in the United States, as well as the MFAH's subsequent exploration of curatorial strategies.

The historical and theoretical precedents outlined in chapter one lead to the developments discussed in chapter two, which explores the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* (1956) at the MFAH. This showcase poses an example of an alternative curatorial strategy initiated by the MFAH, and in collaboration with PAU and Gómez Sicre. This endeavour was sponsored by Brown & Root Ltd. a construction and engineering company that is still active in the Gulf-Caribbean region and was in Houston at the time. The framework for this exhibition consisted of collapsing rigid national borders creating a revised hemispheric vision that was akin to the reviewed geography proposed during the Good Neighbour Years.

Nevertheless, the focus on the Gulf-Caribbean region included a south/north trajectory encompassing five southern States in the United States: Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and Texas, as well as numerous northern countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Rather than the traditional borders that separated Latin America from the United States, this exhibition blurred borders and evoked multilateral exchanges across this region through a re-imagined geography. For the first, and last time, the Americas were conflated into an overlapping entity supported by the idea of Pan-Americanism and hemispheric cooperation. I argue that the collapse of borders was the MFAH's most significant contribution. It established, for a brief period, an alternative network of countries and artists that

was praised by numerous individuals and institutions throughout the region. This network ran parallel to MoMA in New York, which was well established as the centre of the art world and determined quality in art.

The selection of artworks for this show was curated by Gómez Sicre, whose aim was to create a level playing field in which art from Latin America equalled that of art produced in the United States. The framework of collapsed borders, proposed by the MFAH, provided this opportunity. Gómez Sicre's curatorial approach was steeped in considerations of the technical and aesthetic rendering of artworks, an approach he acquired during his time in New York and through his friendship with Barr. This approach went as far as choosing artworks with decidedly no political content to promote PAU's Hemispheric vision and avoid controversies such as that resulting from Rivera's exhibition at the MFAH in 1951.

The artworks discussed as part of this chapter include Alejandro Obregón (Colombia, 1920-1992) *Cattle Drowning in the Magdalena* (1955), and Armando Morales (Nicaragua, 1927-2011) *Bird Cage* (1955). Both works won purchase prizes awarded by the jury at the MFAH for their distinct quality and were acquired by the institution for their collection. These artworks will be compared to later examples by the same artists to illustrate the development in their art practices, the incorporation of political content, and the treatment of state violence in their approaches. These later examples depict the death of a student, in Obregón's instance, and a dead guerrilla fighter in the case of Morales. These works are indicative of the change in the artists' circumstances as their respective countries experienced periods of heightened violence in the aftermath of significant political upheaval.

Lead by his approach, steeped in Cold War modernism, it will also become apparent that Gómez Sicre not only rejected overt political content in artworks, but also sought to mirror a positive hemispheric vision through high art. His primary

concern remained that of rejecting 'tourist art', as he called it, that depicted stereotypical images of nations in Latin America and that catered to the expectations of audiences in the United States. Through this curatorial vision, the exhibition was praised as a survey of the most challenging and accomplished selection of art from the Gulf-Caribbean region and was perceived as superior to the selection made in the United States.

This was the result of a separate jury employed for the United States portion, consisting of three jurors who chose artworks over one weekend at the MFAH. On the other hand, Gómez Sicre travelled extensively throughout the Gulf-Caribbean region seeking out artists and their studios to make his selection over the course of several weeks. The reception of this exhibition is testament to Gómez Sicre's standards, his keen eye for quality art, and his insistence upon equity between art from the United States and that from Latin America.

After the show, the curator returned to fulfil his position as Chief of the Visual Arts Section at PAU, taking with him his expertise and knowledge. These capabilities were not embedded at the MFAH marking this exhibition a one-off occurrence in Houston. Nonetheless, 1956 remains a significant year in the history of the MFAH as this exhibition left a legacy that promulgated, for a brief period, a successful alternative centre for art from Latin America in the United States. This shift in focus ran parallel to New York and MoMA establishing a vital inroad for the MFAH's institutional future in this field.

Chapters three and four pose a leap in the temporal trajectory I explore in the MFAH's exhibition history. I will outline a change in the cultural policies that developed in the United States throughout the 1960s and 1970s, reaching a high point in the 1980s. This decade marks the advent of multiculturalism and pluralism which proposed an active inclusion of minorities in mainstream institutions in the

United States. Anchoring their programme in this premise, the MFAH organised the first ever survey exhibition of Latino art at a mainstream institution. *Hispanic Art in the United States- Thirty Contemporary Sculptors and Painters* (1987) was significant in that the MFAH attempted to create a platform for Latino art at that institution and highlight this field as a crucial contribution to United States art history. This was further supported through the production of a catalogue containing essays that frame the artworks as expanding the North American canon.

This approach unearthed challenges that remain key issues in the field of identity politics today and that are unpicked in chapter three. These concern, firstly, the differences between the labels 'Latino' and 'Hispanic', and, secondly, the debate surrounding national cultural policies originating in multiculturalism and pluralism. This chapter will place this exhibition in the context of Houston and Texas, since the MFAH's director, Marzio sought to mirror and integrate the Latino population living there within the institution more broadly.

The origins of the terms Hispanic and Latino will be outlined providing an insight into their meanings and their use on a national and State level, particularly in Texas. This will be offset with the history of the term Latino, which originated from an act of self-determination by this heterogeneous group against the use of the term Hispanic by official government bodies. Observations by several Latino artists and writers, among them Mexican-American artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Luis Camnitzer, and, philosopher Ilan Stavav, will illustrate the difficulties in using these terms and highlight the ambiguity in which they continue to be viewed.

Nonetheless, operating distinctly outside of institutions, Latino art was born out of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and a profound desire to express the experiences of the Latino community in the United States. These consisted of the struggles faced by Latinos for recognition and equality. As this growing minority took

recourse in its connection with Latin American culture and traditions, it created works of art that were socially and politically charged. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Latino scholar and writer, has called this deep rootedness 'pan-Latino consciousness' and states that the 'surge in the Latino population coincided with the rise of a pan-Latino consciousness that evolved in the artistic and cultural production in the United States' ("Destabilizing Categorizations" 790). Transcending borders and geography through their multifaceted practices, Latinos questioned what art is and created new conditions for its visibility that were divergent to European modernist conceptions of technique and aesthetics. These intertwined with their origins and experiences in Latin America and the United States.

The cross-fertilization and continuous exchange and incorporation of these ideas underpin Latino art and culture, which, in turn, mirrors the heterogeneous origins of the many Latino communities in the United States. This will be illustrated through interviews I conducted with Margo Gutierrez, librarian for Latino Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and Mari Carmen Ramírez, during my research stay in Houston and Austin in 2014. Their candid observations as Latinas and as scholars, living and working in the United States, provide an insight into the complicated make-up of this minority, particularly in Texas. Furthermore, an overview of the demographic in this State will highlight its significant role as being home to a vast number of Latinos.

The chapter also outlines and discusses Octavio Paz's essay for the catalogue for *Hispanic Art in the United States-Thirty Contemporary Sculptors and Painters* in which he establishes a binary divide between a white, protestant, Anglo-Saxon community versus Latinos. He highlights historical ties with Mexico and the forming of Mexican-American and Tejano communities in Texas. Paz underlines Latino art as isolated, citing the artist Martín Ramírez (1895-1963) as a symbol for the Latino

community across the United States. His emphasis on ethnicity establishes Latino art as different to the mainstream and justifies its inclusion within the MFAH.

This is offset with the assessment of multiculturalism and pluralism as a basis from which Latinos were included in the MFAH's exhibition programme. This concerns mostly the emphasis upon ethnicity which was crucial in forming the curatorial strategy for this exhibition. The criticisms focused on the premise of this show and its anchoring in multiculturalism which is contested as a tool that appeases tensions and homogenises different artistic expressions under cultural policies that are perceived as paternalistic. The MFAH became embroiled in a debate surrounding cultural policies and served as a stark reminder that parallel histories and conditions of visibility should not depend upon the mainstream for legitimisation.

This is followed in chapter four by a close discussion of *Hispanic Art in the United States- Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*. This chapter recognises the pioneering and committed effort by the MFAH to include Latino art in its institutional fabric. This is evident through the financial and research effort afforded by Marzio. He recognised the changing demographic in Houston and sought to reflect this through the MFAH. This also dovetailed with his efforts to forge relations with museums in South America mentioned earlier. He undertook a research trip to various institutions in 1987 and again, in 1991, with this aim in mind. Initially, however, his vision aimed for the MFAH, as the first mainstream institution, to create a lasting platform for Latino artists reflecting this demographic more accurately through the MFAH.

It becomes apparent that this director responded to the MFAH's environment and sought to embed and reflect Houston's population. His approach, and that of the curators Livingston and Beardsley, is based upon a levelling of museum practices and the simultaneous exhibition of Latino art and European Masters, as well as the



demand to display both in a disinterested and decontextualised forum. This led to the judgement of artworks through a distinct Eurocentric aesthetic framework that was reminiscent of MoMA's conception of quality art.

The main participants in this project were close colleagues and had prior experience in curating exhibitions of minority artists and movements. Livingston was associate director and chief curator at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington between 1975 and 1989. She curated one of the first exhibitions of Chicano art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Los Four: Almaraz/de la Rocha/Lujan/Romero* showcased works by this artist collective in 1974 and is hailed by Jackson as a significant early step to present Chicano art in the mainstream (152-153). Together with Beardsley, she co-curated *Black Folk Art in America: 1930-1980* (1982) for the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Beardsley is an art historian and currently director of Garden and Landscape studies at Dumbarton Oaks. He wrote numerous books and organised exhibitions of contemporary art together with Marzio while the latter was director at the Corcoran before moving to the MFAH in 1982. Livingston replaced Marzio as the director at the Corcoran that year.

The curators' approach aimed to forge a field of Latino art within an expanded United States art history that led to a somewhat uncomfortable inclusion based on aesthetic and technical criteria originating outside of the Latino community. This ignored the roots of Latino art in the civil rights movement. While trying to appear progressive, the MFAH caused an uncomfortable measuring of Latino art against Eurocentric conceptions that failed to introduce a reflexive assessment of Latino art and their crucial contribution to art within a critical context.

This included the inscription of Latino art within a Eurocentric art historical narrative through Livingston's catalogue essay. Her account denominates this field as 'Latino/Hispanic Modernism' and 'Picassosque Surrealism (Picasso via Lam, Matta,

and Miró)' through which the curator detects the artistic oeuvres of Pablo Picasso (Spain, 1881-1973), Joan Miró (Spain, 1893-1983), the Mexican muralists, as well as Joaquín Torres-García (Uruguay, 1874-1949), Roberto Matta (Chile, 1911-2002), and Wifredo Lam (Cuba, 1902-1982) (106). This unprecedented attempt at inscribing Latino art within a narrative that leads to European Masters exposes what Mari Carmen Ramírez calls the 'displacement of European modernisms' and a levelling of Latino art disarming it of its critical potential and innovation of artistic practices ("Beyond the Fantastic" 238-239).

Livingston's assertion will be contrasted with the approach advocated by E. Carmen Ramos and Ybarra-Frausto who recognise the parallel development of Latino art to that of North American art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ybarra-Frausto further underlines the particularly fertile discussions originating in Latino art that oppose established narratives based on Eurocentric and modernist conceptions of quality and style in artworks. The technical and aesthetic approaches advocated by the MFAH prove insufficient in understanding the motivations and contexts of artists who work outside of the mainstream and wish to be recognised based upon equity rather than mainstream criteria.

To illustrate these parallel conditions and the Eurocentric interpretations by the curators and some reviewers, I will closely discuss selected artworks. These are two portraits, *Preacher* (1983) and *Fatima* (1984) by John Valadez (b.1951), a Chicano artist from California who creates portraits of people in his immediate surroundings in East Los Angeles. This is followed by Carmen Lomas Garza (b.1948). This Tejana artist lives and works in Texas and focuses her work on preserving and documenting memory and traditions. Her work *Abuelitos piscando nopalitos/Grandparents cutting Cacti* (1980) is an example that integrates Tejano culture and history within a Texas and United States context.

Finally, Luis Jiménez (b. 1940), also a Tejano artist, contributed the working drawing for a large-scale sculpture he later realised. *Cruzando el Rio Bravo/Border Crossing* (1986) documents the artist's grandmother crossing the border into Texas during the Mexican Revolution to flee the violence in that country. Further, *Honky Tonk* (1981-1986), a series of large-scale fibreglass sculptures, illustrates Tejano nightlife for the generations of people that remain in the United States.

It will become apparent that various interpretations put forward focus upon the search for identity and isolation of Latinos in the United States. Moreover, responses by reviewers highlight psychology and mystical elements in artworks. The artworks included in this chapter will also unearth the contradictory and subjective interpretations by the curators, especially in the case of Valadez. While Beardsley emphasises the artist's quest for identity, Livingston recognises the individuated response to the artist's surroundings.

Conversely, I argue that the works depict idealised cultural and regional traditions. This is particularly true of the works by Lomas Garza and Jiménez as they deal with the condition of Tejanos more broadly, while Valadez takes on a distinctly critical approach toward ethnicity, identity and storytelling. At the same time, the works underline the resistance of the Latino community to be included and disarmed within reductive assertions comprising the labelling of this community based on ethnicity and mainstream criteria of Eurocentric narratives of art.

Most importantly, the curatorial strategy, although bold and pioneering in its attempt to expand North American art history, considers ethnicity as a quality aspect of art, and bases this in scholarly engagement and the catalogue. This approach falls short of the promises it states, as the artists remain isolated within a confined ethnic remit, rather than providing a critical response to history and established narratives.

Nonetheless, this exhibition was significant in that it unearthed tensions

within identity politics, and the cultural and political motivations inherent in a project such as this one. Moreover, it proved the MFAH's commitment to actively engage with the Latino community and embed them within a dialogue and the institution. Finally, the exhibition proved the MFAH's willingness to take risks with a project that was previously not tried, confirming its pioneering efforts in reviewing curatorial strategies.

The attempt at including Latino art within the MFAH's institutional fabric, although partially successful, was still a significant milestone for this institution in ascertaining a more serious role in the exhibition and research of art from Latin America and Latino art. Chapter five describes the incorporation of both fields through *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*. This is the latest and perhaps most daring attempt at re-writing art historical narratives and overturn assumptions about this field in the United States.

This exhibition was co-curated by Ramírez and Olea. Ramírez previously worked as assistant director at the Ponce Museum of Art in Puerto Rico where she curated a retrospective of Lorenzo Homar's (1913-2008) work ("Personal Interview"). She was later appointed as the first curator of Latin America Art in the United States at the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art in Austin between 1988 and 2000, before she was eventually appointed director of the ICAA. Olea, a Mexican scholar, translator, and writer, regularly publishes essays and texts on art from Latin America. He is also involved in the digital archive at the ICAA as Translations and Publications Editor.

The exhibition discussed in this chapter should be understood as a cornerstone showcase following the founding of the ICAA and the consolidation of the curators' aims. The result of this project was a series of monographic exhibitions of artists including Hélio Oiticica (Brazil, 1937-1980), *The Body of Colour* in 2006; a

retrospective of the work by Carlos Cruz-Díez (Venezuela, b. 1923) *Color in Space and Time* in 2011; and an exhibition of the work by Antonio Berni (Argentina, 1905-1981) titled *Antonio Berni: Juanito and Ramona* in 2013, among others. All artists mentioned here were exhibited as part of *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* and had previously not been subject of monographic exhibitions organised by the MFAH and ICAA. Ultimately, the aim is to unearth artists and artistic strategies that were not well known in the United States offering a renewed reading of this field that goes beyond expected movements such as Mexican Muralism.

This exhibition proposed a curatorial strategy that consisted of two crucial features. Firstly, a constellation model consisting of six combinations of terms: 'Progress and Rupture', 'Vibrational and Stationary', 'Touch and Gaze', 'Cryptic and Committed', 'Play and Grief' and 'Universal and Vernacular'. These provided the framework through which the more than 200 artworks were loosely categorised. Secondly, the research conducted for this exhibition, and the essays published as part of the catalogue, are rooted in archival documents originating in Latin America. The catalogue and the exhibition consisted of facsimiles of archival documents including manifestos, essays, and letters written by artists, curators, and scholars.

The inclusion of archival material in an exhibition and catalogue was first introduced by Dawn Ades for her 1989 survey *Art in Latin America- The Modern Era, 1820-1980*. Adopting this strategy to trace and root an alternative history, *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* also purposely introduced hitherto unknown artists to a reviewed art historical narrative and redefined the conditions through which art from Latin America is determined and viewed. The archival feature inherent in this exhibition underpinned this aim and has not been reviewed until now. I believe that this constitutes a fundamental aspect that aided the shift in curatorial strategy and the writing of art history from Latin America together with

the constellations proposed by the MFAH. I argue that this is the ICAA's most valuable contribution to the exhibition of art from Latin America in the United States in recent years.

The curators proposed a narrative of artistic practices and developments that took place in Latin America in which European modernist ideas were critically inverted and adapted to the artists' local milieu. This aim is a view shared by Baddeley and Fraser some fifteen years earlier (2). Similarly, the approaches were steeped in the social and political, rather than aesthetic and technical, characteristics of art, and distinctly countered that of Barr's narrow framework for quality and high art. The constellation model mentioned above, acted as a questioning device that formed the foundation for this reevaluation.

Ramírez specifically mentions artistic strategies originating in Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Neo-Plasticism, Constructivism, and Surrealism that were re-appropriated and inverted upon their arrival in Latin America ("A Highly" 3). The curators' aim was to locate the Avant-Garde in Latin America, while at the same time creating a system of significant nodes and connections within a global art ecology. Crucially, it has been observed that the premise of the exhibition still adheres, in some way, to the criteria it critiques since it is a response to already established narratives of Latin American art tracing artistic developments to European and, to a lesser degree, North American movements.

For example, Ramírez wrote two essays, on Conceptualism and Constructivism respectively, establishing connections between artists and periods throughout the Americas. She proposes a narrative that cuts across geographical and temporal boundaries and mentions developments taking place in Conceptualism throughout Chile, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, and New York during a period spanning from the 1960s until the late 1990s. Ramírez underlines the social and

non-aesthetic objectives embodied by practices of artists. Thus, the works function as mediator between the social and political reality surrounding them.

Similarly, her take on Constructivism underlines the significance of artistic movements across the continent including Torres-García's School of the South, which this artist founded upon his return to Uruguay from Europe. He established a visual language that incorporated pre-Columbian symbols and signs coupled with geometry, abstraction and mysticism, aiming to create a universal visual language. This in turn influenced artists in their practices throughout the region, and in subsequent years, as will be shown.

At the same time, Ramírez also steps the origins of inversion in Oswald de Andrade's (Brazil, 1890-1954) 'The Anthropophagous Manifesto' (1928). In this text, de Andrade incorporates the allegory of cannibalism to illustrate the metaphorical eating up of European concepts and regurgitating them to create new ideas that are rooted in Brazil. Torres-García and de Andrade operated independently from each other and during different times. Nonetheless, Ramírez's deliberate collapse of periods, movements, and geopolitical parameters opens additional avenues of exploration and creates new nodes and connections previously not manifested in this way.

The exhibition also establishes a connection with Latino art through two works by Julio Tomás Martínez (Puerto Rico, 1878-1954). However, this inclusion is not discussed or contextualised successfully leaving this link weak and underexplored in the context of the ICAA's founding and its aim to incorporate Latino art within its research remit. Conversely, the catalogue and exhibition highlight various artists, some of whom have previously not been exhibited in the United States, as proponents of a radical Avant-Garde in Latin America.

The curators distinctly do not claim to have presented a survey, but propose

a selection of movements and artists that illustrate innovative approaches to art practices. Additionally, to review the history of art from Latin America in the United States, the curators deliberately veered away from traditional interpretations of Mexican Muralism. This has been criticised by some reviewers as a serious oversight. This also concerned the omission of artworks by Frida Kahlo and artists from movements such as Indigenism and Figurativism. Nevertheless, this was a necessary step to reevaluate the movements and artists within a changing context. Rather than highlighting the already widely known narrative of the Three Great Mexican Muralists, their works are incorporated within a wider, and re-written, context of film-making. This is indicative of the broader aim proposed by the curators which establishes an adjacent approach to this field and one that does not repeat MoMA's already established narrative.

*Inverted Utopias-Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* is most noted for its constellation model, which will be analysed through various reviews and academic papers that have been written since. This will provide an indication of the impact the MFAH and ICAA have had so far, and continue to exert in this field, through pushing institutional interpretations and standards.

Freire's quote at the beginning of this introduction expresses the power struggle between divergent entities. This includes the institutions discussed here. This thesis is furthermore based upon awareness of the disparity between the United States and Latin America and their historically unequal power relation. García Canclini outlines this condition as it exists today most accurately and through a nuanced view:

The connections that now make us dependent on the United States and on global powers cannot be explained as relations of *coloniality*, which imply the occupation of a subordinated territory, or an *imperialist* relation, which entail



a linear domination by the imperial center over the subaltern nations. [...] U.S. imperialism relegated these countries to dependency and a peripheral position within the world system of unequal and uneven exchanges. (emphasis in the original text; "Consumers and Citizens" 4)

This quote outlines the shifting relationship between Latin America and the United States and points to the skewed power relations that favour the latter. The MFAH, situated in the hegemonic north, collaborates with Latino artists and institutions nationally, as well as those in Latin America. As a result, the MFAH is often criticised, albeit not in academic papers or articles, for its location and agenda to further the study of art from Latin America and Latino art through an institution in the United States. This condition appears to enact dependency and a peripheral position.

However, the MFAH seeks to break the centre/periphery binary by introducing the idea of a network in which art from Latin America and Latino art comprise another significant, albeit not sufficiently recognised, node in an international art ecology. This thesis will illustrate how this approach first occurred at the MFAH through the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, and its radical geographical proposal that levelled the Gulf-Caribbean region. Although this was not further embedded at the MFAH at the time, I believe that this marks a significant moment in the MFAH's institutional history. Equally, *Hispanic Art-Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* posed an attempt at levelling north American art through a unifying, and, at the time, innovative approach. This institution repeatedly attempted to become a gateway to art from Latin American and Latino art by moderating these uneven exchanges. Nevertheless, the difficulty of this endeavour is best encapsulated by Ramírez:

The imbalance is what I call the incommensurability of the experience between Latin American countries and the U.S. You're constantly trying to navigate those two worlds, which as I said before, are incommensurable. One world doesn't fit into the other and there are huge differences, huge gaps, huge ignorance in between. (Personal Interview)

Ramírez points to the fundamental differences that prevail between the United States and Latin America and the difficulty in traversing these effectively in an institution situated in the north. She also points to the chasm between both geographical entities, which cannot be remedied through a unifying approach such as Pan-Americanism, multiculturalism and pluralism. The difficulties and lack of reconciliation remain at the heart of this debate which I do not propose to solve, however, this thesis explores this contested field as circumstances shifted with each exhibition discussed here.

Lately, this culminated in Ramírez asserting the role as cultural broker and mediator. She has theorised this position in previous essays including *Brokering Identities: Art Curators and the Politics of Cultural Representation* and *Between Two Waters: Image and Identity in Latino-American Art*. In both instances, she attributes the curator with a central role in arbitrating differences. This in turn ascribes him or her with a powerful role which creates monolithic narratives anew.

Notwithstanding this, I believe that the changes in curatorial strategies were possible due to the MFAH's comparatively peripheral status in the United States. The MFAH's distance from New York and MoMA, as well as the MFAH's proximity to Latin America, means that this institution could align its curatorial strategies with that of its immediate neighbours to the south in diverse and innovative ways.

Still, the conception of quality art and international style articulated by Barr was crucial in establishing a scholarship of art from Latin America in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Barr's conditions determined what art is based solely on its aesthetic value. Correspondingly, the MFAH initially based its conception on these criteria, however, it repeatedly deviated from some of these categorizations including geographic parameters, unrecognised fields of art history, and reviewing established narratives.

As a result, my thesis adds a vital piece to the institutional history, not only of the MFAH, but also to a wider understanding of the field of art and art history from Latin America and Latino art in the United States. A thorough analysis and discussion of this theme is timely, as there is a paucity of literature about the role asserted by the MFAH in this field. While this institution is emerging as a key player in the research, collection and exhibition of Latin American and Latino art, scholarly papers and books that look at the MFAH's history in this field are rare. A survey book of its collections was published in 1982. *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: A Guide to the Collection* provides an overview of its holdings and was written by its then director William C. Agee (1974-1982). This publication, however, excludes the collection of art from Latin America it already possessed at the time and focuses upon their European and ancient collections of artefacts and artworks, which were the central focus under the leadership of Agee, and before the directorship of Marzio.

The Methodology for this thesis encompasses a variety of avenues. Much of this dissertation is based on archival research and primary material gathered during my research stay at the archives of the MFAH in Houston and interviews conducted with Ramírez and Gutierrez throughout September and October 2014.

Other sources include a variety of books and academic papers analysing histories of diplomacy between the United States and Latin America throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the history of art from Latin America and Latino art. Sarah E. Foltz's 2013 Master's thesis explores the MFAH and the Dallas Museum of Fine Art in context of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* and the prevalent discourse of Pan-Americanism during the 1950s. This thesis helped me greatly in obtaining valuable insight into the latest interpretations of this historical period, and include further archival documents in the form of press clippings for chapter two of this thesis.

Literature that helped me gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between the United States and Latin America in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century include Claire F. Fox's *Making Art Panamerican: Cultural Policy and the Cold War*. Fox provides a cogent assessment of the role of the PAU in the strengthening of diplomatic ties through art and culture. She assesses the crucial role played by Gómez Sicre who contributed to the establishment, recognition and promotion of young, innovative artists from Latin America in the United States.

Further, Amy Spellacy's paper "Mapping the Metaphor of the Good Neighbour: Geography, Globalism, and Pan-Americanism during the 1940s" proved essential in my understanding of the re-imagining of the western hemisphere as a coherent entity that must collaborate against perceived threats coming from Europe at the time. Spellacy discusses these policies and highlights the aim of the United States to secure Latin America's natural resources and its cooperation (53). Both, Fox and Spellacy, outline the change in approach by the United States from aggressively promoting its own economic and political interests to collaborating with nations in Latin America through the exchange of art and culture. These approaches continue in altered modes today and should be kept in mind throughout the following pages.

This is underpinned by the idea of Latin America as a geographical, political and economic area. At this juncture, it is apt to recall that the definition of Latin America originates in Europe and has later been adopted in the United States to mirror changing political and economic policies (Swanson 1; Baddeley and Fraser 1). Nevertheless, in opposition to the geographical delineations, Octavio Paz summarizes Edmundo O'Gorman who states that Latin America

Is not a geographical region, and it is not a past; perhaps it is not even a present. It is an idea, an invention of the European spirit. America is a utopia, a moment in which the European spirit becomes universal by freeing

itself of its historical particulars and conceiving of itself as a universal idea.  
(*The Labyrinth of Solitude* 170)

As shown by this quote, the definition, delineation, and the way in which scholars approach this field, originates outside of Latin America. It remains a region wedded to European ideas and conceptions making a truly levelled reading impossible as has been pointed out by Baddeley and Fraser (1). Moreover, García Canclini establishes that it is no longer sufficient to speak of Latin America as one coherent whole. He cites inherent differences in history, culture and traditions between, for example, Mexico and Argentina, stating that Mexico embraces its indigenous roots creating a nation that is different to Argentina, which mostly exterminated its indigenous population. Because of incremental immigration from Europe throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this country appears more akin to people in exile from Europe (*Latinoamericanos* 11).

García Canclini underlines the heterogeneity of Latinos in the United States and lists some of the occupations and associated reasons for immigration that include business people, artists, and students, among others. Further to that, he states that there are vast differences between an undocumented immigrant and, for example, a business man or woman who travel to and from the United States (*Latinoamericanos* 24-25). He echoes Gómez-Peña's observations that are outlined in detail in chapter three. The heterogeneity between different people and communities makes a coherent field such as art from Latin America and Latino art increasingly difficult to narrow down through borders alone.

Thus, the geographical delineations of Latin America are to be understood as deconstructed frameworks. This notion runs throughout this thesis as borders are collapsed, ethnicities are understood within a pan-ethnic context, and art histories span through time and space. These approaches deviate from purely geopolitical and chronological considerations. Thus, this thesis pivots between perceived borders

throughout the Americas and the Latino community in the United States as encompassing deeply complicated ideas.

My research in the field of art from Latin America began in canonical books, written in the United States and Europe about art from Latin America. These include anthologies of art from Latin America such as Jaqueline Barnitz's *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art from Latin America*; Edward J. Sullivan's *Latin American Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*; the already mentioned publication by Ades *Art in Latin America- the Modern Era 1820-1980*; and Edward Lucie-Smith's *Latin American Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. These survey publications provide a scholarly grounding for this field of study and for this thesis. Sullivan's survey book is, moreover, the first to inscribe Chicano art into the art historical canon by including Zamudio-Taylor's chapter on this movement which is cited in this thesis.

These publications provide a fundamental framework to our, arguably limited, understanding and interpretation of art and art history from Latin America. Their overall framing often support geographical surveys of this field. This is particularly true of Sullivan's publication which is arranged through chapters by countries. Barnitz and Lucie-Smith opted for overviews of movements and developments throughout Latin America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Barnitz additionally provides a timeline and map of Latin America in her publication adding to the geographical delineation of this field. Ades presents a historical and by admission selective view of art from Latin America since Independence from Spain. All publications are significant and widely recognized in the United States and Europe in that they underline key ideas and movements. They furnished my thesis with valuable information and historical contexts about artists and their creations.

At the same time, their canonical character is offset with papers and articles written recently that argue counter to monolithic narratives already established.

Furthermore, the exhibitions discussed and the archival material consulted also review and expand these narratives.

Ramírez features as scholar and curator in chapter five, and is a prominent critic of multiculturalism and the case study in chapters three and four. She is hailed as a significant promoter of Latin American and Latino art in the United States by Time Magazine and through her work at the ICAA outlined above (Lacayo). Notable publications included here are *Beyond the Fantastic-Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art*, in which she outlines her misgivings toward exhibitions that approach art from Latin America and Latino art through, what she calls 'Euro-American' approaches (234). This text is incorporated in chapter four as it critiques *Hispanic Art in the United States-Thirty Contemporary Sculptors and Painters* and provides insight into Ramírez's approach toward curating outlined in detail in chapter five.

In conjunction with this, I explore the debate surrounding identity politics, ethnic labels, their histories, backgrounds, and responses from artists who identify as belonging to its diverse communities. Thus, much of chapters three and four are rooted in Gómez-Peña's and Ilan Stavans' observations about ethnic labels, pluralism, and multiculturalism in the United States. Key writers in these chapters also include Ybarra-Frausto who writes extensively about Chicano art and its history in the United States. His assertion about pan-Latino consciousness, a term he has not yet theorised, also forms a significant aspect of these chapters. Pan-Latino consciousness, the shared ideas of culture and tradition, is further echoed through my interviews conducted with Gutierrez and Ramírez.

Crucial to a review of curatorial strategies are the ideas put forward by Ramos, who outlines the Smithsonian's efforts to integrate Latino art in its collection. However, rather than the inclusion and disarming of this field, she advocates,

together with Ybarra-Frausto, the heterogeneity of Latino art as a form of parallel and critical history in the United States. This holds true for art from Latin America, which increasingly presents parallel and critical art historical narratives within the United States context and away from canons already written. This, again, echoes Freie and should be considered throughout this thesis.

Finally, the exhibition catalogues for the case studies in chapter four and five are closely analysed. As remaining documents and crucial aspects of the respective curatorial strategies, these are central in my research to provide a full picture of the motivations and framing of these exhibitions. Conversely, articles, press releases, and reviews written about these exhibitions are cited extensively throughout all chapters.

The literature review outlined here unearths a significant lack in the charting an analysis of the MFAH's institutional history in this field, and its more daring and bold exhibitions and curatorial strategies between 1956 and 2004. I aim to contribute to an opening of this field and a critical engagement with curating throughout history. I propose a critical history that responds to unequal power relations and rigid geopolitical constructions by deconstructing these conditions and enabling a non-linear, inter-disciplinary, and responsive narrative.



## **Chapter 1- Early Curatorial Strategies: From MoMA and Alfred H. Barr to PAU and José Gómez Sicre**

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the political and curatorial precedents leading up to the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* and the subsequent exhibitions discussed as part of this thesis. The following pages outline the international diplomatic landscape and the European modernist and aesthetic theories during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which contributed to the selection of artworks for exhibitions of art from Latin America at MoMA, PAU, and subsequently at the MFAH. I will highlight the approaches adopted by Barr and Gómez Sicre underlining the differences in their conception and presentation of art from Latin America. This will outline the early framework through which art from Latin America was judged and accepted, and underscore its changing interpretation in the United States.

To provide historical context, this chapter outlines the Good Neighbour Years. This was preceded by the idea of Pan-Americanism, which introduced diplomatic collaboration in the hemisphere since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After continued aggressive interventions undertaken by the United States, countries in Latin America were increasingly suspicious toward their neighbour to the North. For example, Foweraker et al. count over thirty military interventions undertaken by the United States in Latin America between 1898 and 1934 (14). By the 1920s the United States reviewed its diplomatic relationship with Latin America. The decidedly hostile attitude against the United States began to be quelled through a goodwill tour conducted by President Herbert Hoover (1929 -1933) in 1928. Delivering speeches throughout the region, he stated that the United States would interfere less in the region's affairs (Williams 131-132).

This open and soft diplomatic approach was continued by Hoover's successor Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945), who relaxed interventionist approaches further to promote collaboration in the region (Williams 133). The Good Neighbour Years were underpinned by the conception of the western hemisphere as one neighbouring, coherent geographical region (Spellacy 42). These strategies are also known as soft power approaches and encourage collaboration through the alignment of a hemispheric and Pan-American vision. Therefore, rather than hard power strategies through direct military or economic intervention, the use of soft power suggests a more indirect way of influencing. Williams explains this strategy as follows: [Soft power] resources include a state's cultural appeal, ideology, political values, and its leverage in international institutions (31). Similarly, Nye asserts that

Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A country's soft power rests in its resources of culture, values, and policies. (94)

Art and culture became a way to implement this approach and through their exchange between countries in the Americas, the emphasis upon cooperation, mutual understanding and the positive effects of democracy were underlined (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 3). Throughout the 1930s and 1940s it was MoMA that promoted art from Latin America under the leadership of its founding director Alfred H. Barr (1929-1943).

MoMA was closely affiliated with government agencies such as the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), which was attached to the Inter-American Fund. Its director, Nelson Rockefeller, encouraged and funded the research, collection, and exhibition of art from Latin America at MoMA, making this institution pioneering during those early years. Rockefeller, and his mother, Abby Aldrich, were instrumental in the founding of MoMA and contributed numerous artworks from Latin America to its collection. Soft power diplomacy rooted this field

in the United States promoting democratic values, as well as collaboration within the western hemisphere. The diplomatic aims for this endeavour and the geographical parameters determined the motivation and it was Barr's task to establish the aesthetic and theoretical criteria for the exhibition and acquisition of artworks to MoMA's nascent collection.

Barr's selection criteria for artworks included those that displayed a universal visual language and were 'international in style or character' (Barr, "Problems of Research and Documentation" 39). This determined an artwork's quality. The conditions for this are outlined by Rosenberg:

"Quality" in a work of art is not merely a matter of personal opinion but to a high degree also a matter of common agreement among artistically sensitive and trained observers and to a high degree objectively traceable. (Rosenberg xxiv)

In other words, quality artworks were subject to consensus among experts in the field. They applied certain technical and aesthetic criteria that communicated universal ideas. According to Barr, the basis for this conception is found in European artistic practices, particularly Cubism and Abstraction, which he viewed as the apotheosis of high art. Other movements revered by him include Surrealism, Impressionism, Expressionism, and Post-Impressionism. Thus, MoMA's collection consisted of works by pivotal modernist artists who created artworks that originated in these movements and eras including Cézanne, Gauguin, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Henri Matisse (1869-1964) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917) to name only a few (Gordon Kantor 241). It was these artists and their practices that determined the standards of quality art.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For detailed discussions about quality in art and its criteria see also, Ashton 4-9; and Anderson 9-23.

This chapter discusses the works *Te aa no Areois/The Seed of the Areoi* (1892) by Gauguin and *The Bather* (1885) by Post-Impressionist painter Cézanne. Barr attributes both artists as source theoreticians and practitioners who influenced numerous subsequent artistic movements in Europe through their innovative approaches and techniques (*Cubism* 19). Through Barr's collection efforts and understanding of Modern art, he established a genealogy of quality and international style that was bolstered by his essay for the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* which took place at MoMA in 1936, and that determined the visual criteria for high art.

In the field of art from Latin America, MoMA focused its attention particularly on Mexican Muralism throughout the 1930s and 1940s as an example of quality art since it was inspired and influenced by European artists including those cited above. Mexican Muralism became most promoted and associated with Latin American art. The Three Great Mexican Muralists, Siqueiros, Orozco and Rivera, were hailed as incorporating European aesthetics and techniques most successfully in their works. Rivera was particularly inspired by European artists during his time spent in France and Italy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The artist incorporated techniques from various European movements including those developed by Cézanne, Gauguin, and Picasso, matching Barr's criteria of quality art.

After a period of intense focus on Mexican Muralism, a sea change occurred by the end of World War II. This was brought on by the start of the Cold War after Fascism was defeated in Europe. Thus, the promotion of art from Latin America in the United States shifted significantly. Firstly, considering the beginnings of the Cold War, the promotion and exchange of art from Latin America became yet more important. Secondly, MoMA in New York decreased its programme while PAU in Washington D.C. increased their focus on art from Latin America significantly. This

was embedded within an augmented diplomatic framework adopted by PAU, whose aim was to appeal to Latin American countries and strengthen democracy vis-à-vis the threat of communism. This had a further effect on Mexican Muralism, which, with its overt communist leanings, fell out of favour with some institutions including PAU.

This organisation found its propagator in the Cuban curator and art critic Gómez Sicre who was appointed as Chief of the Visual Art Section in 1946. He was tasked with the continuation of positive artistic exchanges in the hemisphere, and was critical of Mexican Muralism which he viewed as reactionary. Comparably to Barr, Gómez Sicre's approach was also rooted in the understanding of quality art that was entrenched in avant-garde approaches from Europe. He showcased work that rejected the then prevalent undertaking in art schools throughout Latin America to duplicate European ideas and techniques.

Prior to his appointment at PAU, Gómez Sicre worked with Barr on the exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* at MoMA in 1944. This show exhibited paintings from the Cuban Avant-Garde movement known as AfroCubanismo for the first time at that institution. Anreus points to the shift in the interpretation of Cuban painting that was imbued with MoMA's rhetoric of Modern art ("Historical Close-Up"). The exhibition promoted the innovative approaches adopted by the artists toward painting and sculpture. Those were rooted in local contexts in which art was created, while at the same time supporting art that was international in its visual language.

Examples of AfroCubanismo that are discussed in this chapter include those by Cuban painters Victor Manuel (1897-1969) whose work *Muchacha con manzana roja/Girl with Red Apple* (1940) is an example of employing a distinctly Cuban visual language. Similarly, Jaime Valls Díaz (1883-1955) was a proponent of the first generation of Cuban Avant-Garde art. His artwork *La rumba/The Party* (1928), and

that of Manuel, will be contrasted with works by the earlier mentioned Gauguin and Cézanne providing an aesthetic comparison between styles, themes and techniques employed by these artists. This will illustrate the incorporation of modernist approaches within Latin American Art. Promoting Afrocubanismo was Gómez Sicre's early attempt to break with the assumption that artists from Latin America imitated and copied European ideas and practices, and were capable of innovation in artistic approaches and techniques.

While the use of soft power to align political ideologies to favour democracy remained at the heart of PAU, the terms of engagement changed with the years and responded to changing political circumstances. The late 1940s and throughout 1950s were a time of transition between the repercussions of World War II and those evoked by the success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, leading in a period of intense intervention in Latin America from the 1960s onwards.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, between 1945 and 1959 the Cold War was in its early stages and began to pose a threat that was not as imminent as it became later in the Americas. It was during this period, in 1956, that the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* took place at the MFAH setting significant, although brief precedents, in revising curatorial strategies that began at MoMA earlier in the century.

### 1.1 The Good Neighbour Years (1928-1947) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York

The relations between the United States and countries in Latin America are historically marked by aggressive campaigns of expansion conducted throughout the

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<sup>5</sup> After the Cuban Revolution and the successful installation of a communist government under the leadership of Fidel Castro (1926-2016), the United States returned to strategies of hard power and direct military and political interventions in the region. Between 1961 and 1973, the Alliance for Progress, a programme initiated by the United States and its then president John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), also sought to combat communist tendencies that were feared to spread in the western hemisphere. The Alliance for Progress supported economic and social development through aid and closer collaboration in all areas including culture and art. Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 13; Fox, "The PAU Visual Arts" 86.

19<sup>th</sup> century on the part of the United States. These originated in the establishment of the Monroe Doctrine (1823) asserting the right of the United States to intervene throughout the hemisphere if it perceived a threat to its sovereignty (*U.S. Nat'l Archives and Records Administration*). The result of this approach saw the annexation of half of Mexico's territory in the Mexican-American War, and the establishment of Puerto Rico as colony of the United States after the Spanish-American War (Williams 51, 80). Following the same conflict, Cuba remained protectorate of the United States until 1934 allowing the latter to intercede in the island's affairs (Williams 80).

The continued intervention in political and economic matters throughout Latin America became a contentious issue leading to strained relations between the United States and countries in Latin America causing scepticism and distrust that prevented collaboration across the continent. By the 1920s, it was almost impossible for the United States to foment positive relations within the Americas and was forced to rethink its approach. This was underpinned by a strategic re-definition of geographical delineations.

Amy Spellacy outlines the changes adopted in the conception of the Americas during the Good Neighbour Years. Hers is the most useful explanation of the changing geographical conception that was initiated by the United States government. In contrast to the Monroe Doctrine, the Good Neighbour Years were characterised by soft power strategies. This period re-imagined the Americas from the notion of a continent, consisting of separate nations, to a neighbouring hemisphere. The metaphor of the 'Good Neighbour' contributed to a positive echo of this policy encouraging exchanges across the geographical span of the Americas (Spellacy 42). Rather than viewing the Americas as consisting of separate countries, the idea of the hemisphere served to create a connected vision that linked all

nations. This supported the aim of collaboration between the United States and Latin America.

Spellacy claims that this approach had the effect that the United States could maintain political allegiances and control over resources in Latin America which became important before, during, and after World War II (61-62). This included sugar from the Caribbean, tin from Bolivia and rubber from the Amazon, which became yet more significant for building airplanes that were needed during World War II (Spellacy 51). The change in approach proved crucial and beneficial for the United States in its war efforts, and the securing of raw materials for its various industries.

By 1940, the aims of this initiative extended to include art and culture and found an outlet with the establishment of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), which was attached to the Inter-American Fund. This government-funded agency took the reins in supporting cultural, economic, and information exchanges between the United States and countries in Latin America.<sup>6</sup> The exchange of art and culture remained rooted in the aim to align all countries in the hemisphere to the economic and political interests of the United States through the OCIAA (Pérez-Barreiro 177; Herrera 35; Fox 117). Under the leadership of Nelson Rockefeller, artistic exchanges were organised and exhibited mostly at MoMA in New York. Rockefeller was also a key founding member of this institution and an early promoter and collector of modern art and art from Latin America.

In an effort to disseminate exhibitions throughout the United States, in 1941, the OCIAA drew up an agreement between MoMA, the American Museum of Natural

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<sup>6</sup> This government body underwent several changes in its designation. It was founded in 1940 as the Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations Between the American Republics (OCCCRBAR) before it was renamed as the OCIAA in 1941. The agency operated under this acronym until 1945 when it was renamed Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA); National Archives and Records Service.



History, Brooklyn Museum, and the San Francisco Museum of Art to organise exhibitions and to travel these to smaller museums, community centres, and university museums throughout the United States.<sup>7</sup> Several venues acted as temporary sites for numerous exhibitions. These included the Milwaukee Art Institute, Fort Wayne Art School and Museum, University of Wisconsin, University of Minnesota, and the Women's City Club in Detroit, among many more (Herrera 35-36). The aim to reach as many audiences across the United States as possible was an underlying and significant aspect of this agreement.

Taking the reins in exploring art from Latin America, Barr, and his associate Lincoln Kirstein, undertook numerous journeys to various countries with the aim to research art from Latin America and build a collection of notable artworks. Additionally, these trips served the purpose of reporting back to Rockefeller on attitudes and opinions concerning diplomacy and business prevalent in Latin America toward the United States (Pérez-Barreiro 178). This informed approaches adopted by the OCIAA to successfully foment commercial and economic relations and to secure the acquisition of the resources mentioned above. The overlap between culture and business interests using soft power strategies become apparent here and formed much of Inter-American relations promoted throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These continued through the diplomatic and cultural framework developed at PAU as will be shown in chapter two.

Initially, MoMA's efforts became somewhat of a reconnaissance mission to investigate diplomatic and commercial potential in the region. Nevertheless, this also resulted in the exhibition and establishment of the first collection of art from Latin America in the United States. These intertwined objectives and the strategies

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<sup>7</sup> Herrera lists all exhibitions of art from Latin America between 1893 and 2007 that took place in the Midwest United States identifying key exhibitions organised and disseminated by MoMA during the 1940s (82-143).

employed to collect and exhibit art from Latin America at MoMA during the 1930s, and into the first half of the 1940s, are best outlined by Barr in the following quote:

Perhaps [I] might not have taken any great interest in South America had it not been for the war, the state of emergency, the necessity of establishing closer relations with the countries to the south. I think we were very conscious of the political background of our interests, and conscious, too, of the somewhat complicating nature of that political atmosphere. ("Problems of Research" 38)

He refers to the efforts on the part of the United States to combat any potential manifestations of fascism in Latin America before and during World War II. He further equates his role as director of MoMA with that of improving business and diplomatic relationships sought after by the OCIAA. Barr was conscious of the approach and objectives inherent in his efforts and the interventionist history that preceded them.

Nevertheless, he goes on to call for a 'dictionary of artists [...] and histories of national schools' to establish Latin American art as a field of research ("Problems of Research" 39-40). Barr goes further than the immediate commercial and diplomatic interests and encourages the establishment of a scholarship in this field. He maintains that by involving scholars and embedding thorough examination in this process intellectual ties were going to be strengthened:

Scholarly excellence and disinterested critical integrity will in the end prove to be a very valuable, though concomitant, political factor in our international relationships, particularly with Latin Americans. ("Problems of Research" 43)

In this vein, Barr asks for adequate translations of critical texts and books about artists. For example, he highlights that a history of Argentinean art has already been written in that country, and that a monographic book about Orozco has been produced in Mexico, however neither were available in English ("Problems of Research" 40). Moreover, he sought to instate a closer understanding of local and

regional circumstances that investigate 'the [...] effects of our occasional economic intervention, whether on a basis of disinterested admiration or of commerce, or of a political nature' ("Problems of Research" 40). He refers to the political and economic interventions undertaken by the United States in Latin American countries. Barr maintains that these additional strategies would encourage good will and collaboration between the United States and Latin America. It becomes apparent that he locates MoMA within diplomatic and political parameters, as well as considering the artistic contributions made by artists from Latin America. Barr encourages research into Latin American art and the continuation of collecting information to root this field in scholarly research in the United States. As a result, Barr can be attributed as a significant initiator and propagator of this field.

The political and diplomatic intentions outlined here formed the basis and continued funding for these exchanges which were taken over by PAU in Washington after 1945 (Lamontagne 7). At that time, MoMA drastically reduced its interest and activities in this field and the PAU continued to work strategically through the exchange of art to prevent the spread of communism in the hemisphere, which replaced the previous threat of fascism. From the beginning of Gómez Sicre's engagement at PAU, this curator undertook the strategic realisation of cultural and artistic exchanges and exhibitions between the United States and Latin America, and under similar diplomatic and commercial aims.

The curatorial approach employed by Gómez Sicre combined diplomacy and art criticism. His approach remained embedded in the aims of the PAU, and overlapped with the idea of the hemisphere and the Good Neighbour, although this policy officially ended in 1947. Positive exchanges remained at the heart of transnational exhibitions that brought together artists, collectors, businessmen, and diplomats creating platforms for informal discussions supporting collaborations in

culture, business and politics.

While this section provides the historical and diplomatic context to the motivations behind the exchange of art from Latin America, it is pertinent to note that the early activities undertaken at MoMA, and by Barr, were pivotal in framing the theoretical and interpretative approach toward art from Latin America and established a basis from which this field began to be researched in the United States. Gómez Sicre later developed his conception based on Barr's framing; however, Gómez Sicre's curatorial premise had Latin America firmly in mind. This included specificity and innovation in art from Latin America that he introduced to audiences in the United States.

## 1.2. Quality Art- Techniques, Lineage, Narratives

To understand the approach adopted by Gómez Sicre toward including artworks in the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, discussed in detail in chapter two, it is important to understand the parameters that determined the quality of artworks. These begin with Barr who insisted on artworks that were international in their outlook and universal in their visual language transcending borders and parochial outlooks. He outlines three aesthetic principles that underpinned international style and quality.

These are

Emphasis upon volume- space enclosed by thin planes or surfaces as opposed to the suggestion of mass and solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance; and, lastly dependence upon the intrinsic elegance of materials, technical perfection, and fine proportions, as opposed to applied ornament. (Preface 13)

Barr's conception of quality in art entailed excellent materials, consistent and innovative use of themes, and an overall well balanced arrangement of an artwork's contents. On the other hand, adornment, overt evenness, and solid forms were not

favoured. Barr's approach emphasises aesthetics over subject matter in artworks.

This formal approach to the composition of an artwork is similarly outlined by

Rosenberg, however, this author laments overtly technical emphasis, which he

perceives to be to the detriment of an artwork's theme:

It...evaluates works of art primarily in terms of the qualities of form and formal organisation and too easily neglects or denies all other aspects, particularly subject matter or content. This kind of modern criticism seems the ultimate consequence of the principle of *l'art pour l'art*, which originated in the mid-nineteenth century and which has since risen in importance. (Rosenberg 99)

It becomes apparent that quality in art for Barr was determined by strict aesthetic criteria that focused on the technical rendering of an artwork. Rosenberg, on the other hand, points to the emergence of this approach in the idea of art for art's sake and to its influence on determining quality in art. Further, Fox outlines the effect of this for art from Latin America in the following quote:

"Quality art" laid claim to full enfranchisement for Latin Americans in the international community, and it signalled the imminent harmonization of the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres in Latin American societies. (emphasis in the original text; *Making Art Panamerican* 28)

Fox establishes a link between diplomacy and high art in that innovations and developments in artistic practices would evoke advances in other areas including the economy, politics, and society. The above quote confirms the assumption by the United States that Latin America needs collaboration and help from United States government bodies including the OCIAA and PAU. The attribute of quality art became a vital tool in this partnership throughout the hemisphere supporting a developmental framework in which Latin America catches up with the more advanced United States through parity in the field of high art. However, this collaboration is not based on equality, rather, on an unequal power relation placing more control in the determination of quality in art at the hands of institutions in the United States.

European movements such as Cubism, Surrealism, Abstraction, Impressionism, Expressionism, and Post-Impressionism embodied the idea of quality and an international style as these were perceived as 'original, [...] consistent, [...] logical' (Preface 11). They also exemplified ideas of the 'new', 'originality' and the artist as genius (Gordon Kantor 126). The admiration for 20<sup>th</sup> century European Modernism, and a country's development through artistic innovation, was underpinned by these standards.

Examples of these parameters include Cézanne's *The Bather* (1885) (see fig.2). This is a portrait of a male figure painted through the visual perception of the artist and adheres to Barr's criteria of technical rendering in a painting. Similarly, *Tea no Areois/The Seed of the Areoi* (1892) by Gauguin consists of an amalgamation of local Tahitian myths and the artists' vision which he, much like Cézanne, translates onto the canvas (see fig.3). This example reflects the significance of the painting's content as it depicts folklore that is specific to Tahiti where the artist lived and worked reflecting Rosenberg's attention to content in addition to technical approaches. Crucially, Barr attributes both artists with inventing visual approaches that were most influential in the development of European Modern art:

The first, and more important current, finds its sources in the art and theories of Cézanne...and passes through the widening stream of Cubism and finds its delta in the various geometrical and Constructivist movements which developed in Russia and Holland during the War and have since spread throughout the World. This current may be described as intellectual, structural, architectonic, geometrical, rectilinear and classical in its austerity and dependence upon logic and calculation. The second—and, until recently, secondary— current has its principal source in the art and theories of Gauguin and his circle, flows through the Fauvism of Matisse to the Abstract Expressionism of the pre-War paintings of Kandinsky...This tradition, by contrast with the first, is intuitional and emotional rather than intellectual; organic or biomorphic rather than geometrical in its forms; curvilinear rather than rectilinear, decorative rather than structural, and romantic rather than classical in its exaltation of the mystical, the spontaneous and the irrational. (*Cubism* 19)

Barr traces a lineage and geographical span of high art in this quote which begins with the artists discussed here. On the one hand, he underlines the theories of Cézanne as rational and calculated. On the other hand, he contrasts this with Gauguin's emotive approach. Barr expands his narrative to include numerous movements that came after these artists, and that were influenced by their ideas and technical approaches. Most importantly, however, Barr attributes Gauguin and Cézanne as innovators and initiators of a new visual language that spread across countries, movements, and eras.

Both artists were self-taught painters who broke with classical education in French academic painting. Through their pioneering approach, they chose to follow their own visualisations and developed techniques that reflected a new way of seeing the world (Brodskaya 21). Both works discussed in the next section are in the collection of MoMA and stem from its earliest collection efforts under Barr. They are but two examples of artworks that embody quality and the international style advocated through Barr's conception of 20<sup>th</sup> century European Modernism.

### 1.2.1. Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin- Origins of Quality Art and International Style

Cézanne began his career as an impressionist painter but soon broke with this movement when he began to use 'colour only to extrapolate volume. The effect proved to be directly the opposite of the impressionistic' (Brodskaya 28). Brodskaya describes his process of painting as forceful, since Cézanne applied colour with a palette knife directly onto the canvas (39). In *The Bather* this process becomes visible as the male body is painted in rich flesh colours that convey the male's size and body volume as he walks toward the viewer. The man is also clearly depicted in midstride and seemingly walks toward the viewer.

Unlike immediate impressions transferred onto the canvas, a process sought

after and suggested by the movement's name, Impressionism, Cézanne depicts the world on his canvases through considered classical compositions using vertical axis and measured distances between subjects (Brodskaya 31). *The Bather* situates the male body visibly in the centre of the composition in equidistance to each side of the canvas framing the scene and creating regularity within the composition. The structural and architectural elements, mentioned by Barr above, come to the fore and underline the artist's rational approach to constructing this painting.

On the other hand, Gauguin's composition remains unconventional and did not follow a classical or calculated arrangement based on determining axis, such as that utilised by Cézanne. Rather, Gauguin searched for a 'decorative composition' that was, nevertheless, devoid of the haphazard application of colour in Impressionism (Brodskaya 126). He was, furthermore, preoccupied with colour including reddish browns and greens that reappeared in many of his works (Brodskaya 126). These colours were not nuanced or natural, rather, Gauguin used them to approximate toward, what he called, abstraction (Brodskaya 132-134). Through the compartmentalisation of colours, a process he began in France, 'he delineated flats of bright colour patches with contours' (Brodskaya 146). This is visible in *Te aa no Areois/The Seed of the Areoi* which depicts a Tahitian goddess sitting on a cloth amongst the nature and fruits of Tahiti. The shades of green and rich red are visible around the subject. Gauguin used shades of reddish brown for the skin colour of the goddess.

This painting originates from the artist's time in Tahiti from 1891 onward, where he immersed himself in the country's culture and colours. Gauguin became knowledgeable about local legends and Tahitian gods (Brodskaya 146). Thus, the title of this painting is Tahitian. The artist worked mostly outside, continuing his practice of compartmentalizing colours. This also created volume in his paintings. His



style became ever more preoccupied with these aspects rather than creating nuances between colours, which was key in Impressionism (Brodskaya 149). Gauguin created innovative visions, much like Cézanne, which led Barr to propagate both artists as most influential for generations of artists and the movements that followed.

In both cases cited here, the artists broke with Impressionism's immediacy by planning their paintings before applying colour to the canvas. Their practices echo Barr's assertion regarding quality art and international style as being unique, regular and rational. Both artists worked outside of academic painting creating their visions that were new, original, and innovative. This approach also echoes Rosenberg's statement that technical rendering and content are equally important. Through the combination of European modernism supported by MoMA, and the aims to bring Latin America closer to the United States, the criteria for quality art and international modernism was determined by European ideas and techniques that are outlined here.

### 1.3. "Discovering" Art from Latin America

In addition to the criteria outlined above, MoMA's attempt to collect and research art from Latin America throughout the 1930s and 1940s in the United States was defined by 'a spirit of discovery' ("Problems of Research" 38). This was realised through research trips undertaken to Latin America where MoMA acquired art for its nascent collection. Further, this institution produced its first publication about art from Latin America. *The Latin American Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (1943) recounts national art histories, latest developments in art from Latin America, and lists its various acquisitions made throughout the 1930s (fig.4). This publication illustrates MoMA's interest and concerted efforts to research this field as a pioneering institution.

Most poignantly, the publication states that European practices and theories were copied by artists in Latin America pronouncing this field as derivative (Kirstein 5). These reductive assumptions did not consider that artists approached the creation of art with their own ideas and subjects that were locally specific. This recalls Rosenberg's critique stating that purely aesthetic and technical considerations lacked insight into the motivations behind an artwork's content. However, in a presentation conducted by Barr, first he asserts, and then admits that

International standards can be applied to art which is *international* in style or character. We can easily compare, say, a cubist picture from Chile with a cubist picture from the source of cubism, namely Paris, and find it lacking. But it is much more difficult to judge values which are national or local in character. (emphasis in the original text, "Problems of Research" 39)

Barr attributes Latin American art with its own specificity in this quote, as he recognizes that artists dealt with local and regional issues in their art, however he admits to being at a loss in understanding these specificities. Without sufficient experience or understanding of culture, politics, and the history of countries in Latin America, it was impossible for MoMA to provide an objective and rounded interpretation of art from Latin America. The art promoted by MoMA had to be readable according to the criteria outlined above and disregarded specific conditions and local references (Pérez-Barreiro 180). Barr's experiences of visiting galleries of modern art in Europe and New York and his lack of knowledge about Latin America led to a one-sided conception of quality in art even though he travelled to Mexico and Cuba to research and collect art for MoMA's collection.

Equally, Kirstein travelled to several countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay. Kirstein, who authored most of MoMA's publication, states that 'within this frame various local divisions increasingly assert their own flavour and atmosphere' (Kirstein 5). Much like Barr, Kirstein

recognizes specific traits and developments in art from Latin America; however, he fails to outline these in detail. Nevertheless, Kirstein praises Mexico as the most innovative of all countries in its development of art and devotes twenty-eight pages discussing artworks and artists from that country (Kirstein 6). He does not, however, elaborate on specificities placing art from Latin America within a framework that does not underline its original contribution, however, maintains its strategy of copying European ideas.

As has been shown, the efforts undertaken by MoMA manifested that quality in art from Latin America was measured by European visual and technical standards. This informed the interpretation of this field in the United States and became embedded in this institution. However, MoMA's reading of art from Latin America was unable to mediate local specificities inherent in artworks. As will be shown, Gómez Sicre acted as a mediator between art from Latin America and audiences in the United States bringing specificity in artworks to the fore. Firstly, however, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the movement most closely associated with Barr's conception of quality and international style from Latin America, was that of Mexican Muralism, and particularly the art of Rivera, which is discussed in the following section.

### 1.3.1. Early Focus on Mexican Muralism and Diego Rivera

MoMA emphasised the significance of exhibiting and collecting art from Latin America alongside art from Europe. Despite criticism stating that Barr lacked support for U.S. American artists, the director highlighted that MoMA was committed to displaying and collecting art without prejudice toward countries or nationalities so long as they adhered to the conception of an internationally recognized style and

quality in their works (Foreword 3).<sup>8</sup> Mexican Muralism belonged to this category according to Barr, and by 1940 the Three Great Mexican muralists, Orozco, Siqueiros and Rivera, were represented with a sizeable number of paintings, prints, watercolours and drawings in MoMA's collection. These were donated, bought, or in some cases, commissioned. The collection's inaugurating donation in 1935 was the painting *Subway* (1928) by Orozco (see fig.5). This work was gifted to the museum by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and was followed by donations of artworks by Rivera and Siqueiros in 1937 (see figs.6 and 7). MoMA extended its interests in 1939 and included art from other countries in Latin America such as Brazil, Cuba, and Bolivia (Foreword 3).

Rivera was particularly supported and promoted by MoMA even before it collected his artworks. A solo show of this artist's works was the second monographic exhibition staged at this institution in 1931 (Foreword 3-4). Rivera's practice poses an example of fitting the categories for quality art and the aesthetic approaches upheld by this institution despite his overt communist leanings.

This artist spent the years between 1907 and 1921 studying and working in Europe (Barnitz 44). He travelled to Italy in 1920 to study the works of Giotto, Uccello, Piero della Francesca, Mantegna and Michelangelo (Lucie-Smith 49). Ades, Lucie-Smith, and Barnitz point to the impact of this journey, the artist's intense studying of frescoes, and his years spent as cubist painter in Paris on his practice of painting murals later in Mexico (154; 52; 45). Further, he was also inspired by European masters including Cézanne and Gauguin (Barnitz 44). Barr was aware of Rivera's lengthy stay in Europe and his history as cubist painter. As a result, the director was particularly interested in Rivera's work through his ties with this

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<sup>8</sup> Barr felt that media such as painting and sculpture were not as developed in the United States than that being produced in Paris at the time, Gordon Kantor 237-238.

movement and his technical knowledge of modernist painting.

Rivera adopted and re-worked European techniques, and additionally imbued his visual renderings with indigenous, social, and political themes that rooted this movement in pre-Columbian history. This approach originated in *The Manifesto of the Union of Mexican Workers, Technicians, Painters and Sculptors*, authored by Siqueiros and others, which states that 'The art of the Mexican people is the most important and vital spiritual manifestation in the world today, and its Indian traditions lie at its very heart' (Siqueiros et al. 237). The aim for Mexican art was to create 'a harmonious flowering of ethnic art, of cosmological and historical significance to our race, comparable to that of our wonderful ancient autochthonous civilizations' (Siqueiros et al. 238). Ades attributes Mexican Muralism with 'social responsibility' that sought to create art that was accessible to the people who viewed it, in order to convey these ideas aesthetically (4). It becomes apparent that the concepts behind Mexican Muralism were of political and social significance, as well as the visual rendering of these ideas.

Nevertheless, the political and social role Rivera's artworks adopted in Mexico were less underlined by MoMA, since his works embody the technical and aesthetic quality sought after by Barr. Through incorporating cubist elements and using techniques employed in European fresco painting, Rivera's work adopted an international and universal outlook. The artist established an international language in his works that found resonance and support at MoMA. Rivera's art continued to be exhibited and collected by Barr, together with the works by Orozco and Siqueiros. As a result, these artists are much researched, written about, and exhibited in the United States. They continued to enjoy significant success throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the early recognition and support by MoMA. This is also due to this institution's late expansion to acquire artworks from other countries in the region as

outlined earlier. Because of this, art from Latin America became understood through the prism of Mexican Muralism and its political and socialist visual language.

In contrast, the following section concentrates on the artistic practices and movements that were highlighted through the curatorship of Gómez Sicre at the PAU. This curator changed the presentation of art from Latin America in the United States. Gómez Sicre took on a stance that decidedly rejected Mexican Muralism and moved toward a wide-ranging reach encompassing Latin American art. This included art that was produced beyond Mexico. Notwithstanding this, he insisted on the recognition of pre-Columbian art as the first instance of abstraction (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 19). He further underlines the incorporation of local themes as stimulus and source inspiration for artists.

### *1.3.2 Gómez Sicre's Rejection of Mexican Muralism- Rivera at the MFAH*

In 1943, Gómez Sicre met David Alfaro Siqueiros during a lengthy stay of this artist in Havana (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 18). Siqueiros' bellicose character, didactic and forceful language in which he and the Mexican painters and sculptors propagated socialism and communism, did not convince the artists of the Cuban Avant-Garde, or Gómez Sicre. He criticised 'the style and politics of Mexican muralism, which was *retardataire*, academic, anecdotal, and folkloric and at its worst moments an instrument at the service of communism' (emphasis in the original text, Anreus 84). Barr also mentions Siqueiros' stay in Havana after which the Avant-Garde group in Cuba did not adopt this artist's visual language or his political leanings as their practices were more concerned with 'form and color' rather than collective political action (Barr, "Modern Cuban Painters" 4).

Gómez Sicre continued to criticize Mexican Muralism as outdated, flippant in its use of themes, and, thus, populist, as well as overtly political. This extended to the curator's refusal to include artworks by Rivera and Siqueiros in the collection of

art from Latin America at the Art Museum of the Americas (AMA) in Washington, which remains attached to the Pan-American Union and was founded through Gómez Sicre (Fox "Cold War" 18). Furthermore, he did not favour Peruvian and Ecuadorian Indigenist painting which drew inspiration from Mexican Muralism (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 17). He rejected overt nationalist visual representations that were promoted through these movements and unequivocally precluded them throughout his career.

Moreover, the promotion of Siqueiros, Orozco, and Rivera in the United States throughout the 1930s and 1940s eclipsed that of art produced from other parts of Latin America. By the late 1940s, audiences associated this movement, and leftist politics, with the art of the rest of Latin America leading to a myopic understanding of this vast and heterogeneous area and the art created in various other countries and regions (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 8).

More importantly, the changing political landscape after World War II, and the beginning of the Cold War contributed to a further decline in the popularity of Los tres grandes. The movement entered a crisis in the USA, since it was no longer supported for its overt communist propensities. Gómez Sicre certainly adhered to this anti-communist stance and is described by Anreus as a 'cold-war modernist' ("José Gómez Sicre" 84). This refers to Gómez Sicre's alignment with a hemispheric conception of the Americas, his insistence upon the universal visual language and techniques employed by artists, and his rejection of explicit political content in artworks.

The increased difficulty in presenting art by Mexican painters from the mural movement in the United States becomes furthermore apparent in one example that took place at the MFAH when this institution organised *Oils and Watercolours by Diego Rivera* in 1951. This exhibition was a collaboration between the Museo

Nacional de Artes Plásticas del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes/National Museum of Art at the National Institute of Art, Sociedad de Arquitectos Mexicanos/Mexican Architectural Society, and the MFAH. The exhibition was sponsored by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston).

Despite Rivera's status as successful and established artist since the 1930s, this exhibition was mired in controversy after a letter sent to the MFAH strongly advised this institution not to show Rivera's works. The letter lists the artist's political activities and takes issue with what it calls his communist beliefs, as well as 'anti-capitalist and anti-religious' themes in his works (*Diego Rivera*). The report further states that 'HE'S NO GOOD and now that the cards are down the U.S. should have nothing to do with him or his paintings' (emphasis in the original document, *Diego Rivera*). The report outlines his involvement with the communist party in Mexico and his critical views toward the United States. The rejection of Rivera's political ideology is clear in this example and illustrates how he fell out of favour in the United States due to his political attitude. The report reveals a deep uneasiness with this project and the perceived threat of communism that Rivera represented to the United States, Texas, and Houston.

Nevertheless, despite the vehement rallying against this exhibition, it was eventually installed. Moreover, it was highlighted as the 'most popular one-man show' at the MFAH.<sup>9</sup> This again manifests this artist's well-established popularity until well into the 1950s in the United States, while at the same time stressing the increasingly difficult political circumstances surrounding the exhibition of his work. This example underlines a chasm that existed between diplomatic aims and artistic

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<sup>9</sup> The exhibition consisted of a retrospective selection of thirty-three works divided into eras. These include the cubist Period from 1913-1917, Transitional Post-cubist Period, Mexican Novorealist Period, and Watercolours. The catalogue frames his achievements as artist and compares his approach as mural painter to that of him as easel painter. In both cases, and in the short introduction of the works in the exhibition, his artistic innovations are highlighted, rather than the content of the works, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston for the Houston Chapter AIA.



license in the United States. While the framework for exhibiting art from Latin America in the United States remained one that promoted collaboration and multilateral understanding, the content of the artworks had to match this aim. Moreover, artists could no longer represent communist political attitudes and were required to work in tandem with democratic values set out by the United States.

Gómez Sicre mirrored these reservations and aspired to promote art from Latin America according to a framework that promoted artistic quality, universal and international style over political content. Initially, he promoted the Cuban Avant-Garde and its contribution to painting and sculpture through showcasing works that were part of the movement known as Afro-Cubanismo (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 18). Artists who worked in this vein incorporated representations of race in their artworks. A selection of these was displayed in the exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* which took place in 1944 at MoMA. It was Barr who invited Gómez Sicre to curate this exhibition showcasing works that were produced in the previous five years by twelve Cuban artists. The collaboration between both men allowed Gómez Sicre to develop his approach in presenting art from Latin America, which he later employed at the PAU. The following section discusses the intersections and differences in the curatorial approaches adopted by Gómez Sicre and Barr.

#### 1.4. Gómez Sicre's Curatorial Approach

Between the years 1940 and 1945 Gómez Sicre remained mainly in Cuba, where he developed networks of intellectuals, artists and critics, and worked for progressive cultural institutions (Fox, "The PAU Visual Arts" 101). During that time, he also travelled to Mexico, Haiti, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and the United States, gaining insight into the artistic production of other countries (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 13-14). In New York, Gómez Sicre audited art history courses with Erwin Panofsky at New York University as part of a fellowship (Fox,

"The PAU Visual Arts" 88). Additionally, through regular contact with Barr, Gómez Sicre shared the director's idea of international style and quality art. Gómez Sicre's experience and knowledge of Latin America and its cultural landscape, as well as his formation in New York, aided the development of his curatorial strategy.

At the PAU, he increased the frequency of exhibitions from seven to twenty-one temporary shows yearly, marking an unprecedented surge in the exposure of emerging artists from Latin America in the United States (Lamontagne 17). Utilizing the PAU as platform, Gómez Sicre reframed the way in which art from Latin America was presented. His curatorship 'asserted Latin American autonomy, intra-Latin American solidarity, and North-South parity' (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 16). Therefore, his approach was marked through a de-centralised view of the art world, while placing significance upon developments in art practices that originated in Latin America. This significantly deviated from Barr's foray into this field as his insistence upon derivative approaches was questioned through Gómez Sicre's strategy.

He developed and upheld the role of cultural and artistic exchanges between the United States and countries in Latin America and focused his energy upon working closely with artists and carving a niche market for art from Latin America in the United States. This led to the curator being described as initiator of the idea of Latin American art in the United States by the Peruvian artist Fernando de Szyszlo:

The person who really promoted the idea of Latin American art was (José) Pepe Gómez Sicre. Before him, there was Argentinean painting, Colombian painting, Venezuelan or Mexican painting. It was Gómez Sicre who was the first to speak of Latin American painting. (Medina 150)

This quote highlights the curator's influence upon the conception and mapping of this field for artists in the United States. Gómez Sicre introduced debates surrounding Latin America cohering the field through his role at the PAU. However,

rather than supporting the idea of one singular arbiter as the founder of the idea of Latin American art in the United States, Fox states that

The category of Latin American art may be an invention, but...it is less the intellectual property of a single visionary than a concatenation of diverse institutional projects that eventually found an impresario at the (OAS) during the postwar period in the contradictory and multi-layered Gómez Sicre. (9)

Rather than supporting the idea that this field originates with this curator alone, Fox points to the amalgamation of several strands. These include the idea of Pan-Americanism, the Good Neighbour Years, the role played by MoMA and Barr in defining quality art, and, eventually, the development of Gómez Sicre's role at the PAU. The curator shared the idea of quality art and that of international modernism with Barr, however, Gómez Sicre evoked a more successful merging of Latin American themes with European art practices influenced by his knowledge and experience of the region's history, politics, and art, creating an approach that was more sensitive to innovations originating in Latin America. The curator embedded this within the diplomatic, political and institutional framework outlined in this chapter, enabling close working relationships with numerous artists.

In accordance with the idea of innovation in the visual arts, as well as economic, political, and societal development and collaboration in the Americas, Gómez Sicre viewed

[The] Western Hemisphere as an art circuit, framing the [PAU] arts programs through multinational corporate patronage and Latin Americanist discourses explicitly tied to concepts of universalism, developmentalism, and rebellious, youthful aesthetics. (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican*)<sup>10</sup>

Firstly, this explains that the Western hemisphere remained defined as a coherent geographical entity under the PAU, and was the result of the Good Neighbour Years

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<sup>10</sup> Fox also states that Gómez Sicre's curatorial projects drew on U.S.-centred conceptual and material databases of Latin Americanism; however, they also introduced ideas pertaining to a distinctly Latin America-centred tradition of *latinoamericanismo* (Latin Americanism) Fox, *Making Art Pan-American* 4-7.

which reframed relations in the hemisphere and between all nations through positive collaboration. As already mentioned, this was the basis from which Gómez Sicre approached the field.

Secondly, corporate patronage included, for example, the support of Brown & Root Ltd., an engineering and construction company based in Houston, for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*. Through their investment in this exhibition its far-reaching concept could be carried out at the MFAH. Another prominent corporate patron included ESSO, a multinational oil company, which is part of the ExxonMobil empire. This company sponsored the *ESSO Salon of Young Artists* (1965) in partnership with the PAU and Gómez Sicre (*Esso Salon*). It becomes apparent that the curator's emphasis on business connections and corporate sponsorship were fundamental to realise the PAU's increase in exhibitions of art from Latin America. This also evoked a more direct exchange between businesses in the region and the PAU as a government related institution that promoted positive diplomatic and economic relations. At the same time, Gómez Sicre's influence upon creating a coherent field for Latin American art should not be underestimated and has been underlined by de Szyszlo.

This section has shown that Gómez Sicre introduced a Latin American discourse in his curatorial approach that sought to level the field of art in the hemisphere. This still meant that art from Latin America remained viewed and understood from a perspective that originated in the United States and in the idea of European Modernism promoted by MoMA and Barr. Although Gómez Sicre emphasised the specificity of themes in art from Latin America, it was maintained in a position that expected artists to incorporate innovations brought forward in European Modernism to resonate with a conception of quality art that was based in the United States. Gómez Sicre, nonetheless, merged these approaches in this work

at the PAU.

One successful reworking and reimagining of European techniques is that of Afrocubanismo which was ardently supported by Gómez Sicre. The following section sheds light onto this movement and underlines its rendering of European techniques to suit the Cuban environment. Further, Barr's assessment of this movement is included here to illustrate the dovetailing of his and Gómez Sicre's understanding of techniques and aesthetics in art from Latin America.

#### 1.4.1 Afrocubanismo

Cuban art was influenced by Spanish colonial legacies that were promoted through established art institutions such as the Academia de San Alejandro in Havana which was founded in 1818. It taught academic painting and sculpture and was set in its traditional teachings impeding experimentation or the development of new artistic movements until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Blanc 82; Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 16). It was against these established traditions that the movement of Afrocubanismo emerged in the mid-1920s and with the artist Victor Manuel as a significant promoter (Barr "Modern Cuban Painters" 2). Through a collective desire to create a national identity and assert visual autonomy, various artists and critics, among them Gómez Sicre, became involved in Cuba's art circuit actively supporting and promoting Afrocubanismo.

Barr indicates that the Cuban vanguard took inspiration from the paintings of Italian primitives and Gauguin, as well as cubist, and expressionist techniques ("Modern Cuban Painters" 2-4). Arguably, techniques by Cézanne can be added to this as well as will be shown below. Barr also recognises that Afrocubanismo incorporates themes, such as race and cultural influences from Africa, that are integral aspects of Cuban life and form a significant part of that country's heritage ("Modern Cuban Painters" 4). This movement published its aims in the magazine

Revista de Avance which was issued concurrently with their activities. The artists proclaimed their objectives and origins in a key text titled 'The Negro Question':

It is a question of culture, and the transformation of a racial identity into a cultural identity, with genuine characteristics and values, and is a task that belongs to the minorities of color. (6)

The artists assert control over identity and Cuban consciousness by rooting it within that country's racial, cultural, and lived environment. These elements were incorporated in painting and sculpture. The results of this approach formed a Cuban visual language that stood apart from Spanish colonialism and legacies of academic painting. For this reason, Barr attributes this movement with a fresh approach that

has something of the brashness, but even more the virtues of youth – courage, freshness, vitality, and a healthy disrespect for its elders in a country which is very old in tradition and very new in independence. ("Modern Cuban Painters" 1)

This underlines the favoured attitudes of irreverence and innovation in modern art propagated by Barr and Gómez Sicre. This is echoed by Anreus' assessment of the curatorial approach and its impact on defining Cuban and Latin American art following this exhibition ("Historical Close-Up"). The criteria by which the works were judged are visible in the painting *La rumba/The Party* (1928) by Valls Díaz (see fig.8). This work, like many others of this movement, incorporates traces of race and music and is an early example of this emerging movement in Cuba. The painting shows a woman dressed in white dancing to music being played by three men sitting on the floor and to the right of the scene. It appears that their ethnicity is African confirming the insistence upon the incorporation of race in artworks as a fundamental aspect. A sense of movement is evoked through the swooping outline framing the woman and the brushstrokes in the background seemingly emanating outward from her body. Her central role is partly underlined by the glowing white dress she wears and the fact that she is the only person painted in full and facing

the viewer. She is not placed in the centre of the composition; nevertheless, the attention is focused on her since the musicians face her rather than the viewer.

The composition of this painting reminds of Gauguin's unconventional use of space in *Te aa no Areois/The Seed of the Areoi* by slightly offsetting the dancing woman in the composition. The process of compartmentalising colours employed by Gauguin is also detectable, however, Valls Díaz does not overpower this composition through this technique. Nevertheless, it is visible that the colours do not overlap and that, for example, the hat of the musician in the foreground is clearly outlined in black brushstrokes, creating clear breaks within the canvas and between colours. The same is true of the woman's dress and outline of her body, reminding of Cézanne's use of black outlines in his painting *The Bather* to distinguish the form of the male body from its surroundings.

Another, later, example of making race visible in art is that of Victor Manuel's *Muchacha con manzana roja/Girl with Red Apple* (1940) (see fig.9). Painted almost twenty years later than the previous example, this portrait is of a woman holding an apple. The woman is wearing a white cloth on her head and a yellow robe draped over her right shoulder. Unlike in Valls Díaz's painting, her facial features are not as pronounced and the sense of movement is void in this portrait. The classical composition places the woman at the centre of the painting looking past the viewer. Again, this contrasts with Valls Díaz's example. She holds the apple in her right hand and near her face. The orange and red tone of the apple is muted and in line with the colours in the rest of the painting. These veer between earthy brown, yellow, and green tones. The latter are banished to the background depicting a landscape and a house to the left of the composition.

Barr states that 'Cuban colors, Cuban light, Cuban forms, and Cuban motifs are plastically and imaginatively assimilated rather than realistically represented'

("Modern Cuban Painters" 4). These are visible in *Muchacha con manzana roja/Girl with Red Apple* and in *La rumba/The Party*. The colours used in both paintings abstract natural hues and are similar to Gauguin's approach that creates contours. It remains unexplained what Barr meant by Cuban colours, lights, forms, and motifs, however, this points to his attempt at explaining local specificity in these works. It becomes apparent that Barr and Gómez Sicre relied on critical visual analysis and Barr's lineage of quality art to aesthetically and technically evaluate artworks, rather than examining the intellectual and theoretical grounding and intentions articulated by the artists in the above cited manifesto.

Baddeley and Fraser go further and state that observations such as those uttered by Barr above, ignore 'questions of occupation, ownership and use, of appropriation, expropriation, exploitation and control' (10). If we consider the artists' premise above, these issues come to the fore in the paintings as they sought to assert control over Cuba's visual expressions and identity. At the same time, it becomes apparent that Barr's interpretation was informed by Gómez Sicre and his art criticism as he acknowledges African influences in the artworks presented.

In both examples cited here, the representation of people of different races who live in Cuba becomes an imminent concern underlining Afro-Cubanismo as presenting a more accurate reflection of the people, landscapes, and cultural influences that exist in Cuba. The nod toward Gauguin's and Cézanne's techniques are detectable in both examples, however, the paintings acquire their own visual language through their vigorous engagement and re-working of European techniques that are merged with Cuban themes. This was significant in developing a visual language that asserted Cuba's specificity which lay at the heart of Gómez Sicre's curatorial approach that highlighted specificity and local content rooted in Latin America.



This chapter outlined the emerging conditions for exhibitions of art from Latin America in the United States in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This consisted of curatorial strategies that developed alongside the political, business, and diplomatic circumstances present at that time. Propelled by these intentions, the United States reframed geographical perceptions to create the idea of a neighbouring hemisphere under the guise of the Good Neighbour Policy, which in turn was inspired by the earlier conception of Pan-Americanism. Government funded entities such as the OCIAA fomented positive artistic exchanges by funding the collection and research of art from Latin America at MoMA in New York.

As shown in this chapter, this institution acquired a pivotal role in the early framing of what it understood to be quality and high art from Latin America. Thus, while it was stated that the interchange of art and culture within the hemisphere was fundamental, it becomes apparent that this undertaking was focused in the United States through collecting and exhibiting art from Latin America in that country.

Nevertheless, as mentioned, Barr called for a systematic scholarship of this field, which he felt would establish better ties with Latin America. MoMA's concerted efforts to collect artworks, and its publication discussing the collection and histories of art from Latin American countries, did indeed form a basis from which this field was studied. Nevertheless, it also asserted that art from Latin America was derivative due to the Barr's and Kirstein's lack of knowledge about the region. This produced a one directional interpretation of art from Latin America that originated in the United States and was influenced by ideas originating in European Modernism.

Helped by Barr's unrelenting support, and prior to the start of the Cold War, it was the Mexican Muralists who enjoyed stellar success in the United States throughout the 1930s. Barr detected innovations in the works of these artists, which mirrored those advocated by Cézanne and Gauguin. As outlined in detail, Barr established a genealogy of Modern Art that traced its origins to the attempts by these European artists to create new visual languages that incorporated intellectual and spatial currents, in the case of Cézanne, as well as emotive and mystical aspects, as in the case of Gauguin. Their innovations influenced subsequent movements including Cubism and Abstraction which, according to the director, were the apotheosis of high art. Barr's insistence upon aesthetic and technical excellence that translated into quality and international style in art, foreshadowed any political or social content inherent in artworks.

However, as has been shown here, Mexican Muralism was no longer in favour after 1945 and the end of World War II, as this movement supported communist views. MoMA's decrease in its interest for art from Latin America coincided with this development and this field was taken over by the PAU finding a new propagator in Gómez Sicre. As the Chief of the Visual Arts Section, he decidedly rejected Mexican Muralism and translated his knowledge and experience into his curatorial strategy. The rejection of this movement extended to the MFAH in Texas, which was met with resistance to its exhibition of Rivera's work in 1951. This institution was met with significant opposition, however, the MFAH insisted on exhibiting Rivera with a successful result, proving this institution's resistance against national trends and asserting its own approach to programming.

Meanwhile, Gómez Sicre's approach underlined the attempt of levelling the political, economic, and societal differences in the western hemisphere through high art, which would eventually bring with it development in Latin America that matched

what was already achieved in the United States. The previous revision of the continent into a coherent geographical entity supported Gómez Sicre's levelled conception of the Americas as an art circuit in which all points were connected and operated from an equal platform. This enabled the curator to introduce an approach that was more attuned to Latin America locating the origins of Abstraction in pre-Columbian art, rather than in Europe or the United States. Further, he cohered and promoted the field of Latin American art more acutely than Barr before him, although, as pointed out, he was not solely responsible for its overall conception.

Rather, Gómez Sicre acted out several briefs. These included the PAU's aims and the formation of his curatorial strategy prior to his time in Washington. This combined his experience and knowledge gained in Cuba, extensive travels throughout Latin America, his time spent working and studying in New York, and curating the exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* at MoMA in collaboration with Barr. These aspects were instrumental in forming a starting point for his career at the PAU. As outlined in this chapter, the spirit of the Good Neighbour Years carried on there after the initiative ended. The diplomatic and political intentions remain at the heart of PAU's programme to showcase art from Latin America in the United States forming a vital strategy to foment economic and political collaboration within the hemisphere.

Nevertheless, the criteria for the conception of quality art remained wedded to the principles and narrative established by Barr at MoMA. Gómez Sicre extended this conception to include, among others, the Cuban Avant-Garde painters, Valls Díaz and Manuel. These artists present examples of modernist techniques used that embody concerns that were translated into a visual language that was relevant to Cuba. This was crucially embedded within their theoretical conception articulated in *Revista de Avance*, which was all but ignored by Barr in his essay for *Modern Cuban*

*Painters*, again, indicating the director's lack of theoretical knowledge of AfroCubanismo, of which both artists were first and second generation proponents.

The development of a strong national visual language was an integral part in asserting identity in Cuba during, and after, its status as protectorate of the United States. Both artists discussed in this chapter were concerned with depicting the varied races that exist in that country and reflected a more accurate view of the island through their artworks. These aspects were underlined by Gómez Sicre contributing to a crucial development in the increased understanding of art from Latin America in the United States. MoMA's and Barr's initial founding strategy, as well as later, PAU's and Gómez Sicre's approach, promoted the research, exhibition and curation of Latin American art in the USA. Both men, and their respective institutions, formed important starting points for this field in the United States. This, in turn, contributed to the development of the MFAH's programme, which sought to align with national aims that promoted democracy, while asserting a different approach toward borders and curating art from Latin America.

The following chapter will discuss the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, which took place during a period in which the PAU and the Division of Visual Arts actively promoted democracy over communism through cultural exchanges. The chapter will underline how this exhibition was more experimental, and arguably more successful, in its outset to conflate the hemisphere into a collaborating entity by collapsing borders between parts of the United States and Latin America. It will also become apparent that the aesthetic and technical considerations outlined in this chapter remained at the forefront of Gómez Sicre's curatorial approach while promoting innovation and high art from Latin America. At the same time, the MFAH acted as a platform that allowed experimentation to take place and broadened the curatorial approach in this field.

## Chapter 2- The Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition (1956)

Two black and white photographs from the archives of the MFAH are the starting point for this chapter and the exhibition I will discuss. Their content illustrates the significance of this showcase in the forging of business, economic, and diplomatic relations, as well as the integration of art from Latin America at the MFAH. The images were taken at the opening night of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*. This show took place at the MFAH from the 4<sup>th</sup> April until 6<sup>th</sup> May 1956. The archive records list no description of the people in the images, and make no reference to the artworks. Nevertheless, it is possible to surmise that in the first photograph Lee Malone, the director of the MFAH from 1953 until 1959, is depicted in a white suit jacket standing to the right of the image and talking to two unidentified individuals. They are standing in front of Cundo Bermúdez's (Cuba, 1914-2008) *Havana Sexted* (1953), which takes up half of the photograph in the background revealing its considerable size within the gallery space and in relation to the people standing next to it (see fig.10).

Conversely, the second photograph shows a woman standing in front of two unidentified paintings that are hung on opposite walls that meet in the corner of the exhibition space (see fig.11). To her left, and just behind her, a triptych depicts images of seemingly mythological characters. To her right, and the painting she faces, a landscape can be ascertained. Its swirling brushstrokes and imposing mountains are perceptible in this photograph. The woman wears a dress that appears to be made of silk. She seems engrossed in the painting in front of her. Surrounded by art, this image suggests an intimate engagement with the works, while Malone and the visitors engage in conversation with each other.

The photographs outlined here are the only remaining images preserved at the MFAH archives of the opening night. They illustrate the role of art and that of

the MFAH in creating a southern network through this exhibition. The motivations for this project originated in the interest to foment positive business and diplomatic relations in the Gulf-Caribbean region, and were embedded in the institutional approach adopted by the PAU, MFAH, and Root & Brown Ltd, an engineering and construction company building dams and chemical plants throughout the region ("Promoting Art" 85). Further, Gómez Sicre aimed to present art from the region that was innovative and highly accomplished. At the same time, his approach as cold-war modernist, will be highlighted here through his selection of artworks. Overall, this exhibition aimed to align a regional hemispheric vision pulling together the separate interests at play in this project.

The role and exchange of culture was an underlying strategy to promote mutual understanding and peace in the hemisphere and was included in the PAU's Charter from 1948:

The spiritual unity of the continent is based on respect for the cultural values of the American countries and requires their close cooperation for the high purposes of civilization.<sup>11</sup> (Latmontagne 7)

Echoing the idea of the Good Neighbour Years discussed in chapter one, this quote details the aim to foster cultural understanding which is still an integral part of this organisation.<sup>12</sup> More specifically, this includes cultural exchanges between institutions, artists, diplomats, nations, and businesses that are based upon parity in artistic accomplishments. The *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* is an example of how art and culture acted as a vehicle to foster these aims (see fig.12).

This exhibition is nestled between historic initiatives and events including the

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<sup>11</sup> The charter was signed in 1948 by the following nations: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, United States, Uruguay, Venezuela. Organization of American States.

<sup>12</sup> Another example of cultural exchange is the Art Museum of the Americas (AMA). This institution remains attached to the PAU and continues to support artistic production and cultural exchanges across the Americas. Its collection of art from Latin America was initiated by Gómez Sicre; Organization of American States.

already discussed Good Neighbour Years, and the Cuban Revolution, which took place in 1959. The overthrow of the U.S. backed dictator Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar and the instalment of a communist regime headed by Fidel Castro, brought the threat of communism within closest proximity to the United States. This historic event was followed by increased efforts to align the hemisphere with democratic values and goals promoted by the United States (Fox, "The PAU Visual Arts" 86).

Nevertheless, in 1956 and before these significant events, the Gulf-Caribbean was a relatively peaceful region and, at that time, not of prior concern to United States foreign policy. Its aims remained embedded in the above-cited charter. The *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* served as another vehicle to manifest these objectives. The historical events and initiatives before and after this exhibition have been studied and written about extensively, and in conjunction with cultural and artistic exchanges in the region. However, the period between these initiatives remains less considered. This chapter provides new and valuable insights into curatorial approaches toward art from Latin America at the MFAH during a period that was open to experimentation with geographical frameworks for artistic and cultural exchanges.

It is further pertinent to explore how the exchange and the promotion of art from Latin America formed an art historical canon that was influenced by the selection criteria for artworks adopted by Gómez Sicre. This curator's approach dovetailed with earlier strategies by Barr at MoMA that emphasised the technical and aesthetic rendering of artworks inspired by European practices. However, Gómez Sicre revised some of these exceptionally Eurocentric attitudes. He rooted the art created in Latin America within a discourse that emphasised the incorporation of local themes in artworks. Above all, he aimed to showcase accomplished creations that stressed aesthetic skill over political content, aligning his approach to that of the

PAU, and fostering transcendent connections across the hemisphere.

This chapter focuses on selected artworks by participating artists including Alejandro Obregón's *Cattle Drowning in the Magdalena* (1955). This artwork won the \$1000 purchase prize as part of the exhibition's competition. Further, Armando Morales' *Bird Cage* (1955), the winner of the \$200 purchase prize, will also be discussed as an example that exemplifies the curatorial approach employed by Gómez Sicre.

These artworks will be compared to later works by the same artists showing their acute engagement with politically loaded issues. In the case of Obregón, this concerns *Estudiante Muerto (El Velorio)/The Dead Student (The Vigil)* (1956), and Morales' *Guerillero Muerto VIII/Dead Warrior VIII* (1962). These artworks acquire acutely political overtones criticising state violence and oppression in Colombia and Nicaragua respectively during the late 1950s and 1960s. This contrasts with the artworks selected for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, which remain non-political and emphasise abstract and cubist techniques. It will become apparent from these examples, that Gómez Sicre's selection for this exhibition decidedly excluded artworks with political content mirroring the aim to align a positive Hemispheric view. Moreover, this illustrates that the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* took place during a relatively calm period in the Cold War.

As the hosting institution, the MFAH asserted a central role in the instigation and framing of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*. It consisted of 161 artworks by 137 artists. The catalogue depicts only forty-four artworks that are printed in black and white providing little further information apart from the artist's names, their countries of origin, and the title of the artworks.

Nevertheless, the MFAH's perhaps most significant contribution was the geographical framing outlined in an initial memorandum that marked an effort to



showcase art from the Gulf-Caribbean region surrounding Texas. This included five Gulf States in the United States: Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, and Texas, as well as countries represented from the Caribbean and Latin America. These were: Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Puerto Rico, Surinam, Trinidad, and Venezuela (*Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*). Due to the strategic location of the MFAH in Texas, sharing borders with Mexico and waters with numerous countries that are part of Latin America and others that pertain to the Caribbean, it becomes apparent that the MFAH asserted a defining role in cultural and artistic diplomacy during the intermittent years of the Cold War. This institution proposed a blurring of borders between the United States and Latin America contributing to a further alignment of the hemispheric idea proposed by the PAU.

In line with this, I argue that the MFAH sought to set itself apart from the overshadowing presence of New York, which at that time already asserted a central role in the art world. In 1956, the MFAH became a focus for an alternative network setting the tone for its innovations later in the century that concerned programming and expanding toward more specialised interests. This concerns the first ever institutional exhibition of Latino art with *Hispanic Art in the United States-Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* (1987) discussed in chapter four, the establishment of the International Centre for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) in 2001, and the vast survey exhibition *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art from Latin America* (2004), which will be discussed in chapter five.

In 1956, and at the same time as the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, monographic exhibitions of the works by Armando Reverón (Venezuela, 1889-1954) and Rufino Tamayo (Mexico, 1899-1991) were staged marking this year as the first significant one for art from Latin America at the MFAH since 1932 when MoMA took

over the reins in this field. Tamayo's exhibition was curated by George W. Staempfli, the MFAH's curator, while Reverón's show was an itinerant exhibition organised in Venezuela by Alfredo Boulton, a long-time friend of the artist, and Carlos Otero, the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Caracas (*Armando Reverón; Rufino Tamayo*). These simultaneous exhibitions are testament to the increased interest in artistic achievements in the field of Latin American art by the MFAH.

It will become apparent that the period in question here was one in which artistic practices that emphasised technique over content were favoured. At the same time, the MFAH proposed a parallel framework that experimented with curatorial approaches and that collapsed borders. Through Gómez Sicre's promotion of art from Latin America and the staging of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* at the MFAH, this institution became instrumental in briefly asserting a reviewed narrative.

Firstly, I will outline the exhibition history at the MFAH before and after this significant year spanning from the 1940s until the 1960s. This will illustrate this institution's history in some depth and place the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* within a local and chronological context. This will underline 1956 as an exceptional year that was not only located between significant historical and international events, but also within institutional developments that influenced the changing programming at this institution.

## 2.1. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Before and After the Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition

As already outlined in the introduction, since the MFAH's inauguration as a museum in 1924, exhibitions of art from Latin America until the late 1930s were itinerant and often organised by various galleries located in New York. They also consisted of direct collaborations between the MFAH, artists, and government ministries in Mexico.

In the 1940s, the PAU brought two notable exhibitions to the MFAH. These were the *Inter-American Photographic Salon* (1943) and *Paintings by Pedro Figari* (1947). Again, the aim was to promote positive Pan-American relations and was underlined in a letter to Chillman from the Chief of Special Events at the PAU, Paul W. Murphy:

We have selected the leading states where Pan-American interest is the greatest, and because of this, and the size of Texas, we decided to have two exhibits in your state. (Murphy)

The letter refers to the *Inter-American Photographic Salon*, which was also shown at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts in the same year. The letter echoes communication by the AFA from 1930, outlined in the introduction, in which the MFAH was underscored as a key institution for fomenting relations with Latin America due to its geographical location. It becomes apparent that the MFAH was known to the PAU, and other organisations, as a key museum in the south of the United States that showcased their exhibitions regularly.

In 1953, the MFAH hosted the *Pan-American Exhibition*. Information for this show at the MFAH archives consist of a single press release and a list of works borrowed from the collections of Houstonians (*Pan-American Exhibition*). This was a local effort and organised independently from the PAU. It borrowed from the idea of Pan-Americanism to frame the exhibition. This meant it proposed an interconnected view of the western hemisphere, however, unlike the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* three years later, and the previous itinerant exhibitions by the PAU mentioned above, the *Pan-American Exhibition* did not forge connections with other countries in Latin America. This exhibition presented examples of art from Latin America that were collected and housed in the homes of Houstonians and at the MFAH's own collections.

After 1956, the institution's interest and commitment to art from Latin

America subsided. This was briefly resurrected in 1967 when *Our Mexican Heritage* was shown there. This time the premise was not focused upon the idea of the hemisphere and diplomacy; rather, this show posed an approximation toward an interdisciplinary project that focused on Mexican art from pre-Columbian times to the present. The exhibition showcased pre-Columbian artefacts, Colonial art from Mexico, and works by Roberto Montenegro (Mexico, 1885-1968), Rivera and Gunther Gerzso (Mexico 1915-2000) among others. Similarly to the 1953 *Pan-American Exhibition* the artworks and artefacts originated from the MFAH's own collection and that of several lenders from Houston.

This show was accompanied by dance performances and screenings of Mexican films. The dance event, *Bird Legends of the Mixtec*, was presented on two occasions by the G'Ann Boyd Concert Dancers, and films included, among others, *Desfile Histórico Mexicano/Historic Mexican Parade* (1960). This documentary commemorates the parade taking place during the one hundredth anniversary of the liberation of Mexico. The broad and interdisciplinary approach for this exhibition underlines a wider interest that examines the MFAH's own collections and other media including performance and video.

The shows briefly outlined here, which preceded and then followed the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, were organised according to premises that were rooted in local and institutional origins, as well as collaborations with the PAU. The MFAH was already an established partner with that institution and hosted itinerant shows throughout the 1940s. At the same time, the MFAH intermittently examined its own collections and reviewed its regional relevance to the idea of Pan-Americanism. I believe that it is for this reason that the framework for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* included the reimagined geography of part of the continent. This was

significant in bridging the local with the international. As a result, this exhibition was outward looking and briefly forged a southern network.

## 2.2. The Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition – Premise and Parameters

The proposition and constraints outlined by the MFAH propose a review of geography and curatorial strategies. The purpose and aim of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* was charted in detail in an institutional memorandum from 1955:

To bring together and to focus attention on the contemporary painting, sculpture, and ceramics of the countries surrounding the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. It is felt that the historic and economic ties of the five Gulf States with this vast area provide a deep-rooted cultural background for significant relationships in the arts today. (*Instructions to the Jury*)

This quote underlines the aim to encourage close cultural relations that are rooted in history and business relations within the region. The memorandum also situates the initiative with the MFAH which align to the aims of the PAU by promoting overall positive Pan-American relations. These are focused on the Gulf-Caribbean region rather than the entire hemisphere. Furthermore, the project was sponsored by Brown & Root, a company that was active in the region since the mid 1940s. The collaboration between the MFAH, PAU, and the corporate sponsorship provided by Brown & Root confirms the institutional, diplomatic and commercial interests that underpinned this exhibition.

The aims of the MFAH also dovetailed with those of Gómez Sicre. The MFAH sought to assert a legitimating role as an innovative art institution, while Gómez Sicre promoted groundbreaking art from Latin America in the United States under the diplomatic cloak of the PAU. Furthermore, the sponsorship by Brown & Root manifested this initiative as a valuable endeavour from which business was also promoted. Gómez Sicre summarised these points emphasising the significant geographical location of the MFAH in the south:

It is stimulating to note that an interest in the art of our neighbors to the south should first appear in the dynamic metropolis of the Gulf coast, and even more encouraging to note that this interest should be furthered by so enterprising and important a cultural center as the Museum of Fine Arts of Houston. (Introduction)

After the inaugural exhibition at the MFAH, the show travelled to several institutions in the United States. It stayed at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Centre; Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; Institute of Contemporary Arts, Boston; The Munson-Williams Proctor Institute, Utica, New York; and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (*Gulf-Caribbean*). The Houston Post reported that the show could travel to Cuba, however, this plan was not realised ("Art from Gulf Cultural Area"). Therefore, despite the inclusion of art from the United States and the Gulf-Caribbean region the exhibition did not travel to any of the countries that are part of the northern part of Latin America. This suggests, firstly, a lack of exchange between the United States and the countries taking part in this show, and, secondly, an emphasis upon framing the exhibition in a United States context by only disseminating it in that country.

Nevertheless, the geographical parameters for the inclusion of artworks were close-knit and did not include much of South America. The participating countries included those that surrounded the Gulf of Mexico and the five Gulf States in the United States. Similarly, the MFAH asserted a regional and transnational central point that did not comprise New York and MoMA, which remained a significant actor in the art world, yet was purposely excluded here.

For this exhibition, the MFAH became an alternative nexus acquiring an important role in providing a platform for fomenting multilateral relations between the contributing nations. Despite the limited circulation of the exhibition in the region, the geographical framework established a vital break with MoMA creating a parallel exhibition node located in the Gulf of Mexico. Thus, it is important to note

that this exhibition conflated imagined and real borders between all participating nations and the United States.

Gómez Sicre developed an approach toward art from Latin America working closely with artists from the region. He promoted 'alternate art historical genealogies to hegemonic nationalist ones' and urged artists to be inspired by their own histories, cultures, and societies rather than looking toward Europe or the United States (Fox, *Making Art Panamerican* 19). In the case of the paintings by Obregón and Morales discussed in this chapter, this will become visible as they incorporated local themes rendered through adjusted European practices in their artworks. In this way, they claimed foremost positions as modern Latin American artists.

The MFAH, as legitimating institution, did not assume this role again in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sponsorship from businesses such as Brown & Root did not support similar efforts. The interest by the PAU later expanded across all Latin America rather than selected geographical areas such as that proposed in this exhibition. Similarly, subsequent exhibitions at the MFAH focused on art from Latin America and presented shows of artworks by individual artists. This marked a return to the initial geographical conception of Latin American art and created a clear division between art produced in the United States and that coming from other countries in the hemisphere. The *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* was therefore a onetime project that included an unconventional geographical framework. Firstly, I will closely discuss Gómez Sicre's criteria for the inclusion of artworks.

### 2.3. Gómez Sicre on his Selection

The curator wrote the article "A Critic's Choice" which was published in the magazine *Americas* in June 1956. This is an extended version of the introduction the curator wrote for the exhibition catalogue. For instance, in the essay for the catalogue, he

states that many artists from Latin America 'have won acceptance...and are judged on an equal basis with Europeans, but not altogether independently of conditions which bear little relation to their intrinsic value.' In the version for Americas, he asserts:

When I accepted the invitation of Mr Lee Malone, director of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, my criterion was to be quality: a work would have to stand on its own merits, regardless of whether it depicted its place of origin. No doubt people intent on sightseeing through pictures will be disappointed. (33)

Gómez Sicre is adamant in this quote that his selection of artworks was judged on equal criteria to that of other artists in Europe and the United States. At the same time, he points to the perhaps expected imagery from the region, which he rejects, and insists upon aesthetic and technical quality in artworks. He reiterates these points in the introduction to the catalogue:

No concessions have been made to "tourist art," to provincial picturesqueness. The goal pursued in making the selection has been to single out which can compete, on the basis of its own intrinsic worth, at the international level. (Introduction)

Similarly, the essay also states that 'no one style will characterize the exhibition. If expressionism strikes a dominant tone, it is reflected in varying interpretations.' Gómez Sicre's disapproval for art that played to the expectations of audiences in the United States is made clear in the quotes cited here. He recalls the trend during the 1930s and 1940s to exhibit such stereotypical images of Latin America, which he calls 'tourist art', and elicits that

The representatives of foundations and semi-official institutions and the so-called technicians who were sent to Latin America to select works for exhibition in the United States brought back almost exclusively examples of forced sentimentality and the consciously picturesque. (Introduction)

It becomes apparent that to move away from these early attempts at defining art from Latin America, the curator purposely selected artworks that did not depict lush



landscapes and quaint images of an idealised Latin America. He was determined to show the latest and most innovative artworks that were international in their outlook and able to compete with art produced in the United States and Europe. The curator's aim was to show mastery of techniques, such as illustrated in the works by Obregón and Morales who worked with cubist and abstract practices as will be shown. All the while, the curator placed emphasis upon the artist's innovative approaches that incorporated themes that originate in their surroundings. The role of the MFAH as hosting institution is crucial in this recount as it provides the platform for this endeavour.

Ida Gramcko observes the innovation and the artistic questions introduced through Gómez Sicre's selection and that of the overall exhibition. In her article for Venezuela's newspaper *El Nacional*, she mentions the catalogue as an illustration of the vast selection of artworks and suggests that

The Houston exhibition catalogue proves that the healthy majority of abstract paintings result in the artists finding themselves focused on the most tumultuous dilemma: to be situated in a universal conception, and all of which it contains, not as a friendly secret, but as a troublesome problem.<sup>13</sup>

The writer recognizes the aim to rework universal techniques critically and underlines the overall selection for the exhibition as pioneering. She also asserts that the catalogue illustrates the questions posed by artists in terms of abstract art as a critical engagement. She goes on to outline the impossibility of conveying traits of a nation or its people through painting rendering nationalistic art irrelevant in the context of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* (Gramcko). She echoes Gómez Sicre's aim to present originality, recalcitrant aesthetics, and a new art from Latin America. The focus on quality in art and its origin in abstraction becomes most poignant here.

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<sup>13</sup> Translated by the author from Spanish: El catálogo de la exposición de Houston da constancia de que frente a la saludable generalidad de la pintura abstracta el artista se encuentra abocado al más tormentoso dilema: situar en una concepción universal todo aquello que está en él, no como confidencia bonachona, sino como problema pendenciero.

The reception of this exhibition by critics and writers was positive as a result and confirmed Gómez Sicre as a foremost arbiter for Latin American art in the United States.

#### 2.4. The Geographical Framework - Collapsing Borders, Dividing Selections

Together with the focus on the international and national area surrounding Texas, and with the MFAH becoming the centre for diplomatic and cultural activity in the Gulf-Caribbean region, this project mirrored the PAU's aim to promote 'spiritual unity' and 'respect for cultural values of the American countries' as outlined above in its charter from 1948.

Moreover, the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* marked a step toward asserting a significant role in Cold War cultural policy. The MFAH's location in Texas and its shared borders with Mexico, and proximity to islands including Cuba, was an ideal location for this project. Since the promotion of democracy over communism was a key diplomatic aim of the PAU, it is reasonable to assume that this was another vital concern and motivator for this project.

The Nicaraguan newspaper, *La Noticia*, and the Guatemalan newspaper *Diario de Centro América* noted that the opening of the exhibition coincided with Day of the Americas on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, and that of the Pan-American week from the 8<sup>th</sup> until the 14<sup>th</sup> of April. ("Cinco artistas"; "Muestras de arte"). Both events were inaugurated by the PAU to celebrate collaboration and understanding within the hemisphere. Although this was not the central concern in this case, nor was it applied as a framing device, the coinciding dates supported this effort to some degree nonetheless. More importantly, the economic and historical ties in the region were used as a common denominator as pointed out previously. This weighs in favour of the MFAH as an alternative centre for a southern network that was loosely tied to the PAU's overall aim of hemispheric cooperation. Moreover, a key difference

rests in the exhibition's significant deviation in its geographical span, which was an attempt at fomenting regional relations and establish a network of cultural alignment.

In the United States, the five Gulf States were included in this exhibition, as well as all countries located throughout the Mexican Gulf. This geographical framing amalgamated not only art from countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, as was usual for a survey exhibition of this kind, but also art from the United States.

The deviation in the framing becomes more significant if we consider Gómez Sicre's role in the promotion and display of art from Latin America in the United States after the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*. In later efforts, the geographical boundaries were far less fluid, since as part of the exhibitions *South American Art Today* (1959) and the *Esso Salon of Young Artists* (1965), only artists from South America and Latin America were included respectively. This highlights the otherwise binary geographical distinction employed by the PAU and Gómez Sicre in which art from the United States was never included in the same exhibition as that from Latin America. Thus, Gómez Sicre's view of a de-centralised art world based on parity between north and south was later compromised. The vision for an interconnected and equal platform in this curator's curatorial approach was, however, realised in Houston in 1956.

The *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* proved that high art replaces the need for national borders and stereotypical images. In this sense, Gómez Sicre and the MFAH reached an apotheosis through this curatorial strategy before the inevitable return to consider the continent in its traditional geographical definition that insisted upon Latin America as a geopolitical entity that is separate from the United States. This also returned to the ghettoisation of art from Latin America and the insistence upon developmentalist policies implemented by the United States in countries across Latin

America.

Moreover, within the organisation of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* an unequal distribution of the responsibilities for the selection of artworks took place. To identify works of art for inclusion in the exhibition, Gómez Sicre travelled over the course of five weeks to all countries in the Gulf-Caribbean region to survey and select artworks ("A Critic's Choice" 33). Contrary, in the United States, an advisory committee selected artists from the five Gulf States to be included in the exhibition. The jurors were James S. Plaut, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Ala Story, director of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California; and Gordon Bailey Washburn, director of the Department of Fine Arts, Carnegie Institute, Massachusetts (*Gulf-Caribbean*). While the jurors in the United States selected artworks that were entered at the MFAH over the course of a weekend, Gómez Sicre travelled extensively throughout the region visiting artists' studios and preparing works to be transported to the MFAH. This underscored this curator's extended and active efforts to find and ship works from numerous locations throughout the region.

The *Houston Post* and *Houston Chronicle* focused their reports on the judges from the United States and their involvement in choosing works from the five Gulf States. Their selection of fifty-four artworks was undertaken from a total of 115 entered for consideration ("Art from Gulf", "Judges' Session"). The inclusion of the Caribbean and Latin American countries taking part is mentioned at the end of these short announcements pointing to an increased local interest in the run up to the exhibition with no mention made of Gómez Sicre's involvement.

In total, 107 paintings and sculptures from the Gulf-Caribbean countries were selected by Gómez Sicre, more than half the total number of artworks. Gómez Sicre was aware of the potential criticisms regarding this selection process. Nevertheless,

he endeavoured to provide a complete view of the art produced in the region as he stated:

I am fully aware of the risks involved in a one-man jury selection from twelve nations and four colonies, but I undertook my trip confident of finding works which, though not all of the same quality, would at least give a global idea of what is going on in that part of our hemisphere. (Introduction)

He appears perhaps less committed to his selection in this quote and resolves to present a survey of current practices in the region, rather than the insistence upon excellence outlined earlier. The unequal division of responsibilities and labour highlights a separation between the selection process of art from the United States and that of the other countries in the Gulf-Caribbean region. Gómez Sicre not only travelled more extensively, but also selected more artworks than the jury of three in the United States. Therefore, while the geopolitical framework encompassed the United States and countries in Latin America and the Caribbean region, the division of the selection process was clearly separated and did not overlap. This, furthermore, points to Gómez Sicre's foremost role as cultural intermediary and translator of art from Latin America in the United States endowing him with this significant responsibility and the associated extended effort.

It becomes clear that the division between the jury to select artworks originated from pragmatic motives since the jury in the United States comprised of knowledge about the art produced there. Equally, Gómez Sicre's expertise focused on art from Latin America. The location of the MFAH served the diplomatic ends of the PAU and the business objectives of Brown & Root., which worked on diverse projects in the region. At the same time, this presented an innovative premise that collapsed borders echoing Gómez Sicre's aim to create a level playing field between the art created in the hemisphere in which art from Latin America was exhibited on an equal footing as that from the United States. Finally, the MFAH acted as platform

giving this institution a legitimating role as tastemaker for artworks in a re-imagined hemisphere, and, more specifically, a southern network.

#### 2.4.1. The MFAH within a Southern Network

The geographical parameters for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* transcended borders and exhibited art from across this expanse on a platform forgoing geopolitical definitions. Nations were presented as an integral part of the region and their artistic output served as proof of their quality and innovation that was worthy of being included in this international exhibition and next to art that was created in the United States. Foltz argues that rather than viewing this exhibition as a regional effort, it should be viewed as an attempt at bringing Pan-American ideals together in one project (21). Fox states that Gómez-Sicre's approach was one that endorsed the idea of Latin American art within the hemisphere as part of a network of significant places within the international art world:

Through promoting a continental consciousness, Latin America would exchange parochial and fractious nationalisms for a progressive and outward-looking regionalism that did not dispense with the national altogether but instead featured it as one tier on a progressive scale of affective spatial and communal registers linking American metropolises to the rest of the world. (*Making Art Panamerican* 6)

The idea of a de-centralised art world emerges in this quote, which lay at the heart of Gómez Sicre's curatorial premise. He viewed the whole hemisphere levelling equally through high art. This produced scope for cultural activities to be promoted anywhere in the hemisphere creating a space in which artistic exchanges took place between equally innovative and original artistic practices. In this framework, institutions, such as the MFAH, became the housing entities for the artworks promoted by Gómez Sicre.

In response to the creation of this southern network, two newspapers in Venezuela, *El Nacional* and *El Universal*, reported calls for further exchanges

between the south of the United States and the nations surrounding the geographical parameters established by this exhibition. Both articles further highlight positive responses expressed by Venezuelan consulates and unnamed individuals in the North American art world who hoped to see an ampler exchange of artistic creations in future between the south of the United States and Venezuela ("Oswaldo Vigas"; "Premian a Oswaldo"). It becomes apparent that a similar exchange was welcomed and highlighted as one more hope for collaboration in future in this region. This underlines the MFAH's geographical framework and curatorial premise as a welcome alternative network that was located alongside that of New York.

The reason for this was a significant decrease in exhibitions of art from Latin America in that city. Gómez Sicre underlines the lack of interest for the works of artists from Latin America as he recalls a friend stating: 'Too bad that the New York market resists Latin American art so' (Introduction). He further states the difficulty in gaining recognition for Latin American art in New York and the lack of exhibitions, which rarely took place during the late 1940s and 1950s (Introduction).

Nevertheless, he highlights Barr's role in this field:

An exception to this New York resistance is the Museum of Modern Art. While it has not kept its collection entirely up to date, it does, thanks to the unbiased judgement of Alfred H. Barr, represent many new names and trends. ("A Critic's Choice")

Gómez Sicre makes partial concessions for MoMA, stating that its efforts under Barr continue to introduce artists, even though it has not kept up with latest developments or updated its collection. MoMA's interest in this field was indeed negligible at that time and was no longer comparable to its initial interest and zeal during the 1930s and early 1940s. Although critical of New York, Gómez Sicre's assessment of MoMA falls short of a serious engagement with that institution's failure to continue programming art from Latin America.

At the same time, his praise for the MFAH for initiating this exhibition is noteworthy as he highlights this institution's significance as a cultural centre placing it at the heart of promoting new and innovative art. In both, the introduction to the catalogue and his article for *Americas*, the curator recognizes the MFAH as a key player; however, does not appear to recognize the potential for this institution to become an alternative centre for this field. The proposed shift in the focus and representation of art from Latin America is based on re-imagined borders and a move away from established institutional centres in the United States. It becomes clear that the role of the MFAH as an alternative centre was secondary to Gómez Sicre's aim of promoting the participating artists and to maintain the PAU as the key institution to promote the field.

Nevertheless, the MFAH asserted a central institutional and geographical position where contemporary art from the Gulf-Caribbean region found a temporary platform. Thus, this institution became significant in that it presented an opposing nexus to MoMA and New York, which was long established as the centre of the art world. The creation of an alternative network to promote art from Latin America that was based upon a framework of equality marked a significant change from the 1930s and early 1940s when MoMA described art from Latin America as derivative of European practices.

Moreover, and as outlined here, the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* initiated a geographical framework that did not separate Latin America from the United States. This supported the idea of a partially unified hemisphere and the conflation of borders into a region that cooperated fully. Gómez Sicre was instrumental in selecting the right artworks that promoted modern art of excellence and quality and underpinned the MFAH as a serious node in this southern network. The following section discusses and analyses the entries by Obregón and Morales. Both artworks



remain part of the collection at the MFAH and exemplify Gómez Sicre's conception of quality modern art and underline his role as cold-war modernist.

## 2.5. Artists

### 2.5.1. Alejandro Obregón

The theme of this artist's entry, *Cattle Drowning in the Magdalena*, deals with the death and destruction that is caused by natural forces (see fig.13). Gómez Sicre recalls his encounter with the artist and his reasons for selecting this painting:

Alejandro Obregón awaited me with a magnificent series of pictures based on the recent flood of the Magdalena River. The series demonstrated surprising subtlety and purity in the treatment of heads of cattle foundering in the muddy waters. I selected the painting that seemed to me the most eloquent of the group. ("A Critic's Choice" 34)

The subject in this painting takes as its central theme the Magdalena River, Colombia's principal waterway, and its potentially devastating effects upon nature. It depicts the swollen river after heavy rain storms, leading to debris and living creatures being dragged into its path, carried northward, and into the Caribbean Sea. The composition uses geometric and cubist elements to convey a sense of chaos. The background is composed of several shades of grey, dark blue and white, which are outlined in rough rectangles. At the lower end of the painting, the shape of two fish appear which are painted on a dark brown background and are hidden behind yet more debris. The painting presents a smooth surface that belies the turbulent subject it depicts. The brushstrokes are not detectable, however, the contrast between the background colours are markedly different. The centre of the painting is taken up by the bull in the throes of the powerful current of the Magdalena River. Several shapes, rendered in a cubist style, and in different colours and sizes are dotted across the canvas and overlap each other. They appear to bury the bull beneath it. Its mouth is wide open, while its eyes appear shut as it endures a lethal struggle as the viewer watches on.

The Magdalena River spans almost the entire length of the country connecting with the Caribbean Sea near Barranquilla in the North where the artist lived in the early part of the 1950s (Barnitz 161). The Magdalena River serves the transportation of goods and people up and down the country acting as a significant system of transportation. Gómez Sicre recounts Obregón's motivation behind the creation of this award-winning painting:

He has not seen any cattle drown. His experience with the angry river consisted of joining the search for a body of a friend who had drowned while the river was flood. It would be too melodramatic to depict the ardent with a human being, but he could not dismiss the idea. From it developed the series of oils executed with the greatest subtlety the artist had ever employed. ("A Critic's Choice" 34)

Rather than the perhaps macabre subject of a dead body, the curator highlights how Obregón chose to depict the natural power of this river and the devastation it can cause. Lucie-Smith connects Obregón's practice with Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014) and this writer's literary style known as Magic Realism. Both were in regular contact while they lived by the Caribbean coast in Colombia (159-161). Ivonne Pini relates Obregón more directly to Magic Realism, claiming that the artist combines his art practice with vivid colours, animals as symbolic additions, and local themes that are present in the Caribbean region of Colombia (169). Obregón's painting reflects his observations and immersion in the landscape and surroundings where he lived. This is evident in the subject of the artwork. The influence of García Márquez is also most likely through their regular exchanges while both lived in that part of Colombia as outlined by Lucie-Smith.

Obregón grew up in Spain for much of his life and worked in France for five years in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Barnitz 161). Because of his extended stay in Europe, he was familiar with Picasso's works and that of other European Modern artists. Lucie-Smith and Pini point to Obregón's use of vibrant colour in his work and

underline the influence of Picasso detectable in the artist's work (159; 169). This assertion is reinforced by Barnitz who also claims that Obregón's work was rooted in late cubism and depictions of violence such as that of Picasso's *Guernica* (161). This painting dealt with the onset of the Spanish Civil War, and the destruction of the ancient town Guernica, which was caused by a concentrated air raid in 1937 (fig.14). This artwork explores and depicts the violence exerted by the Government unto its citizens. Obregón was equally troubled by the subject of violence and force used by the State against its own citizens in which Colombia remains entrenched since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Examples of this include *Estudiante Muerto (El Velorio)/Dead Student (The Vigil)* (see fig.15). This painting also uses late cubist elements and vibrant red and brown tones to respond to the persisting violence in Colombia and the incident in which several students were killed during protests between June 8 and 9 in 1956 (Reece 75). The painting was created sometime after this event and after the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*. Gómez Sicre could not have seen this painting or known of its existence at the time pointing to Obregón's artistic development in response to events in Colombia.

The subject of this painting, a deceased student, lies on a table surrounded by numerous items such as a rooster signifying death, betrayal, and resurrection (Reece 75). This addition echoes Pini's assertion that Obregón included symbolic imagery in his works. The flowers surrounding the body point to the student's imminent funeral. The body is depicted with injuries to the legs and torso and lying flat on the table top. Obregón uses smooth brushstrokes throughout the painting and keeps details to a minimum while emphasising the main subject in the composition.

Echoing Picasso's *Guernica*, this artwork references the aftermath of state violence and acts as a form of political protest. By emphasising the result of violence and the suffering experienced, this artwork becomes impacting and urgent. This is reminiscent of Obregón's entry to the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*; however, *Cattle Drowning in the Magdalena* is not an overt political statement; rather, it represents nature's potential for destruction. This runs counter to Lucie-Smith's, Barnitz's, Ades' and Sullivan's claims that art from Latin America mostly emphasised political themes and engaged with social issues.

Nonetheless, in both cases, the technical and artistic influences from Europe are evident in the cubist elements in which the paintings are rendered. This is underlined by Barnitz, Pini, Luci-Smith, and Gómez Sicre. This further highlights the latter's preference for non-political content. Thus, *Estudiante Muerto (El Velorio)/Dead Student (The Vigil)* would not likely have been included in the selection for Houston had it been in existence earlier that year.

### 2.5.2. Armando Morales

Armando Morales's entry, *Bird Cage*, is another example of art that was favoured by Gómez Sicre as a work that he states is 'entirely free of provincial flavour' ('A Critic's Choice' 35). Provincialism, like tourist art, is decried by Gómez Sicre, and Morales' painting presents us with another example of art that was neither political, nor adhered to picturesqueness or stereotypical depictions of Latin America (see fig.16).

The composition presents the viewer with an, at first, disorienting picture of a cage. This is indicative of Morales' period during which he worked mainly in abstraction (Kupfer 66). The idea of a cage is represented through painted grids in varying styles, yet they do not constitute the figurative shape of a coop. Nevertheless, through fine brushstrokes, the idea of a confined space is evoked.

Much like in Obregón's example above, the background consists of cubist shapes painted in varying shades of green and ochre. The central space of the canvas appears brighter through tones of light green. Several fruits are strewn around the area of the cage suggesting feeding time.

*Bird Cage* also depicts eight figuratively painted birds that are located at varying places on the canvas. Kupfer highlights that this artist has maintained a balance between figuration and abstraction in his paintings (Kupfer 66). This is visible here since the painting combines figuratively painted birds next to abstracted surroundings. Further, Morales does not depict political themes, nor does he allude to them. Much like *Cattle Drowning in the Magdalena*, the political content is absent and the painting focuses on depicting nature through a combination of abstract and cubist techniques.

This artwork has been described as an extraordinary painting by *La Prensa* in Nicaragua as early as December 1955. The article highlights the virtues of this entry to the exhibition describing it as a visual poem:

Capturing the rhythm of this composition, and the decomposition of the birdcage, (Morales) treats each area of the painting with diligent delight until it is left thoroughly validated, not only in itself, but also in its relation with the visual rhythm of the overall painting. The colours and metaphoric drawing of the moving birds, the composition and poetry of the objects, make this canvas one of the most beautiful in national painting. (5b)<sup>14</sup>

This positive review was extended in the same article underlining the movement and vibration evoked through the colours and the delicate treatment of the birds and objects (5b).<sup>15</sup> It becomes apparent that long before this painting was sent to

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<sup>14</sup> Translated by the author from Spanish: 'Captando todos los ritmos de la composición y descomposición de una jaula con pájaros, tratando cada zona del cuadro con oficioso deleite hasta dejarla plenamente valorado, no sólo en sí misma sino en su relación y ritmo plástico con las demás. Colorido, dibujo metafórico de los pájaros en movimiento, composición y poesía de los objetos hacen de este cuadro uno de los más bellos producidos en la pintura nacional.'

<sup>15</sup> Translated by the author from Spanish: 'deja apreciar en conjunto la movilidad, la vibración [...] de los colores y el fino tratamiento de cada pájaro, de cada objeto y de cada zona del cuadro'.

Houston, the national press in Nicaragua underlined the qualities of this painting and the artist's mastery of modernist techniques.

Similarly to Obregón's artistic development, Morales also depicted political themes and criticised the use of violence later in his career and during the civil war in Nicaragua in the 1960s. The increasing opposition by the Sandinistas against the Somoza dictatorship led to guerrilla warfare in the country (Reece 73). *Guerrillero Muerto VIII/Dead Warrior VIII* is an example of Morales introducing more overt political responses to Nicaragua's national upheaval in his art (see fig.17).

This artwork is rendered in more abstract techniques than Morales' entry to the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* making an accurate assessment of the contents almost impossible. This non-figurative composition, which was part of a series he created from 1958 onwards, is painted in sombre dark colours (Craven 131). The work consists of a collage of impasto that is reminiscent of an anthropomorphic shape due to its similarity to the bending of a knee, which can be detected in the centre of the composition (Reece 73). The painting depicts fabric that is seemingly torn. Two painted grids frame the suggested shape of a leg and bullet holes that penetrate through the thighs on the left edge of the work.

The light grey colour of the leg is broken up with dark green patches that may imply a state of decomposition. The way this image is created echoes Kupfer's assertion of Morales' balance between figuration and abstraction. This painting conveys a sense of morbid disclosure which is underlined by the title of the artwork. The historical context during which this work was created supports this interpretation. The painting outlines the repercussions of violence and emits a sombre sense of destruction much like Obregon's later example outlined above.

Morales' artwork is in stark contrast to his entry for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* in that it directly points to the repercussions of political violence

experienced in Nicaragua. The difference in content between Morales' and Obregón's entries to this exhibition becomes clear. While the entries to the MFAH were clearly not political, later work by these artists, became more explicit in their rendering of these themes. This also speaks to their inclusion in later art historical anthologies by Sullivan, Luci-Smith, Ades and BARNITZ to name a few, that emphasised the social and political role played by art. In all cases, the techniques in which the artists painted remained the same, namely mostly abstract in the case of Morales, and late cubist in the case of Obregón.

The selection of these, and other artworks for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, suggests that the 1950s was a period in which artists from Latin America who depicted political themes and effects of state violence were not included in the selection for exhibitions in the United States. The choices for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* certainly suggest this. However, if we consider that Obregon's *The Dead Student* was painted in 1956 and after the show in Houston, and that Morales' *Dead Warrior VIII* was painted some six years later, it becomes apparent that during the mid 1950s State violence was not yet as acute an issue. This changed later when artists responded to these events through visual, abstract means that incorporated their experiences in their art.

The selection for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, however, was determined by Gómez Sicre's criteria, which insisted upon quality in art and the technical, as well as aesthetic approaches incorporated in artworks. The 1950s marked a period during the Cold War in which the United States closed ranks against the USSR. As diplomatic relations increasingly froze between both super powers, the importance of collaboration in the western hemisphere increased making the PAU an important actor. It becomes apparent that depictions of state and political violence were rejected. This influenced the choice of artworks for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*

which remained apolitical and focused on technical and aesthetic accomplishments by the artists. Artists such as Obregón and Morales, who experimented with techniques and dealt with local themes, provided an alternative to ideological painting. This was welcomed in the United States as the practices by these artists adhered to promoting development and innovation in the hemisphere.

The creation of a platform for cultural exchange was the MFAH's objective, however, it was Gómez Sicre who selected the artworks. By working closely with this curator and the PAU, the MFAH took on a collaborative approach that also encompassed the legitimization of artworks through the MFAH, which awarded both artists with cash prizes and acquired their works for their permanent collection. This asserted the MFAH's position as taste-maker within a cultural and diplomatic network in the Gulf-Caribbean region.

## 2.6. Responses and Reception

The recorded visitor figures indicate widespread interest and successful dissemination of this show. The exhibition was seen by 2128 people during the first weeks at the MFAH ("Gulf Art"). The final visitor figures during its sojourn in Houston were counted at 20 000 ("Promoting Art"). The magazines *Time* and *Business Week* hailed this exhibition a success, as did *El Universal* and *El Nacional* of Venezuela. Both newspapers list the numerous participating artists from that country particularly celebrating the prize-winner of the \$200 award, Oswaldo Vigas, with his entry *Birth of a Personage* (1956) ("Oswaldo Vigas"; "Premian a Oswaldo"). The reception of the exhibition was overwhelmingly positive and focused on the artistic quality of the works in the show, especially those by the artists from Latin America. Its success was more widely celebrated and reported in Latin America and the Caribbean region than in the United States. This becomes apparent if we consider,



for example, the celebratory response to Morales' entry by the Nicaraguan Press outlined earlier.

Reviews in the United States praised the Latin American section more than the selection from the five Gulf States. For example, an article published in *Time* praises the Latin American division as showcasing artworks that

Were neither imitations of European schools nor examples of the phony folk art so popular with tourists. Instead the show which ranged from primitives to abstracts, was representative of an area now developing a sophisticated, varied art of its own. ("Gulf Art")

This suggests that the field of art from Latin America gained traction in the United States and began to be recognised as an accomplished field that added valuable input in terms of artistic development. Gramcko provides a thorough analysis of the exhibition and some of the works for *El Nacional* in Venezuela who, similarly to the article published in *Time* outlined above, praises the Latin American section as

A task of rupturing and overcoming Cubism. The discovery of abstract painting as a new language, akin to new themes that are perhaps not yet defined, to the permanence of figuration [...] all of which was represented at the Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition.<sup>16</sup>

She praises the visual language represented in the exhibition and the astute selection by the Cuban curator as one that showcases the innovation of art from the region. Moreover, the author praises the development of cubist techniques. She contrasts this with the entries from the five Gulf States:

The North American painters presented a vast survey of tendencies next to their undeniable knowledge and technical skill...the Latin Americans, more remote...with their innate life and desire, mark a tone of unity and definition.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Translated from Spanish by the author: 'La tarea de ruptura y superación del cubismo, el hallazgo de la pintura abstracta como nuevo lenguaje, gemelo a un nuevo contenido quizás todavía no definido, y hasta la permanencia de la figuración [...] todo eso estuvo representado en la muestra de arte del golfo del Caribe.'

<sup>17</sup> Translated from Spanish by the author: 'Los pintores norteamericanos presentaron un vasto recuento de tendencias, y al lado de su información innegable, de sus conocimientos técnicos...los latinoamericanos, más recónditos...con su innato vivir y sentir, marcaron un tono de unidad y definición.'

Her assessment of the United States entries also states that these lack vitality and coherence and makes a case for art from Latin America that does not adhere to stereotypes. Gramcko states that 'countries, people, and sensibilities are not verified through an obsession with typical traits', rather, 'all painters [...] establish their determination in breaking with the object and reach out to see it transcended.'<sup>18</sup> Again, the idea of vigorous, insubordinate aesthetics and the breach with previous popular art from Latin America in the United States chimes with Gómez Sicre's curatorial approach.

Once the show travelled to Dallas for its second incarnation at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (DMFA), the press response to the quality of the artworks was yet more complimentary. *The Dallas Morning News* reported that 'the quality level is excitingly high, the artists are generally bold with their colors and, most important, they know how to compose their material and draw it' ("Know-How"). Nevertheless, the article criticises the installation of the exhibition at the DMFA and the way in which it catered to an unrealistic and picturesque image of Latin America:

The exhibition truly warrants that much-abused tag "exotic". It offers its own visual-emotional excitements profusely and doesn't need half of the embellishments heaped on it by the museum's pseudo-chichi installation. While a palm tree or two, the hanging fish piece and some of the baskets (emptied of wax fruit) would be in order, the present strewing of conch and other shells, simulated sand spits, mounds of wax fruit, and the fishnet canopy comes uncomfortably close to tackiness. ("Know-How")

The description of the installation underlines the use of stereotypical objects and props, as well as conveying a sense of tourism and exoticism imbued in its incarnation in Dallas. This underlines the re-enactment of tourist art and clichéd perceptions so decried by Gómez Sicre and other reviewers. While the quality of artworks and their universal appeal is underlined, it becomes apparent that this did

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<sup>18</sup> Translated from Spanish by the author: Un país, un hombre, una sensibilidad no se verifican, desde luego, en obsesión de rasgos típicos [...] Todos Los pintores [...] afincaron su empeño de quebrar el objeto y a su alcance de verlo transcendido.'

not translate into the installation of the artworks at the DMFA.

On the other hand, the installation at the MFAH was securely devoid of similar assumptions about the Gulf-Caribbean region. This is visible in the photographs outlined at the beginning of this chapter, which do not show props incorporated in the space. As the foremost cultural arbiter in this field, it becomes apparent that Gómez Sicre had more work to do yet to convince some institutions of the artistic quality originating in Latin America rather than promoting the region as a holiday destination.

Notwithstanding this, the comparison between art from the United States and that from Latin America prevailed. Dorothy Seiberling underlines that for each artwork sold by a United States artist, two were sold by an artist from Latin America (67). Her article recounts the history of Latin American art in the United States since the 1930s and highlights Gómez Sicre as current and most successful proponent whose involvement in the exhibition at the MFAH is prove of the increased presence that art from Latin America acquired in the United States (67). The emergence and establishment of Latin American art is underlined here bringing with it a favourable comparison between art from the United States and that from Latin America.

Newspapers in Latin America focused their reports on celebrating the artists who won prizes in Houston. This included *El Imparcial* in Guatemala whose report underlined Carlos Mérida's win of the \$200 cash prize for his painting *Architecture* ("Obra de Carlos"). Similarly, *Las Américas* reported the first prize wins for Obregón's entry and that of Cundo Bermúdez's *Havana Sextet* ("Un Colombiano"). *El Avance* in Cuba highlighted Bermúdez's win and underlined the involvement of Gómez Sicre in this important project (Suarée). As already mentioned, *La Prensa* in Nicaragua provided extensive coverage of the entries by artist from that country and underlined Morales as a successful proponent of Nicaraguan art. This was followed

by reports of his win in the national press during the exhibition ("Nica Gana"). It becomes apparent that each nation focused on the successes of their artists, while the idea of hemispheric collaboration was less underlined in some cases despite the collapsed geographical parameters introduced, and the organisation of this exhibition under the cloak of Pan-Americanism in the neighbouring western hemisphere. Nonetheless, the successes achieved were cause for positive reports fomenting support and recognition for artists in the region.

Numerous newspapers in Latin America reported on the success of the show and the vital role Gómez Sicre played in its selection and realisation. Rosa Oliva cites correspondence forwarded by the Information Service of the United States Embassy, which claims that the curator

Is fast acquiring prestige in the art world of the Americas. No other individual alone has contributed as much to the stimulation and appreciation of Latin American art. Some unknown artists whose works were exhibited in the United States for the first time, have gained universal reputation as a result of (Gomez Sicre's) good work. ("Será Gomez Sicre")<sup>19</sup>

The article celebrates his establishing efforts to root art from Latin America in the United States. Oliva also states that the aim of this curator is to 'introduce new and progressive tendencies in Latin American art to the United States'<sup>20</sup> reiterating this curator's aim to shape a field for art from Latin America in the United States (Oliva). Gómez Sicre's status as a tastemaker and promoter becomes apparent here, as is his increased influence in the United States and Latin America alike.

Finally, another equally influential factor determining the framing of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* was the sponsorship by Brown & Root. This company

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<sup>19</sup> Translated from Spanish by the author: 'Está adquiriendo cada día más prestigio en el mundo artístico de las Américas. Con toda probabilidad, ningún otro individuo ha contribuido tanto como él, aisladamente, a estimular la apreciación del arte iberoamericano. Algunos de los artistas desconocidos cuyos trabajos se exhibieron por primera vez en los Estados Unidos como resultado de sus buenos oficios, han logrado adquirir reputación universal.'

<sup>20</sup> Translated from Spanish by the author: 'Da a conocer en los EE UU. las nuevas y progresistas tendencias del arte iberoamericano.'

contributed the cash prizes for this project, which, in turn, is underlined as a positive contribution to their public relations ("Promoting Art" 85). The sponsorship served the extended aim to improve relations in the region and increase business collaborations to advance future projects in the Gulf-Caribbean region. At the time of the exhibition, Brown & Root's headquarters were in Houston. The company was active since 1946 and steadily expanded its portfolio of bridge constructions and chemical industry projects. Over the years, its activities expanded to form Industrial Specialty Services establishing a significant presence in Texas and beyond (Brown and Root).

As already outlined in chapter one, corporate sponsorship was a key component in Gómez Sicre's approach to financing international exhibitions of art from Latin America. Moreover, these improved commercial relations through art and culture in the region. The *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* was no exception in both aspects.

The exhibition discussed here was successful and hailed as a hallmark exhibition of accomplished art from the region. The collaboration between the MFAH's geographical framework and Gómez Sicre's keen eye for quality art ensured that this exhibition contributed to a shift in the perception of this field that proposed equity alongside innovation. Finally, the comparison between art from the five Gulf States and the art entered from around the Gulf-Caribbean region underlined the competitive element of this exhibition and implicitly drew renewed borders within the Gulf-Caribbean region.

This chapter explored the overlapping curatorial strategies employed by the MFAH and Gómez Sicre for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*. Underpinning this exhibition were the compelling business motivations propelled by Brown & Root and the diplomatic aims followed by the PAU. As has been shown, the MFAH proposed a

southern network through a blurred border approach, which was met with support by several nations, individuals, and institutions. The fragmentation of geography posed a significant conceptual collapse of geopolitical borders and presented the most successful attempt at levelling the hemisphere and the art produced within the region. This was echoed through Gómez Sicre's aim to balance hemispheric differences through the dissemination of quality art.

In lieu of the binary distinction between art of the United States and that of Latin America, this exhibition considered artworks produced in the five Gulf States in the United States together with those from countries and islands in the Gulf-Caribbean region. Although some of the reviews cited here remained focused on national achievements and winners of the purchase prizes, the role of the MFAH was significant in that it formed a node in a new geographical conception that veered away from MoMA and New York as a centre for taste making. The MFAH ran a parallel discourse to that institution and underlined its role further through its location in the south of the United States and its increased interest in manifesting this institution as important in the wider context of the hemisphere. It did so by establishing a south/north nexus consisting of the southern Gulf States and the Northern countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Gómez Sicre's selection of artworks was widely praised as one that successfully illustrated that art from Latin America engaged critically with European techniques, including Cubism and Abstraction, presenting new approaches to accepted standards. Through Gómez Sicre's close relationships with artists, including Obregón and Morales, he highlighted their innovation of new visual languages that speak from the position of artists from Latin America. The selection for this exhibition reflected technical and aesthetic concerns and criteria that veered away from explicit political content. The aim to align the hemisphere through

accomplished artistic techniques superseded socially and politically engaged art and illustrated the curator's approach as cold-war modernist.

To be clear, Gómez Sicre adhered to Barr's approach outlined in chapter one, and emphasised the quality in artworks, however, the curator also approached this subject from a perspective that was rooted in Latin America and that underlined the critical reworking of aesthetic techniques and encouraged content that originated in Latin America. Gómez Sicre's framing deviated in this aspect from Barr's who stated that art in Latin America was derivative and admitted to lacking understanding of local concerns that are incorporated into artworks.

Nevertheless, this one-time project could not be embedded further at the MFAH as Gómez Sicre returned to his work at the PAU. At the same time, the MFAH lacked expertise in the field of art from Latin America. Notwithstanding this, the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* was a significant contribution by this institution to shift curatorial strategies and further embed art from Latin America in the United States. Obregón's and Morales' respective wins of the purchase prizes, as well as the acquisition of these artworks to the collection of the MFAH, further proves that this institution was serious in its efforts to make a mark in the field of art from Latin America. Moreover, 1956 proved a significant year for art from Latin America at the MFAH considering its additional efforts to showcase works by Tamayo and Reverón concurrently to the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*.

Finally, the MFAH's efforts to establish a southern network were supported by various institutions, artists, writers, and officials in the region as has been illustrated in this chapter. This created a vital inroad and potential platform that could have been expanded in subsequent years, however, the lack of expertise in Texas, and Gómez Sicre's overshadowing presence in Washington did not yet allow for this to take place. The delay in establishing this network was, nonetheless,

rectified in some form forty-five years later and with the establishment of the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) and through the approach advocated by Marí Carmen Ramírez as will be discussed in chapter five.

Before dealing with this development in more detail later, the following chapter poses a lesser leap in chronology as it begins in the 1980s. During that decade, international diplomacy was replaced by national cultural policies. The MFAH followed this path during a time when minorities in the United States were more actively included in mainstream institutions and a dismantling of rigid separations in art and culture began to be undertaken throughout the country. Chapters three and four trace this history and the MFAH's foray into Latino art leading to another bold attempt at mapping this field in the United States.



### **Chapter 3- Multiculturalism, Pluralism, and Latinos in Texas**

Between the staging of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, and until the mid 1980s, the MFAH shifted their focus mostly to art from the United States and European art. Art from Latin America was intermittently exhibited at the MFAH, including, in 1983, *Works on Paper: Mexican Prints and Drawings of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Patricia Covo Johnson, an art critic from the *Houston Chronicle*, curated this exhibition and was awarded \$3000 to conduct research in Mexico and write the essay for the catalogue (Warren; Departmental Correspondence).

The catalogue lists forty-one prints that were exhibited and that were created between 1900 and 1955 by ten artists from Mexico. These included Tamayo, Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco, José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), Jean Charlot (1898-1979), Pablo O'Higgins (1904-1983), Roberto Montenegro (1885-1968), Leopoldo Mendes (1902-1969), and Alfredo Zalce (1908-2003). The prints were chosen from the MFAH's own collection echoing earlier exhibitions that drew from this institution's wealth of artworks.

Other exhibitions of art from Latin America that were organised by European institutions also found a temporary home at the MFAH. This included, in 1987, *Torres-García: Grid-Pattern-Sign, Paris Montevideo 1924-1944*. The organisation of this show was undertaken by Margit Rowell, curator at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. The MFAH hosted this itinerant exhibition; however, it did not initiate new research such as in the case of *Works on Paper: Mexican Prints and Drawings of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Both exhibitions are indicative of the MFAH's return to host internationally recognised shows and explore its own collections creating locally focused exhibitions.

Nevertheless, during the first half of the 1980s, and through the initiative of the MFAH's director, Peter C. Marzio, Houston had set its sights on art from Latin

America and Latino art. In 1987, the institution staged the first ever survey show of art created by artists from the Latino community in a mainstream museum. *Hispanic Art in the United States- Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* was the most significant and perhaps most controversial exhibition staged by the MFAH in the 1980s. I will refer to this example as *Hispanic Art in the United States* for the remainder of this and the following chapter. Concurrently, a more locally focused exhibition of works by Latino artists from Houston was staged. *Houston Hispanic Artists: New Views* was based on the same premise. Both shows opened a significant debate concerning the inclusion and representation of Latino artists in mainstream museums in the context of multiculturalism and pluralism.

This chapter examines the national cultural policies and the debates surrounding identity politics underpinning *Hispanic Art in the United States* since this exhibition reached across diverse Latino communities in the nation and was also exhibited in Mexico. It will become apparent that the MFAH did not look across the hemisphere, and to Latin America, to ascertain cultural acumen as was undertaken through Gómez Sicre's curatorial strategy at the PAU and the MFAH in 1956. Neither did this exhibition seek to improve international diplomatic relations or forge business ties in the region. The MFAH sought to include and recognise the Latino community in the United States and expand the narrative of American art history. The parameters for quality art were stretched to include ethnicity as a legitimating factor to include Latino art in the MFAH's programme. This led to significant debate and criticism surrounding the representation of minorities according to mainstream frameworks and the labelling of ethnicities.

Texas remains one of the most important States in this debate since it is home to a significant number of Latinos and shares history and borders with Mexico. Nevertheless, this history and the awareness of the Latino community has been all

but eradicated through a lack of education creating a vacuum in this field. The MFAH's attempt to provide a platform for Latino artists posed an effort at grappling with this issue and attempted to restore this ethnic group, not only within Houston and Texas, but also, the United States at large.

This involved, firstly, the process of labelling this community as Hispanic, rather than Latino. Secondly, the premise of multiculturalism and pluralism inherent in the curatorial approach employed by the MFAH, and that dovetailed with the process of labelling, ignored the political and social struggles from which Latino art emerged. Finally, the criteria by which artworks were chosen were based upon aesthetic and technical criteria like those outlined in chapters one and two, and will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.

As will be shown in this chapter, the basis for the definition of ethnicity and self-identification as Hispanic or Latino, reaches far beyond geopolitical borders and encompasses traditions, religion, and languages that span across the Americas. I will establish the differences between the terms Hispanic and Latino, and explain their origins. In short, Hispanic is an expression coined and employed by government agencies in the United States, while Latino is a self-naming term that was determined by this community in the wake of the civil rights movement.

In line with this, I will situate the Latino community within a wider historical context beginning with the moment in the 1960s in which the term Latino became established. Guillermo Gómez-Pena's observations concerning methods of labelling provide valuable insight into the experiences of this contemporary Mexican-American artist, who lives and practices in the United States, and who analyses the process of definitions and labelling that originate from outside of the many communities.

It will become apparent that it is no longer possible to stake out geopolitical borders as American art has been cross fertilized and influenced by a growing Latino

community that produced art since well before the 1960s, and has developed parallel to American art history posing a critical counterpoint to accepted standards in art. This includes practices that are motivated by a call for equality and recognition of the Latino community outside of mainstream institutions.

I will pay attention to the role of Latinos in Texas, and Tejanos who are descendants of Mexicans that remained in the United States after the Mexican-American War. First-hand observations by Margo Gutierrez, librarian at the University of Texas at Austin and expert in Latino history in the United States, also provide insight into the use of labels and the shared cultures of the many Latino communities. Outlining this is significant in that it will highlight the marginal position by this group. This will be interspersed with criticisms by pivotal writers including the above-mentioned Gómez-Pena, and Luis Camnitzer, a Uruguayan artist who lives and works in the United States. He wrote extensively about the frameworks determining multiculturalism and the conditions by which Latino artists are accepted into the mainstream.

Furthermore, Silvia Montes' assessment of multiculturalism and its effects of tokenism and symbolic inclusion into the mainstream are discussed here. I will outline Mari Carmen Ramírez's and Gómez-Pena's differentiations of the many Latino communities. Both describe the complicated landscape of a heterogeneous minority that is not sufficiently recognized or understood in the United States. Further, Ybarra-Frausto's view of pan-Latino Consciousness that arose with the emergence of the Latino movement provides further explanation of the many influences that determine Latino art. Ybarra-Frausto posits that pan-Latino consciousness describes the affinities shared between the heterogeneous groups of Latinos from all countries in Latin America and is defined through borderless, shared experiences, which also underpin the art practice of many Latino artists.

This will outline the parameters within which this community exists in the United States, how it is defined by official government bodies, and how it has continuously fought for self-determination, recognition, and equality. These conditions heralded the MFAH's attempt at including this community in a mainstream setting and highlight the aspects that were not considered by this institution. The MFAH sought to position itself at the forefront of cultural policies by establishing a platform on which artists from this community were represented, included, and underlined as quality artists and significant contributors to American art history. As a result, the selection of artworks focused on contemporary works from the first part of the 1980s circumventing the origins of Latino art in civil action and protest that gave birth to Latino art.

Firstly, however, Octavio Paz's contributing essay to the exhibition catalogue for *Hispanic Art in the United States* establishes a crucial division between Latinos in the United States and, what he terms, their Anglo counterparts. Paz's argument is based on a binary conception separating Latinos as a minority justifying the cause for multiculturalism and inclusion. These assertions are countered with criticisms voiced by the scholars mentioned here who question this policy and its effectiveness in rearranging quality judgements in art and evoking equality for minorities. They assert that highlighting difference in this way disarms and hinders a critical engagement with Latino art and, by extension, American art history. This will set the scene for chapter four providing a starting point for a complex reading of that case study and its repercussions for the MFAH as an institution that became the centre for the debate on national cultural policies.

### 3.1. Octavio Paz and Hispanic Art- The Hispanic/Anglo Binary

Paz describes the United States as having formed as an idea that envisioned a homogeneous blue print for a society that emphasises individualism ("Art and Identity" 26). According to him, the stress upon individuality in the United States opposes those of family unit and group cohesion within the many heterogeneous Hispanic communities that also live there ("Art and Identity" 27). These assertions establish a broad cultural distinction between these groups. Paz states that this is the result of various historical events such as the Mexican-American War in which Mexico lost half of its territory to the United States. This resulted in the formation of Mexican-American, Tejano, and Chicano communities that remained within United States borders. Zamudio-Taylor outlines that after the Mexican-American War, those who remained on United States soil became 'to a lesser or greater degree second-class citizens' (316). This was the result of a changing economic and political landscape that favoured white, Protestant, United States citizens who subsequently gained land and economic power.

This discrimination became ingrained and carried on throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the continued formation of Hispanic communities through waves of immigration from Latin America. Herrera underlines the forming of Mexican communities citing the construction of railways in the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a reason for Mexican workers to move to the United States and settle there (16). The Mexican Revolution (1910- 1920) further caused numerous people to flee to the United States due to violence and instability in that country (Herrera 18).

Other causes were the result of changing political landscapes in various countries and direct United States interventions causing waves of immigration. Prominent examples include the United States backed violent overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile (1973) and the resulting repressive dictatorship under Augusto

Pinochet that caused many Chileans to flee that country (Smith 116-117). The Cuban Revolution and the instalment of communism under the leadership of Fidel Castro also began waves of immigration in which Cubans left for the United States forming communities there (Stern 60-62).<sup>21</sup> These are but two examples, many others followed and form diverse communities that co-exist in the United States that formed within different contexts and during changing times.

Paz underlines repercussions experienced by the Hispanic community underlining the economic disadvantage this group suffers, hindering access to higher education and improved employment prospects ("Art and Identity" 26). This mirrors assertions made by several scholars in regards to the continued inequality experienced by the Hispanic community (Zamudio-Taylor 317; Ybarra-Frausto "The Chicano Movement" 165; Oboler "The Politics of Labelling" 20).

Because of their persistent underprivileged position placing Latinos outside of the mainstream, Ybarra-Frausto observes that by the 1960s and 1970s Latino cultural institutions formed parallel to those existing in conventional settings (Yúdice "Interview" 207). These factors aided the identification with Latino values across varying communities from all over Latin America, and supported the struggle for recognition and equality vis à vis an established white, Protestant, Anglo community, as well as the cultural and institutional mainstream.

According to Paz, exploring the resulting tensions between Anglo and Hispanic culture through the chasm outlined here is the purpose of *Hispanic Art in the United States* ("Art and Identity" 35). He argues that the works are presented to underline differences and the conflicts that result from being part of a minority community and hails the exhibition and catalogue as 'a true act of discovery'

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<sup>21</sup> For detailed analysis and recounts of United States interventions in Latin America leading to waves of immigration, internal political unrest, and relations between the United States and Latin America see Foweraker, Landman and Harvey; Smith; Joseph et al.

reaffirming the binary division he establishes in his essay and the minority status assumed by Hispanic people ("Art and Identity" 28). Paz recognises this community's less powerful position and argues for their inclusion in a predominant institutional framework. Although not directly articulated by him, Paz advocates multiculturalism and its aim of inclusion and integration of Latino communities within the mainstream.

He underscores this by concentrating a significant part of his essay on the work of Martín Ramírez (1885-1960). This artist's compositions are extolled by Paz as an emblem of the isolation experienced by the Hispanic community (see fig.18). For Paz, the surreal, dreamlike scenes, and repetitive patterns such as that depicted in *Untitled (Proscenium Image)* (c. 1953), illustrate the search for identity and representation within the confines of United States borders ("Art and Identity" 35). While this interpretation is initially compelling, it is important to note that Ramírez's drawings are more likely to present an insight into the mind of a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic who spent a significant part of his life interned at De Witt Hospital in California. It was there that Ramírez began to draw his intricate compositions on paper from 1945 onwards as part of art therapy.

Although Paz seeks to present Hispanic art as pursuing a coherent objective through the work of one artist, his approach does not reflect the multi-faceted works that are included in this show. Paz focuses on the marginalisation experienced by Hispanic people in the United States using Ramírez's work as an indicator. He therefore creates a basis from which multiculturalism could remedy this condition making *Hispanic Art in the United States* the vehicle to do so.

In contrast, Silvia Montes states that 'multiculturalism addresses discrimination and marginalization symbolically through supporting minority culture' (580). She goes on to state that this approach was prevalent throughout the 1970s



and 1980s and projects focusing on minorities increasingly received funding in the United States through bodies including the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) among others (581). *Hispanic Art in the United States* was an exception to this as it did not receive funding from the NEA as will be outlined in more detail later. Montes also affirms the conditions within which multiculturalism and pluralism were thriving during that period:

For multiculturalism, distinction between minority and mainstream culture is crucial. Only by manifesting 'difference' is a minority culture entitled to support. And art is only supported when it represents the 'cultural identity' of an ethnic group. (581)

Paz's framing of Hispanic art outlined above fit these criteria and illustrates how multiculturalism was the starting point from which to justify this exhibition. He creates a clear distinction between Anglo and Latino culture and identity. Paz grounds his interpretation in the work of Ramírez who lived a reclusive life. The establishment of difference and tension was fundamental to root Latino art within the MFAH's programme of exhibitions and to gain funding. Paz provides the justification through his reading of history, immigration and Ramírez's artworks that underline isolation. In effect, Paz views the exhibition as a political statement regarding the inclusion of the Hispanic community within the mainstream, and that group's search for identity in the United States.

The following section discusses the historic use of the term Hispanic pitted against that of the term Latino. This word was coined by this community to combat their naming as Hispanic from outside and by government agencies. This aimed to assert control over their classification and aid their quest for equality.

### 3.2. Latino and/or Hispanic

Yúdice, Mari Carmen Ramírez, and Ybarra-Frausto point to the use of the term Hispanic as originating with the U.S. Census Bureau. These authors highlight its homogeneous description of an intrinsically heterogeneous minority in the United States (197; "Beyond the Fantastic" 237; "Destabilizing Categories" 790). Both terms, Latino and Hispanic, are used to describe the broad ethnicity of this group of people. The terminology applied interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau describes the Hispanic and/or Latino population living in the United States.

The definition of these terms, which has not changed since 1972, states that a person is Hispanic or Latino if she or he is of 'Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race' (Ríos-Vargas 2). The questionnaire for the population census in the United States provides the following optional answers that are based upon the participants' self-identification: Latino, or Spanish origin; Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano; Puerto Rican; Cuban; another Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin (Ríos-Vargas 1). The final category also contains a box in which the participant is encouraged to state his or her origin, i.e. Colombian, Argentinean, Bolivian, and so on.

It becomes apparent that, while differentiation is part of the census report, the definition by the U.S. Census Bureau remains broad since the terms Hispanic and Latino are applied collectively to a group of people who originate from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the Americas.

On the other hand, Calderon identifies the term Latino as originating in the Chicano and Puerto Rican community in the 1960s (39). The author provides a historical and sociological analysis of the term and how it is used to push for equality and recognition. Coining the term Latino was a significant act of self-determination that was undertaken to assert identity from within, promote common political

objectives, point to shared experiences made by marginalised groups from similar backgrounds, and above all, create a pan-Latino consciousness, or pan-ethnicity, which will be discussed in detail further below (Calderon 39).

Much like the definition by the United States Census Bureau, the term Latino concerned people from the previously mentioned countries, however, it stems from the fact that people in this community originated from Latin America and maintain ties with the culture and traditions of their countries of origin. Crucially, this excludes Spain and the idea of 'Spanish culture' as mentioned above, since this changes the definition to Hispanic in a nod toward European origins and colonial history. Ian Stavans summarises the differences between the overarching terms outlined here most eloquently and provides an explanation as to their stimulus:

*Hispanic* is a more encompassing term that includes not only Latin Americans but also Iberians, whereas *Latino* excludes the Iberians. Moreover, *Hispanic* has a stronger cultural connotation, whereas *Latino* connotes the political and social struggle of Latinos both in the United States and Latin America against the dominance of Anglo-Americans. We could answer that we chose *Latino* simply by saying that we did so because we are Latinos, members of at least two of the main groups of Latinos in the United States, Mexican Americans and Cuban Americans. And that we chose Latino rather than Hispanic art because of the political and social dimensions of our existence in the United States. But such narrow ethnicism is not persuasive to me, although it is surely true that these conversations will deal in part with issues of ethnic identity in general and Latino identity in particular. (emphasis in the original text; 13)

While subject to much discussion, as apparent in this quote, the act of self-naming formed the basis from which the growing Latino community began to assert their rights and visibility in the United States.<sup>22</sup> This also meant that Latinos defined themselves outside of the U.S. Census Bureau and other official government bodies although they eventually included the term Latino in their questionnaire to reflect demands exerted by the Latino community. While this recognises this community's

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<sup>22</sup>For further detailed analysis of the Latino label see Oboler *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives; "The Politics of Labelling"* pp.18-36.

act of self-naming, the definition remains one that serves to describe them in broadest terms, and is used to ascertain the growing number of people from this diverse ethnic background living in the United States.

Stavans also touches on the use of the term Latino art in the above quote, tying it closely with the social and political aims of the Latino community. Although this justification for the label is not convincing for him, its existence prompts important discussions about labelling this heterogeneous group of people. For example, Gómez-Peña views the labels outlined here as problematic:

Terms like 'Hispanic', 'Latino', 'ethnic minority', 'marginal', 'alternative' and 'Third World', among others, are inaccurate and loaded with ideological implications. They create false categories and neo-colonial hierarchies. Yet in the absence of a more enlightened terminology we have no choice but to utilize them- with extreme care. (184)

In contrast to Stavans, Gómez-Peña views these terms as manifestations by mainstream institutions to categorise and isolate communities, while Stavans places the terms within a wider historic and political context concerning Latinos. For Gómez-Peña, the terms enact unequal power relations. At the same time, he concedes that these terms remain widely in use, yet should be viewed and used with caution.

Similarly, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Chicana artist and scholar, outlines the tension between being defined from outside the community and the need for self-determination and self-naming, rather than using criteria that do not come from within the community (Johnson). The artists and writers mentioned here display ambivalent views toward these labels bringing to the fore the tensions within identity politics and the process of naming and labelling. For this thesis, it is sufficed to highlight that the labels alone are subject to much discussion already placing the exhibition discussed in chapter four in a precarious position.

Nevertheless, an insightful history of the term Latino is provided by Ybarra-Frausto who claims that the 'surge in the Latino population coincided with the rise of a pan-Latino consciousness that evolved in the artistic and cultural production in the United States' ("Destabilizing Categories" 790). Pan-Latino consciousness, or as defined by Calderon above, pan-ethnicity, describes the commonalities between the heterogeneous groups of people who originate in Latin America. Margo Gutierrez, librarian for Latino literature at the University of Texas at Austin, points to pan-Latino consciousness that is prevalent within the Latino community at large during my interview with her. She underlines the similar themes, struggles, differences and similarities between Latino artists from various communities and their affinity with Latin American culture, traditions, religion, and language ("Re: Research Questions"). These themes are explored in their artworks and artistic practices.

Both, Gutierrez and Ybarra-Frausto, point to this as a crucial condition in the artistic and cultural production by this community that borrows from shared ideas and cultural influences ("Destabilizing Categories" 790). This process is described as 'visual biculturalism' by Ybarra-Frausto ("The Chicano Movement" 169). In other words, artists draw on vernacular imagery and popular culture that often embody the crossover between Latin American, Latino, and Anglo culture. This becomes a way to comment upon and express concerns about their status as Latinos. Art continues to be a significant part in the assertion of equality and recognition.

Mari Carmen Ramírez stresses the conditions under which the various Latino and Latin American communities exist in the United States, which merits the following lengthy quote:

Latin American identity cannot be confined to a national border. This is a continent that has been made with immigration, and today more than ever, thousands and thousands of Latin Americans are in this country, in the United States. The United States has been central to any discussion about Latin American culture, whether we want it or not, whether we think it's an imperialist thing or not. It is the reality; it is the fact. Latinos are, the

traditional groups that were lumped under Latino, we're talking about way back in the 60s, 70s, 80s, were Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and Cuban Americans...They are Latin Americans and the fact (is) that they have grown up in this country...We share many of the same issues, what you have happening in Latin America in terms of national histories you have here in terms of the histories of these particular communities...In each one of these communities there is the same ethos or nationalist ethos that is pushing forward to be recognized. And the problem is that in Latin America, of course it's more complex, there are countries with their own histories, here there are communities, but there are communities with the same aspirations and communities that have...resisted complete integration. They are not part of the melting pot. They want to be recognised on their own terms and that's what the struggle is all about...The reality is that today you can no longer talk about the Latino community as being two or three groups, the Latino community today is an immense mix of people from Argentina, Brazil, Honduras, Salvador, all the different countries. (Personal Interview)

Ramírez points to a complex landscape. She reiterates both, Ybarra-Frausto's and Gutierrez's assertions, regarding a pan-Latino Consciousness underlining the shared traditions, languages and cultural traits that reach across communities and borders throughout the American continent. She also outlines the need to recognise communities that live in the United States based on their own merit, as well as stressing that not all want to be included in an overarching narrative.

This is echoed by Gómez-Peña, who extends his view to the idea of Hispanic and Latino art as he states that "there is no such thing as 'Latino art' or 'Hispanic art'. There are hundreds of types of Latino-American-derived art in the USA. Each is aesthetically, socially and politically specific" (187). He precedes this assertion with significant differentiations that elaborate on Ramírez's analysis above:

Californian Chicanos and Nuyoricans inhabit different cultural landscapes. Even within Chicano culture a poet living in a rural community in New Mexico has very little in common with and urban 'cholo-punk' from LA. Right-wing Cubanos from Miami are unconditional adversaries of leftist South American exiles. The cultural expression of Central American and Mexican migrant workers differ drastically from those of the Latino intelligentsia in the universities, and so on ad infinitum. (187)

Gómez-Peña recognizes influences originating in Latin America that are worked into art produced by Latino artists, however, he negates that this constitutes a singular

overarching field. He outlines some of the many differences between communities in the United States. His view deconstructs the premise from which *Hispanic Art in the United States* originated. Herrera differentiates further between various terms adopted by artists since the 1960s pointing to the fluidity of self-naming within the Latino community (Herrera 44). The wish by Latinos to remain autonomous and, at the same time, be recognized as equal is at the core of their objective. This is based upon the differentiation within the community without prejudice or expectations of unity.

Still, Gómez-Peña describes the work by Chicano artists and writers as 'perform(ing) the role of brokers, interpreters, and intercultural translators' (Salgado 202). He also suggests a renewed reading of the geopolitical map encompassing the United States through his practice as artist:

As politicized Chicanos and US Latinos, our 'American' art map was much wider. Besides presenting our work in the Anglo experimental art circuit, we regularly visited Latino barrios and Indian reservations. Our map included the whole Southwest...what I term, *Chicanolandia*...and other US Latino *milieus* like Nuyo Rico, Miami and South Chicago. (emphasis in the original text, Salgado, 199)

Gómez-Peña extends the role of artists to reflect and expand not only on the labels employed, but also on the differences in self-naming and the geography artists inhabit. Their aim is to additionally close gaps in intercultural understanding between communities. It becomes apparent that within this framework there are cultural areas that touch and cross-fertilize each other while remaining separate and remote from others.

Paz's narrative is destabilised through the responses presented by Gómez-Peña, Ybarra-Frausto, Gutierrez, and Mari Carmen Ramírez. Latino art and its many variants act as bonds that elaborate upon experiences and perceptions of artists from these communities. More specifically, regional, class, and national Latino

culture varies across the United States. The following section outlines Texas in this network, placing the MFAH within these changing contexts and establishing a historical background to the final section in this chapter anticipating developments in chapter four.

### 3.2.1. Latinos in Texas

This State is one of the most significant places in which Latino communities live, work, and settle. The Latino population in Texas is dense and widespread in comparison to other States. Daniel D. Arreola highlights Texas and California where half of all Latino Americans are concentrated (22). He bases this on the results of the census from 2000. Subsequent surveys show a steady rise in the Latino population throughout the United States. The 2011 report by the U.S. Census Bureau confirms Texas as still holding the second largest population of Latinos after California (Ríos-Vargas 5).

Arreola points to the counties in the south and west of Texas that are overwhelmingly concentrated with Mexican Americans and Chicanos, also known as Tejanos (25-27). The author's synopsis of the census also considers immigration from other countries including El Salvador and Guatemala proving that this State plays a significant role in attracting immigration from other countries adding to the growth of diverse Latino communities (25-27).

Similarly, Gutierrez outlines the makeup of Latinos in Texas as mostly consisting of Mexican American and Mexican Spanish settlers. Moreover, she states that being brought up in a conservative state such as Texas, where Latino history is not taught in schools, the term Hispanic is accepted as a way of encompassing the various Latino communities. She points to the use of this term by the Federal Government and the fact that its use is not questioned, but rather accepted and even considered polite ("Re: Research Questions"). Finally, according to her, the



term Latino was only slowly taken up in Texas, and remains way behind its widespread use in States such as California, Florida, and New York ("Re: Research Questions"). This shows regional variations in the use of the term, as well, as a lack of education in Texas about the history of this diverse ethnic group and the significance of the term Latino.

The data collected by Arreola and the observations outlined here by Gutierrez, underline that despite being a significant Latino population in Texas, the same is not at the forefront of self-naming. The accepted use of Hispanic as a term to describe this group in Texas bears witness to this. Moreover, the title *Hispanic Art in the United States* is a further testament to the prevalent and accepted use of this term by the MFAH during the 1980s.

Margarita Nieto points to this as a critical issue in the context of the show. She underlines that the catalogue does not explain the criteria for selecting the artworks based on the ethnic term used to frame the exhibition. Although she praises Paz's essay as an attempt at drawing out some heterogeneous traits of the Latino community, she states that the exhibition did not pay due diligence to the origins of Latino art that 'sought a return to indigenous and native American roots as a means of gaining a conscious understanding of self-identity' (Nieto). Adding to the processes by which Latino artists express themselves, Nieto points to motivations beyond those of social and political critique and commentary. These concern the return to pre-Columbian themes and are inherently non-Western. Since the term Hispanic connotes Spanish heritage a problem arises between the insinuation of the term and the intentions of the artists.

The use of the term Hispanic to frame the exhibition is expounded upon in a separate co-authored essay by the curators, Livingston and Beardsley, which was published in the edited book *Exhibiting Cultures- The Poetics and Politics of Museum*

*Display* and in the wake of extensive debate and criticism regarding the exhibition. The curators claim that the term Hispanic encompasses the heterogeneous make-up of the Latino community in the most accurate way. The term does not exclude the many nationalities that make up this minority and acknowledges the remote Spanish influences in art and culture (116). The omission of this reasoning in the catalogue for the exhibition points to the aesthetic framework that the curators insisted upon, and echoes Gutierrez's assertion that it is considered acceptable to use this term. Further, this ignored politically loaded issues during the exhibition proving that the curators and the MFAH sought to avoid making political statements. Nevertheless, Nieto states that

This interpretation of the phenomenon as an emanation of the Western tradition refutes or at best, misreads that sense of purpose as well as the pictoric language of many of the artists included in the catalogue, based as they are on non-Western symbols, iconography, style and sense of color.

It becomes apparent that the label used in this case connotes more than ethnicity and imbues the exhibition with a European understanding. Moreover, echoing Gómez-Peña's critique of the term Hispanic, Mari Carmen Ramírez calls its use 'controversial' and 'homogenizing' since the exhibition encompassed artists from backgrounds as diverse as Chicanos and Chileans ("Beyond the Fantastic" 237).

The use of the term Hispanic as a vehicle to carry the exhibition meant that the curators took away the act of self-determination from the artists and ignored the historical meaning of the term Latino since it was coined by the community to push ahead with their political aims of equality and recognition. The curatorial strategy employed for this exhibition does not indicate a reflexive engagement with these issues or the inclusion of pre-Columbian themes.

Moreover, the idea of pan-Latino consciousness and the connections forged through shared cultural, linguistic, and traditional aspects across borders and the

continent were explored through the artworks, however, this was also not underlined by the curators. Therefore, despite the inclusionary premise of this exhibition, the term Hispanic was instrumental in denoting this field as different, new, unexplored, undiscovered, and an expansion of American art history. This was achieved under a mainstream conception supported by national cultural policies, rather than a serious questioning of, for example, ethnic categories, artistic practices, and the processes of inclusion into a mainstream institution.

The following section will further situate the MFAH and the exhibition in question within the debate surrounding multiculturalism and pluralism. As already mentioned, this approach permeated the cultural field in the United States in the 1980s and became the impulse for the MFAH to create a platform for this field of art.

### 3.3. Pluralism, Multiculturalism and Narratives of Migration and Ethnicity

This section is set against the complex cultural, ethnic, and historical landscape outlined so far in this chapter. The conditions outlined above pose a significant premise upon which *Hispanic Art in the United States* was based. The cultural policies prevalent at the time, namely those of multiculturalism and pluralism, responded to the calls for inclusion of ethnic minorities within mainstream institutions. Marzio highlights the importance and the responsibility of the MFAH to include the Latino population to successfully mirror this growing community within a public institution (121). Therefore, the justification for this exhibition is based upon the recognition of the Hispanic community and its wider cultural contribution to the United States. In the case of the exhibition in question, this approach was further rooted in a history that focuses on immigration and broad definitions of ethnicity.

Beardsley discusses the history of immigration to the United States in some detail. Similarly to Paz, the author refers to the diverse historic circumstances that

brought people from Latin America to the United States. Beardsley focuses on the Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban communities significantly curtailing the heterogeneous makeup of the many groups with Latin American heritage. He references the ethnic makeup of Cuba and Puerto Rico originating in African and European ancestry through the forcible importation of slaves to the islands during colonial times (53). Further, he mentions the ethnic origins of Mexico as mainly encompassing indigenous and European descendants through the vast indigenous population that already existed there and their colonisation by Spanish settlers (53). Already, ethnicity is a central theme in this essay.

Beardsley leaves out the far-reaching repercussions for Cuba and Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War. This includes Cuba's status as protectorate of the United States until 1934, and the ambiguous state of Puerto Ricans who were born in the United States and those who were born, and remain, on the island. He does not mention Puerto Rico's colonial status which remains an issue of much debate and contention. Similarly, the history of interventions in Cuba by the United States is mostly left out of the author's account.

Nevertheless, he emphasises the hope of some Cubans to return to a country no longer ruled by Fidel Castro (55). Castro's death in November 2016 and the thawing of relations between the United States and Cuba under Barack Obama's tenure as President, could lead to positive developments in future. It is unlikely, however, that the Cubans who live in the United States will return after years of exile and generations of Cubans born in the United States. Moreover, the uncertainty over the policies of the current President, Donald Trump, and his changing opinions on foreign policy might hamper these early developments in future. U.S. relations with Cuba remain an ongoing issue and will likely impact in some way on the Cuban communities in the United States.

Beardsley also mentions waves of immigration that took place during and after the Mexican Revolution when citizens fled unprecedented violence in their home country (53). It becomes apparent that his essay outlines the historic events that lead to the ethnic makeup of some of the Latino minorities that live in the United States, rather than providing a critical engagement with the circumstances of these events and their repercussions. By focusing on ethnicity, as did Paz, Beardsley sets out the basis for multiculturalism and pluralism, namely the differences between Latinos as minorities and the rest of the population that lives in the United States.

Beardsley's essay continues as he outlines the beginnings of Chicano art in the wake of El Movimiento/The Movement in the 1960s and 1970s (56; Zamudio Taylor 317). This movement consisted of artists, cultural workers, intellectuals and activists that concentrated on recuperating history and memory connected to the southwest and Mexico and since before the Mexican-American war (Zamudio-Taylor 317). Beardsley outlines their cultural aims as rooted in 'bilingual education, the establishment of Chicano Studies departments and study centers, and for Chicano control over these and other cultural programs' (56). In addition, numerous public wall murals and posters were produced in this early stage of the Chicano Movement to visualise their aims (57; Zamudio-Taylor 317).<sup>23</sup> The source of Chicano art is therefore firmly established in history, activism, and collective civil rights struggles.

Ybarra-Frausto furthermore outlines Chicano art as adopting a critical stance toward Mexican Muralism as it was associated with government sponsorship and State control, while Chicano murals were not sponsored or commissioned and painted on public walls in neighbourhoods (Yúdice "Interview" 208). Their intention was to become part of the visual fabric of the barrio and communicate 'a social text' mirroring the movement's aims (Yúdice "Interview" 209). In this early stage of

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<sup>23</sup> For detailed history and analysis of Chicano art see Jackson.

Latino and Chicano art the aim was that 'art should be committed and not art for art's sake' (Yúdice "Interview" 209). It was a vehicle for the Chicano community to communicate their objectives, create identity, and push for equality and recognition.

Notwithstanding this, Beardsley continues to outline the transition from Chicano art as a collective and political endeavour to the pursuit of more individual artistic languages by the beginning of the 1980s:

On the wane was the group solidarity that had been so instrumental in providing Chicano artists with the self-confidence to commence their careers and in launching their art into the consciousness of the wider art community. Emerging in its place was a sense of greater individuation among the artists and a desire to find a place in the company of other, non-Chicano artists, not merely so that Chicanos might avail themselves of the opportunities and rewards open to other artists, but also so that they might know how their work compared, formally and qualitatively, to that of their more mainstream peers. (58)

Beardsley establishes another significant premise for *Hispanic Art in the United States*. He justifies it by situating the artists within contemporary art and their wish to operate outside of their ethnic, cultural, and political remit. He equates this with an increase in opportunities for artists as they leave the confines of political art and enter the mainstream. The author outlines the rift this caused between the original and collective aims of the movement and the attempt by some Chicano artists to look outside of their community and develop their individual practices to gain recognition in the mainstream.

Ybarra-Frausto also charts this history and the change that occurred in the 1980s through the opening of opportunities for Latino artists in mainstream institutions (Yúdice "Interview" 210). This describes an attempt at ending hitherto isolation of this community from the mainstream and echoes Paz's assertion at the beginning of this chapter that pointed to the seclusion from the mainstream as a shared condition by this heterogeneous community. Thus, *Hispanic Art in the United*

*States* acts as a platform through which the inclusion of Latino artists and their comparison with mainstream art is enabled. Camnitzer, however, counters this strategy:

Although the term "mainstream" carries democratic reverberations, suggesting an open and majority-supported institution, it is in fact rather elitist, reflecting a specific social and economic class. (Mainstream) is a name for a power structure that promotes a self-appointed hegemonic culture. For this reason, the wish to belong to the mainstream and the wish to destroy it often arise simultaneously in the individuals who are, or feel, marginal to it. ("Access" 37)

Camnitzer outlines the initial intentions to gain admittance to the mainstream as originating in a democratic impulse. This is undoubtedly apparent in Beardsley's and Paz's positions, as well as the MFAH's, and Marzio's inclusion of Latino art in its programme. Nevertheless, this aim is countered by the framework within which mainstream institutions continue to operate. According to Camnitzer, this includes class distinctions, and the criteria determined by mainstream institutions to provide access. The results create a tension that, at the same time, supports and reviles this structure.

Beardsley asserts the artists' desire to develop away from their communities, legitimising the MFAH's attempt to display their artworks. On the other hand, Camnitzer points to the influence exerted by institutions such as the MFAH to create the criteria by which Latino art becomes accepted without recognising its critical potential. These are based on the formal and qualitative comparisons introduced by the MFAH through its aesthetic criteria and will be subject to close analysis in chapter four.

The history recounted by Beardsley illustrates this approach, as he did not pay attention to the skewed power structures that influenced continued migration across the Americas, or the disadvantages experienced by Latinos in the United States. Rather, his focus is set upon the ethnic origins of the people living in the

United States. The objectives of the Chicano movement, and that of the Latino community, included self-determination, representation, and consolidation of Chicano and Latino identity set against hegemonic power and cultural neo-colonialism exerted by official and government bodies in the United States. Yet, as shown here, the approach adopted by the curators and the MFAH, disarms the political and social concerns inherent in Latino art by relying on the wish of artists to be included in a mainstream framework.

As has been shown, the MFAH's previous programme focused on this institution's own collections and collaborations with internationally renowned museums to stage itinerant exhibitions in Houston. By investing significant time and resources to research, select, and stage *Hispanic Art in the United States*, the MFAH embodied a pioneering attempt to include Latino art in its institutional fabric and establish a new and expanded field of art history in the United States.

The central justifying mechanisms for this initiative included multiculturalism and pluralism. These were the founding principles and prevalent approaches in United States domestic cultural policies, upon which minorities found representation and inclusion in mainstream institutions throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s. The narrative established by Paz and Beardsley supports the idea of pluralism as a vehicle that enables artists to work outside of the confines of their communities. The focus on ethnicity and isolation is instrumental in justifying this situation. As pointed out by Montes, tokenism, the superficial inclusion of minorities to cover diversity, and ghettoisation, the labelling of this group under the encompassing term Hispanic, are the main shortcomings in this instance.

Hispanic and Latino are the two defining terms by which this growing community is, not only labelled, but also, understood by mainstream institutions. It is not enough to approach chapter four through the binary distinction between



Hispanics, Latinos and Anglos, as proposed by Paz and Beardsley. Neither are the labels alone enough to explain these groups, be they self-determined by the Latino community or imposed by government agencies. Nonetheless, the self-naming as Latino is pitted against the naming of Hispanics by the U.S. Census Bureau and indicates political action that calls for recognition and equality of this community.

Nonetheless, several artists and writers have articulated their unease with the use of these terms. These include Gómez-Peña, Stavans, Mari Carmen Ramírez, and Ybarra-Frausto outlined here, who view these labels as reductive and imbued with cultural hegemony that is based on ethnicity as a legitimating factor. There is no consensus on the correct use of these terms, as their dissemination varies throughout States, regions, and numerous communities.

This includes, among many others, Texas as a State in which a vast Latino population lives and encompasses autochthonous Mexican-Americans, Tejanos, and people from various countries in Latin America who have migrated to Texas throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the number of Latinos residing there, it has been highlighted that self-naming as Latinos did not take root as it did in other States. This is due to the lack of education of this field and the conservative stance adopted in Texas hindering some political vocabulary to take root in everyday vernacular. It can be deduced then that Latinos in Texas are less politicised than they were in California where the Chicano movement originated.

Calderon's, Ybarra-Frausto's and Gutierrez's assertion that pan-Latino consciousness contributes to the fomenting of this minority through shared cultural traits further connects this community throughout Latin America. This is also supported by Mari Carmen Ramírez's conception of a heterogeneous make up that complicates Paz's and Beardsley's simplified understanding further.

I believe that it is significant for this thesis to think about this community as diverse and defined by its internal differences, rather than as one coherent group that is defined by overarching labels. It becomes apparent then, that the exhibition discussed in the following chapter was defined by domestic cultural policies prevalent in the United States, rather than a reflexive engagement with this community and its diverse history. Despite the attempt at not making political statements, the MFAH became embroiled in a debate about these issues.

Chapter four will look closely at the institutional approach by the MFAH asserting that inclusion does not smoothen differences; rather, they are underlined and even excavated. I will outline in detail the art historical and aesthetic criteria by which the artworks in the exhibition were judged. Paradoxically, the aesthetic and technical rendering of the works were deemed more important in the catalogue and the exhibition than the justification through multiculturalism. These criteria were based upon quality in art and remind of the criteria established earlier in the century by Barr and later adapted by Gómez Sicre. This will highlight the jarring between these different approaches, their complicated historical contexts, and the gaps in the curatorial strategy assumed by the curators. Nevertheless, it will also become apparent that this exhibition paved the way for the MFAH's plans to incorporate Latino art within its institutional framework some fourteen years later, and through the establishment of the ICAA.

#### **Chapter 4- Hispanic Art in the United States- Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors (1987)**

This exhibition was perhaps the boldest project undertaken by the MFAH in the 1980s. This show surveyed contemporary art by Latino artists from across the United States (see fig.19). The exhibition was curated by Livingston and Beardsley who worked together on previous showcases. Marzio initiated this project while still director at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, and introduced it at the MFAH in 1983. He spoke highly of both curators whom he worked with at the Corcoran. This endeavour took several years of intense research and studio visits before it was exhibited from the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May until the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 1987. The exhibition then went on an international tour throughout the United States and Mexico.

Three defining aspects make up the curatorial strategy for this show. These are the ethnicity of the artists, the idea of quality artworks, and American art history in an expanded field. This latter aspect spells a marked shift in curatorial strategy that includes scholarly essays printed as part of the catalogue alongside the exhibition. To establish the MFAH as a mainstream centre for Latino art, Marzio hoped that *Hispanic Art in the United States* would be the start of several exhibitions at the MFAH.

Previously, specialised institutions such as El Museo del Barrio in New York served as centres in which Latino art was, and continues to be, exhibited. This also includes numerous other institutions such as Plaza de la Raza in Los Angeles, and Galería de la Raza in San Francisco. The establishment of these and similar cultural institutions throughout the 1970s was significant in developing artists and manifesting Latino art and culture within their local and regional areas, as well as the Latino community. By the 1980s, the MFAH's efforts introduced, for the first time, a mainstream institution to this field of art. In the press release for the *Houston Chronicle*, Marzio states:

My fondest hope is that hundreds of thousands of people will see this exhibition and clamor to see more. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 10 or 15 years, we could point to a stream of exhibitions which included Hispanic artists and recognize their inspired vision? ("Hispanic Art")

The director cites that 150,000 visitors saw the exhibition in Houston, with around thirty percent of those visitors identifying as Hispanic ("Minorities" 123). Marzio was clearly an advocate of Latino art within the MFAH and aimed to make institutional changes to reflect this community. He ordered the creation of a committee of fifty advisory community leaders during the organisation of the exhibition. They remained at the MFAH after the show ended. Docents from that community were recruited to work in outreach programmes and art education with church groups, schools, organisations, and businesses ("Minorities" 123). This exhibition was the result of developments that included an expanding museum practice which no longer sought to represent only European and North American art, and cultural policies relating to multiculturalism and pluralism outlined in chapter three. This project was also the response by this longstanding institution to actively include and engage with the growing Latino community in Texas and Houston (Marzio "Minorities" 123).

While Marzio's wish to create a series of similar exhibitions did not materialise in later years, the attempt discussed here opened a significant debate about mainstream institutions displaying art by artists from minority backgrounds. The exhibition unearthed deep divides between Latino art in mainstream museums and its representation according to conventional interpretations of quality art. The following quote, by Zamudio-Taylor, captures the root of this criticism most poignantly:

To approach Chicano art with categories and terms set by either exclusionary modernist constructions or multiculturalist and postmodernist perspectives that bind Chicano artistic practices to ethnicity and the mere celebration of difference, reduces and neutralizes the complexity of Chicano art and its capacity to depict, express and challenge the Chicano experience. (328)

This quote concerns Chicano art exclusively, however, its core argument extends to Latino art. This chapter will show the overwhelming modernist criteria by which the artworks were chosen and displayed. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, to legitimise the inclusion of Latino artists in a mainstream institution, Beardsley underlines how artists were increasingly interested in measuring their works against mainstream criteria of quality art at that time. The curator also provides an approach for the ensuing interpretation that focuses on quality in art, rather than the history, social and political dimensions of Chicano art, and that of Latino art more broadly.

Because of this approach, which did not consider marginalisation and discrimination experienced by the Latino community, the exhibition recalled a Eurocentric approach that does not reflect the heterogeneous origins of this group or the varied processes in which artists express their concerns. The art historian and critic, George Yúdice, echoes Zamudio-Taylor by pointing out that the assimilation of differences within a mainstream institution, and through multiculturalism, is based upon the perceived differences and marginalisation of minorities in the first place ("Transnational" 198). In this case, the criticism was apt and pointed to one of the main issues of the curators' strategy for this exhibition, namely that of using ethnicity as a qualifier to exhibit artworks in a mainstream institution while measuring the artworks by modernist, Eurocentric standards that included tracing techniques and histories to European masters.

This was particularly underlined by Ybarra-Frausto, who repeats Yúdice's concerns over the process of othering that is inherent in exhibitions such as these and critiques the efforts to utilise multiculturalism as a legitimating tool to exhibit art in mainstream institutions ("Houston Hispanic" 9). Rather than calling for inclusion, the writers mentioned here, call for the recognition of an alternative narrative that is positioned in critical distance to the mainstream conceptions of art history and

exhibitions. Although recognition was one of the goals pursued by the curators, their means did not justify the end as their attempt reinforced Latino art's marginal position.

In line with this, I will underscore the ideas promoted by Ramos, who advocates art history as a field that raises awareness and recognition of heterogeneous Latino histories, rather than inclusion within a mainstream framework. Her conception is based upon the Smithsonian Institution's continued efforts to write an art history of Latino art in the United States that is reflexive and considers Latino art as a critical part of American art history, while recognising its parallel development.

The following pages will outline the aesthetic and art historical narrative by which the MFAH and the curators arbitrated artworks for inclusion in the MFAH's mainstream framework. This chapter focuses on the criticisms and debates surrounding the exhibition, while also examining the effect the MFAH's experimental move had upon making this institution a mainstream centre for Latino art. It will become clear that the MFAH did not merely present a tokenistic approach toward this field, but also sought to make institutional changes that integrated minorities in this institution. Despite these efforts, the project was heavily criticised for its approach toward categorising Latino art.

To illustrate this, I will analyse selected artworks by Tejano artists Carmen Lomas-Garza (b.1948) and Luis Jiménez (1940-2006), as well as Chicano artist John Valadez (b.1951) from Los Angeles. This will be pitted against the interpretations put forward by the curators proving that theirs is based upon Eurocentric criteria including comparisons with Modern European Masters echoing criteria established by Barr at MoMA earlier in the century. This will pose a close analysis of the curatorial strategy employed by the curators which is based on the notion of quality in art as

has been outlined in chapters one and two of this thesis. This forgoes a successful engagement with Latino art as a field that remains in critical distance to the mainstream and provides fertile ground for a reflexive review of American art history and the conditions of art and its visibility.

#### 4.1. Participating Artists, Touring the Show and Sponsorship

##### 4.1.1 The Artists

The curators undertook extensive research trips to institutions across the United States that specialise in Latino art and its numerous variants including Chicano, Tejano, and Mexican-American art. They also visited numerous artists' studios. Out of over 600 entries, thirty artists with 150 paintings and sculptures were selected for the MFAH show.<sup>24</sup>

The selection consisted mainly of artists from across the southwest and south of the United States with exception of New York and Chicago in the East and North East. The geographical span of artists and the locations where they live and work include Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, and California. Other artists were born in Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Colombia, Mexico, Cuba, and Chile but live and work in the United States permanently. This far-reaching selection, across regions, cities, and countries also means that the artists were from different Latin American backgrounds and comprise their own visual language, history, and relationship with their art practice in the United States. Overall, nine artists identified as Chicano,

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<sup>24</sup> The artists included: Carlos Alfonzo (1950-1991, Cuba), Carlos Almaraz (1941-1989, Mexico), Felipe Archuleta (1910- 1991, New Mexico), Luis Cruz Azaceta (b. 1942, Cuba), Rolando Briseño (b. 1952, Texas), Lidya Buzio (b.1948, Uruguay), Ibsen Espada (b. 1952, New York), Rudy Fernandez (b. 1948, Colorado), Ismael Frigerio (b. 1955, Chile), Carmen Lomas Garza, Roberto Gil De Montes (b. 1950, Mexico), Patricia González (b. 1958, Colombia), Robert Graham (1938-2008, Mexico), Gronk (b. 1954, California), Luis Jiménez, Roberto Juarez (b. 1952, Chicago), Félix A. López (b. 1942, Colorado), Gilbert Sánchez Luján ("Magu") (1940 – 2011, California), César Augusto Martínez (b. 1944, Texas), Gregorio Marzán (1906-1997, Puerto Rico), Jesús Bautista Moroles (1950-2015, Texas), Manuel Neri (b. 1930, California), Pedro Perez (b. 1951, Cuba), Martín Ramírez (1885-1960, Mexico/California), Arnaldo Roche (b. 1955, Puerto Rico), Frank Romero (b. 1941, California), Paul Sierra (b. 1944, Cuba), Luis Stand (b. 1950, Colombia), Luis Eligio Tapia (b. 1950, New Mexico), and John Valadez. All information originates in the catalogue for the exhibition, *Hispanic Art in the United States-Thirty Contemporary Sculptors and Painters*, 137-248.

while a further eight were of Mexican-American descent underscoring more than half of the artists as incorporating Chicano and Mexican elements in their practices and imagery.

The curators state that the limitation to painting and sculpture was necessary since other media such as photography, video, and performance opened too many avenues for a single survey exhibition ("Preface" 8). Moreover, the focus was limited to artworks produced in the first half of the 1980s circumventing the earlier, more politically engaged creations produced by Latino artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Due to the volume of talent and media, the selection had to be narrow indicating a lack of depth in the selection of Latino art. Suffice to say that the exhibition discussed here provided a superficial and selective survey of artworks created in the 1980s and by artists who perhaps vaguely identify with the equally superficial umbrella term Hispanic. The artists originated in disparate parts of Latin America and the United States. Nevertheless, this exhibition toured extensively in that country, and even made a stop in Mexico City.

#### 4.1.2. Touring and Sponsorship

After its inauguration at the MFAH, the first stop for this exhibition included the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., from October 24<sup>th</sup> 1987 until January 9<sup>th</sup> 1988, it then travelled to The Lowe Art Museum, Miami, Florida, from April 7<sup>th</sup> until June 30<sup>th</sup> 1988. After its sojourn in the east and south of the United States the Museum of Fine Arts of New Mexico, Santa Fe, hosted the exhibition from August until September 1988. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California, hosted the show from February 2<sup>nd</sup> until April 16<sup>th</sup> 1989, before it was shown at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, June 10<sup>th</sup> until September 4<sup>th</sup> 1989, thus ending its tour in the United States. Before that, the exhibition crossed borders and was shown at the



Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, from October until December 1988. Unlike the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*, this show travelled across the border and was exhibited in Mexico.

The institutions listed here focus mostly on contemporary art and belong to the mainstream of cultural institutions in the United States. The trajectory outlined mirrors the places where many of the artists who took part in this exhibition came from. Its reach, although focused in the United States, spanned farther yet, making a stop in Mexico City mirroring the origins of the Mexican American and Chicano artists taking part in the show. This introduced Latino art to an extensive audience in various institutions nationally and internationally. This shows the commitment and attempt to put this field of art on the international map of mainstream art institutions and proved successful in that every effort was made to disseminate this show and gain exposure.

There was also pervasive interest by additional institutions in hosting the show. Archival material at the MFAH showed that this included Plaza de la Raza. The Exhibitions director at that institution, John H. Bowles, states the interest in accommodating this show in a letter from April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1985. He emphasises the role of Plaza de la Raza as a significant cultural centre for Hispanic communities and an ideal place to exhibit the works (Bowles). Nevertheless, the plans were cancelled due to unnamed developments at the institution that did not allow for the exhibition to be installed there.

Similarly, the Tucson Museum of Art, Arizona was interested in hosting the exhibition. This was stated in a letter to the MFAH by the interim director Ellwood C. Parry III (Parry). Finally, Rosalind J. Williams, an independent curator who lived and worked in Spain, proposed to ship the exhibition to the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid (R. Williams). In both cases, however, the plans never came to fruition due

to cost issues and clashes in programming. While none of these enquiries led to the exhibition being shown in these institutions, the interest in this project is proven to have extended to Europe and institutions that were particularly focused on Latino art in the United States. This also illustrates that the show was met with significant interest and viewed as a valuable contribution to art history.

The vast logistical and organisational efforts throughout the research and touring stages become further obvious if we consider the proposed and actual venues in which this exhibition was shown. This is of importance to understand the size and ambition of this project, since it was the first attempt at bringing Latino art from all over the United States together and present it as a coherent whole to new audiences nationally and internationally. This proves the MFAH's pioneering role and preparedness to take risks on a hitherto unknown field of art.

The MFAH's commitment is also evident in the efforts to secure financing of this project. Half of the total budget for the show was sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Atlantic Richfield Foundation (ARCO). The Rockefeller Foundation continues to play a significant role in the sponsoring of art and culture in the United States. It was a substantial supporter in MoMA's inception earlier in the century and the promotion of Latin American art at that institution as already mentioned in chapter one.

ARCO is an example of corporate sponsorship, as it is part of the Atlantic Richfield Company, the seventh-largest oil company in the United States (FundingUniverse). Their contribution echoes the corporate support made to the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* by Brown & Root Ltd, for example, and points to the continued philanthropic and corporate sponsorship to support the art and cultural sector in the United States.

Similarly, the touring budget was mostly covered by AT+T, an international telecommunications company based in the United States that continues to underwrite projects at the MFAH (Marzio "Minorities" 124). This includes sponsorship for the ICAA and the exhibition *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, which will be discussed closely in chapter five. Finally, the institutions hosting the show also contributed to the costs of touring and the installation of the artworks (Marzio "Minorities" 124). The MFAH sponsored the remaining half of the total costs, making this a significant investment and showed financial commitment by the MFAH for this project. It becomes apparent that there was significant support that included official government agencies and the corporate sector.

The latter was not highlighted in press releases and articles, as was the sponsorship by Brown and Root Ltd. This points to a change in the incorporation of such financial support in that it is no longer so overtly underscored by business interests and the fomenting of diplomatic and commercial relations. Still, the support through corporate sponsors reflects cultural values corporations want to project. This aspect remains a significant one without which projects such as this are not possible.

### 4.3. Curatorial Strategy

The three underpinning aspects that made up the curatorial strategy for this show included: the ethnicity of the artists, quality artworks, and an expanded American art history. The element of ethnicity has already been explored in chapter three as a component supported by multiculturalism and pluralism and that formed a basis for this exhibition in a mainstream institution. This aspect converged with the idea of quality artworks as ethnicity became a factor that added to this synthesis.

Finally, through a combination of these factors, it was sought for Hispanic art to expand, and become included in, American art history. The catalogue essays

attempt to establish Hispanic art as a significant constituent of American art. The curators conceived of American art as confined within United States borders ("Preface" 8). Beardsley and Livingston state their underlying reasons for selecting artworks for this exhibition based on quality:

What we have cared about above all else is the strength of an artist's work, not conformity to some preconceived notion of what constitutes a Hispanic "style" or "school". Such generalizations as each of us draws follow from our observations of what is *good* about Hispanic art; the broader cultural implications we detect reflect artistic goals determined by the painters and sculptors themselves. (emphasis in the original text, "Preface" 10-11)

The curators place the onus for the artworks with the artists attributing them with self-determination in their practice. The above statement also asserts that expectations of stereotypical artworks would not be catered for, echoing Gómez Sicre's rejection of tourist art mentioned in chapter two. Moreover, the strength of the works is synonymous with the notion of quality. This indicates the selection process as one that was determined by the MFAH's institutional conception of the quality of artworks as they are judged outside of their original context underlining their intrinsic aesthetic quality. This led to the decontextualisation of the artworks within a mainstream context. This effect and its repercussions are outlined and discussed through texts by Gómez-Peña further below.

Since both curators work for mainstream institutions, including the Corcoran and the MFAH, it becomes inevitable that mainstream criteria of quality in artworks influenced the selection of artworks. These criteria were expounded in chapters one and two and included art that incorporated technical aspects inspired by, and originating in, Modern European art. These include forms of Abstraction and Cubism, and works that adopted an international and universal visual language.

The catalogue includes detailed essays and analysis of the artworks based on these criteria and traces a lineage to European masters and developments in America throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This mainstream institutional approach, housed

at the MFAH, and in the context of pluralism and multiculturalism, underpinned the inclusion of Hispanic art in the narrative of American art. In practical terms, this meant the exhibition of Hispanic art alongside artworks from the collection of the MFAH and essays written by the curators that expand on American art history. The justification for this approach was extolled by Marzio as the director of the MFAH.

#### 4.3.1. Mainstream Framework for Quality in Latino Art

Marzio's vision for the MFAH included a more active inclusion of minorities within this institution to reflect the demographic of Houston and, more broadly, that of the United States ("Minorities" 123). His overall approach at the MFAH was untried and expansive. In the 1980s, Marzio's foray into Latino art aimed to incorporate this field into the institutional fabric of the MFAH by displaying artworks by Latino artists alongside European Masters.

Marzio views the 'general art museum' as a key platform where other fields of art find a space to exhibit and simultaneously make 'important statements about quality' ("Minorities" 125). While this experimental approach caters to the inclusion of what Marzio calls, Hispanic art, the same becomes imbued with mainstream criteria of quality, which originate in European artistic practices. This echoes Camnitzer's assessment outlined in chapter three stating that while democratic in its aim, the inclusion of Latino art brings with it a hegemonic power struggle favouring mainstream institutions. The problem does not so much exist with the inclusion of Hispanic art and Latinos within the MFAH, rather, with the criteria by which it is judged.

For example, by the 1980s, the collection of artworks at the MFAH included, among others, significant modern European painters and fewer collection categories than today. In the only known survey book of its collections from 1982, the author,

and director of the MFAH between 1974 and 1982, William C. Agee, reveals a broad anthology of some of the artworks and artefact in the MFAH's extensive holdings. The book is divided into Asian, Ancient, pre-Columbian and Tribal Arts, Early Christian and Medieval, Renaissance, Seventeenth, Eighteenth, Nineteenth, Twentieth Century art, and, finally, art created after 1945. This list reveals that this institution did not yet focus on Latin American or Latino art at that time. It also presents a general chronological categorisation of the artworks and artefacts in its collection.

Moreover, the book mostly focused on its holdings of European Modern art. These include works by Edgar Degas (1834-1917), Georges Braque (1882-1963), and Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), to name only a few (Agee). Marzio further cites artists such as Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), which were on show in another part of the MFAH and at the same time as *Hispanic Art in the United States* ("Minorities" 125). The art historical significance of these artists is unquestionable and is tribute to the MFAH's collection. Marzio attempts to achieve continuity between the artworks by modern European painters in the collection, and Latino art by being exhibited under the same roof and at the same time. This brings with it an attempt at blurring the distinctions between differing fields of art and opening new possibilities for exhibitions.

Marzio states that institutions that emphasise social and anthropological interpretations have a right to do so, however, he demands 'the right to exhibit contemporary artists the way I exhibit Old Masters' ("Minorities" 126). This is to say that through the decontextualised presentation of art by Latino artists, the MFAH asserts the right to review the way in which Latino art is presented and included within a mainstream framework. Marzio seeks to recalibrate the role of mainstream art museums to include art movements that have previously not been recognised.

The director was also aware of the potential political controversy a survey exhibition of Hispanic art could cause. He stated his concern in a letter to Steven D. Lavine, Associate director for Arts and Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation: 'The exhibition could be politically explosive. The Hispanic cultures are diverse and far-flung in North America. To do an exhibition which is fair and fabulous could be impossible'. Marzio recognized the heterogeneity of this community and was concerned with the amalgamation of the numerous separate groups within one exhibition. It becomes clear that he feared that Latinos would feel homogenised and selected groups ignored in a survey of this size. Recalling Mari Carmen Ramírez's and Gómez-Pena's detailed differentiations of this community and their reluctance to be homogenised through overarching labels, such as Hispanic outlined in chapter three, this becomes more apparent.

It is for this reason that Marzio staked out the conditions for the project and the underlying reasons for including artworks and artists as based primarily on the quality of artworks, and, only secondly, on the ethnicity of the artists. He made this aim clear in his application letter for funding to the Rockefeller Foundation:

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston is neither a history museum nor an institution of ethnic causes. The artworks in the show would be chosen for their beauty. Issues of group representation, geographical "balance", etc. will be considered, but no artist or work would be included for political reasons. [...]Hispanic art will be seen as a profound cultural expression of the Spanish speaking people of North America, and [...] an expression of their "new world" experiences, talents and training.

The criteria of inclusion outlined by Marzio were based on formal criteria of artworks with the aim of eliminating the potential for political complications. The selection of artworks based on these criteria is criticised by Kimmelman, who states that expressionistic art has been chosen in favour of artworks with political content.

Kimmelman also asserts that the avoidance of such artworks means that Latino art is

not assessed on its own terms. This highlights the effect on the selection process evoked by mainstream criteria.

Moreover, Marzio underlines the importance of ethnicity in this project in his first letter to Lavine, somewhat contradicting his statement of not being interested in this aspect in the application letter. He ignores the political statement he makes about the selection of artworks based on the artists' ethnicity. At the same time, the aesthetic criteria and the display of Hispanic art alongside European Masters supersedes the recognition of Latino art based on merit. This results in the disarming of Latino art and its seamless insertion into the mainstream by ignoring the political language surrounding not only the artworks, but also the curator's choices.

Marzio's justification falls short of fully understanding the roots in political action and the struggle for civil rights that gave birth to Latino art. The assertion that by the 1980s some Latino artists sought to develop their practices outside of the confines of community and ethnic art provides further justification for a mainstream framework. Thus, artists entered a platform on which to measure their practice to that of artists from other backgrounds and eras as can be surmised from Marzio's strategy that exhibited Old Masters alongside art by Latino artists. Ybarra-Frausto's critiques this strategy of inclusion of Latino art that is based on these institutional criteria:

While stemming from a democratic impulse to validate and recognize diversity, "pluralism" serves also to commodify art, disarm alternative representations and deflect antagonisms. Impertinent and out-of-bound visions of "the other" are embraced as energetic new vistas to be rapidly processed and incorporated into peripheral spaces within the arts circuit and promptly discarded in the yearly cycle of "new models". What remains in place as eternal and canonical are the consecrated idioms of Euro-centred art. ("Houston Hispanic" 9)

Rather than validating Hispanic art through its rooting in ethnicity, Ybarra-Frausto critiques the conditions set by museums such as the MFAH, that include Latino art in their programming. The criteria of visual and technical quality that are determined



by Eurocentric criteria undermine the aims of pluralism and multiculturalism. Nevertheless, Ybarra-Frausto states that, rather than creating equality and recognition of Latino art, a paternalistic stance is enacted enabling the homogenisation and marketing of Latino art through the mainstream. In other words, Latino art is dependent upon the mainstream to be accepted under conditions determined, in this case, by the MFAH. Moreover, Camnitzer explains the results of this situation as follows:

It has also less positive consequences when these analytical premises have been taken to their extreme; the conclusion has been drawn that art should be perceived in formalistic terms, and that these terms- not unlike those of mathematics- should be homogenized into an "international style". In fact, the concept of an international style is one that can be seen as useful for political hegemony and cultural expansionism. ("Access" 38)

Even though thirty contemporary Latino artists chose to participate in a large-scale survey of their art, Camnitzer and Ybarra-Frausto correctly identify the outcome as one that is steered by the institution rather than the artists. Marzio's reasoning and paradoxical stance, outlined above, furthermore illustrate this.

Nevertheless, the artists' motivation to be seen within this expanded context speaks to their will to be included and that they were aware that the MFAH organised the exhibition as a survey of contemporary Latino art. It is possible to surmise that every effort was made on the part of the curators and the director to state the intention of this exhibition to the artists as one that expanded upon American art history by including this field of art in its programme. Notwithstanding this, and as will be shown in the following section, the outcome fell short of these promises. The resulting approach was met with considerable criticism due to its emphasis upon an institutional and Eurocentric framework that legitimised Latino art as a new field of American art history.

### 4.3.2 Expanding American Art History

Efforts to expand the American art historical canon have recently been lauded, most notably by Ramos, who views the inclusion of Latino art in an expanded field positively:

This quest to place Chicano and, by extension, Latino art under the umbrella of art from the United States is an effort advanced by a number of scholars dedicated to developing a richer and more accurate picture of American art history. The marginalized status of Chicano and Latino art undoubtedly relates to the historical origins of these interrelated categories. Responding to the civil rights movement in states across the Southwest and along the East Coast, Latino artists from various ethnic and racialized groups, with deep roots in the U.S., began to express oppositional identities and give image to the culture and history of communities marked by social erasure. (7)

This quote describes efforts by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington to actively include this branch of art history in its research, while recognizing the parallel development of this field and its critical stance toward discrimination and marginalisation among other issues. Crucially, Ramos recognizes the historical and social origins, as well as the heterogeneity inherent in this minority. Further, she highlights the critical artistic contribution to the cultural landscape in the United States. Similarly, the curators for *Hispanic Art in the United States* decidedly attempt to establish this field of artistic production within an art historical narrative of American art. Beardsley framed the history of American art as follows:

The completeness within in which American art came to be synonymous with first gestural and then geometric abstract painting and sculpture on the one hand and Bauhaus-derived, International Style architecture on the other, must have made it seem, in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, that an aesthetic consensus had at last been achieved. Certainly, the notions that American art could be many things simultaneously and that it might be invigorated by alternative- and particularly ethnic- traditions were then very much in retreat. (44-45)

He points to the development of artistic practices in the United States, emphasising that until the late 1960s, differing approaches toward creating art were not included in this process. He underlines ethnic traits especially in this narrative as one that did not find a place in this development. If we recall Gómez Sicre's curatorial approach that rejected overt political content and stereotypical depictions of nationality, this becomes more apparent. Beardsley continues this disinterested conception of art, however, he extends this to include ethnicity as a component:

Indeed, it may be that ethnicity, along with other forms of regional or cultural particularity, can now be perceived as one of the primary ingredients in the alchemy that is good art. (46)

Through underlining the ethnic background of the artists and the value of difference, Latino art is sanctioned as an accepted artistic movement and becomes part of a Eurocentric and American art historical narrative as outlined by Ybarra-Frausto and Camnitzer. This is in contrast with Ramos, who roots her understanding of this field in the civil rights struggle in the United States, as do Ybarra-Frausto and Camnitzer. Ramos aims to expand American art history by recognising the parallel and critical development of Latino art. On the other hand, Beardsley and Livingston view Hispanic art as having developed in isolation of other artistic fields and movements, while, at the same time, they value ethnic aspects as much as technique and aesthetics.

The curators' approach poses a problematic method toward equality granted by a mainstream institution. Jacinto Quirarte, Latino and pre-Columbian art historian, voiced his concern over the appropriation of Latino art into the mainstream and condemned the fact that the artworks were chosen by people from outside the community (Johnson). Further, in their co-written essay for an anthology of essays, Livingston and Beardsley acknowledge Shifra Goldman's criticism stating that the exhibition homogenises Latino art under the vision of the curators rather than being

mindful of the political and social conditions that underpin this field ("The Poetics" 114-115). Criticisms focused on these aspects and were based in the counter-claim that Hispanic art developed parallel and critically to Eurocentric and American criteria.

Lavine, who received Marzios' letter mentioned above, and who was a key supporter of this exhibition and of the director's aim to incorporate Latino art, further points to Ybarra-Frausto and his eloquent rebuttal of the criteria by which Hispanic art came to be validated. He pointed out that through placing the artworks within a museum context, they become sterilised and detached from their original, political and aesthetic context (84). Lavine goes on to reiterate Ybarra-Frausto's critique of defining criteria that are reductive and suppressing the true contribution to art, namely an aesthetic that resists being made part of Eurocentric criteria and quality artworks (86). Gómez-Peña also points to this result. His analysis will be discussed in more detail below and will further highlight that, rather than the inclusion of Hispanic art in the mainstream, the recognition of their criticality and parallel development should have been at the forefront of this exhibition.

#### 4.3.3. Latino Art History and American Art History

Beardsley's and Livingston's approach mirrors that proposed by Gómez-Sicre's, as well as Barr's tracing of the origins of quality art in European techniques elaborated upon in chapter one and two. The curators of *Hispanic Art in the United States* do not refer to Gómez-Sicre or Barr in their essays. Nevertheless, the rooting of their approach in a European genealogy remains intrinsic to their curatorial strategy and understanding of art history.

Livingston's essay for the catalogue is perhaps the most daring attempt at creating new criteria for Latino art through a Eurocentric analysis. She proposes to

call this artistic field 'Latino/Hispanic Modernism' setting it slightly apart from Latin America and Europe, however, still influenced by the practices originating there (106). Livingston proposes an expanded view of art history that recognises European and Latin American influences, yet creates a separate field for Latino art. She also asserts that Chicano art already belongs to the mainstream:

While the artists [...] draw on obviously ethnic visual traditions and on current political and social circumstances for the sources of their work [...] they have unmistakable affinities with the "folk"-inspired and southwestern Chicano artists, belong more securely to the mainstream of contemporary art. (106)

Livingston briefly acknowledges political and social aspects that are incorporated in the artworks, however emphasises their folkloric affinities. Moreover, she distinguishes Chicano art as already having adjusted to mainstream criteria of quality art. She describes this as Latino/Hispanic Modernism and 'Picassuesque Surrealism (Picasso via Lam, Matta, and Miró)' tracing Latino art through various artists back to European roots, and specifically to Picasso, through the cubist styles and techniques some of the artworks incorporate (106). She draws comparisons between the artworks in the exhibition and the artistic oeuvre of Miró, the Mexican Muralists, Torres-García, Matta, and Lam, tracing a lineage across exponents of modern European and Latin American art (106) (see figs.20,21,22).

According to her, this includes the creation of 'an atmosphere of both chromatic and compositional lushness on the one hand, and a kind of timeless, mythic, often primitive imagery on the other' (106). Her essay emphasises the aesthetic and technical rendering of artworks drawing on Barr's, Gómez Sicre's, and Marzio's disinterested approach toward judging artworks and comparing the works to Modern Masters. The political and social content in the works is mentioned, however, this remains a secondary concern for Livingston.

She continues in her interpretation and includes Hispanic art in 'International New Expressionism', citing Georg Baselitz (b. 1938) as one of its contemporary propagators and from the exhibition identifies Almaraz, Briseño, Roche, Stand, and Gil de Montes, among others, as belonging to this style (118). (see figs.23,24,25,26,27).

Livingston identifies the influences of pre-Columbian, Mexican, and Latin American mythology and history in the artworks that, through their rendering by the artists, mutate from being specific cultural signifiers to universal imagery (118). This latter observation recalls Barr's conception of an international aesthetic that forgoes local or regional themes in art. It also echoes Gómez Sicre's emphasis on the influence of pre-Columbian themes on artists in Latin America and their universal appeal. It becomes apparent that Livingston adheres to an established and accepted idea of quality art that incorporates not only European techniques, but also those rooted in Latin American modernisms and pre-Columbian themes.

Mari Carmen Ramírez accurately points to this approach as a 'displacement of European modernisms' that ignores the visual contributions made by Latino artists suggesting that their art is derivative ("Beyond the Fantastic" 238-239). She further points to the lived experiences of discrimination by Latinos in the United States, which are expressed in their art through media such as posters, photography and murals ("Beyond the Fantastic" 238). Examples of this were not included in this exhibition showing a deliberate gap in its selection. At the same time, Ramírez points out that Latino art is treated as another example of American art, sanctioned by the MFAH as a mainstream institution, and theorised by Livingston in her essay for the exhibition (237-238).

This becomes evident in Livingston's reading of art history which is based upon an established narrative that looks to European art history to guide

interpretations made of hitherto unknown artistic fields. Nelson points to this version of art history as possessing the 'ability and power to control and judge its borders, to admit or reject people and objects, and to teach and thus transmit values' (28). The lack of knowledge about the history and conceptual rooting of Latino art, on the part of the MFAH and the curators, is certainly a reason for transmitting the values of European art and art history. Nevertheless, even if the curators had recognised the parallel development of this field, it is unlikely that they would have based their assessment on this knowledge as their aim was to align Latino art to a mainstream understanding of art history. Therefore, the curators became gatekeepers controlling art history's borders and admitting Latino art on Eurocentric terms.

Although this suggests a levelling of mainstream and peripheral artistic production, it is based on the MFAH's conception and defining criteria. These are applied, rather than problematised, causing an imbalanced approach. Livingston fails to sufficiently emphasise the original contribution of Latino art. The tracing via modern European and Latin American art only tells part of the story. She ignores the deeper-rooted issues and lived experiences by Latinos in the United States from which these artworks originate. Ramírez and Ybarra-Frausto provide counterexamples to this approach pointing to the adept use of visual language and the political urgency inherent in Latino art.

Ybarra-Frausto also observes the prevailing ability by Latino artists to use popular references that speak about the tensions between Latino and Anglo culture, a trait that is inherent in Latino art and contributes to the process of *mestizaje*, the mixing between Anglo and Latino culture ("The Chicano Movement" 165). The resulting hybridization between these seemingly opposing cultures is a key component in the work of Latino artists. He also points to stereotypes that are perpetuated in the critical reception of Latino art that refer to works as colourful,

decorative and folkloric ("Houston Hispanic" 9). Similarly, Mari Carmen Ramírez underlines this stereotyping of Latino art, which makes this field marketable ("Beyond the Fantastic" 230). However, both point out that there is more to Latino art than expressions of colour and the everyday. Ybarra-Frausto articulates his conception of Latino art:

"Hispanic" art can be read as a visual narration of cultural negotiation. [It] is not a monolithic but a heterogeneous expression responding to ethnic, cultural and historical diversity. It intersects with formal artistic traditions spanning a chronological continuum from pre-Columbian to the post-modern present. Persistently, the internal vision of the artist is thrust outward towards social reality. ("Houston Hispanic" 9-10)

In this quote, the writer underlines the motivations behind Latino art, rather than rely on the composition and technical manifestations of artworks or their marketable attributes. Ybarra-Frausto agrees here with Livingston's acceptance of pre-Columbian influences and the reworking of contemporary movements; however, in place of presenting detached observations, works by Latino artists are visions that come from their personal archive of memories, cultural influences, and social concerns that are visually negotiated. This suggests that the works are personal and dependent upon their environment, rather than exercises in achieving quality in artworks that mirror Eurocentric criteria. Livingston and Ybarra-Frausto diverge in their conception of Latino art in this respect.

The tensions and negotiations between mainstream institutions, minority communities and their representation found a platform at the MFAH. Livingston's assessment poses on the one hand, compelling reading; however, it does not recognize Latino art based on equity. The tracing of techniques and styles to European criteria supports Camnitzer's, Ybarra-Frausto's, and Ramírez's criticisms outlined here that state that this process disarms Latino art. The following sections discuss some of the artworks in more detail and against the criteria proposed by the MFAH and the curators. I will consider these in conjunction with reviews and



criticisms outlined in the wake of the exhibition. My analysis focuses on Texas and Los Angeles providing a limited insight into the themes and ideas in only two areas of Latino art that were included in this exhibition. Nevertheless, these are indicative of the heterogeneity within this area and show the interpretation undertaken by Livingstone and Beardsley as sometimes contradictory and at other times forgoing political and social analysis in favour of aesthetic criteria applied to the artists' artworks.

#### 4.4. Artists and Artworks

##### 4.4.1. John Valadez (b. 1951)

This artist identifies as Chicano and was actively involved in the Chicano movement in California throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. His formation included studies in fine art practice and art history at California State University. Valadez's practice is influenced by Mexican social realism and Salvador Dalí (Zamudio-Taylor 321). As a result, his art is rooted in figurative depictions of urban life, ethnicity, and political action promoting the presence and recognition of Chicanos. Valadez was commissioned by the United States government to paint large-scale murals in California and Texas, including public wall murals throughout East Los Angeles, confirming his status as established artist in the United States (Zamudio-Taylor 321). For this exhibition, Valadez contributed two portraits, namely *Preacher* (1983), and *Fatima* (1984). Both paintings are detailed renderings, one of a man, and the other, of a woman.

Firstly, *Preacher* depicts a man who is centred within the composition (see fig.28). He takes over most of the area and stands prominently facing the viewer. He wears beige coloured and chequered suit jacket, orange shirt, black tie, and grey trousers. He is holding what looks like two books, possibly bibles, and a handkerchief in his left hand. The title of the painting suggests that he is perhaps a

minister or pastor. His right hand touches his face as he looks out at the viewer with a look that could be experienced as searching or questioning.

Secondly, *Fatima* shows a woman in a floral dress looking sternly out at the viewer (see fig.29). She holds an ice cream in her left hand, while holding a sizeable object in her right hand. It is not possible to ascertain what it is she carries as the object is hidden underneath a blanket that is printed in colourful patterns. She seems to be on the way somewhere and carries a denim bag slung over her left shoulder. The background of this painting is white, in the same way as in *Preacher*, focusing the viewers' attention on the woman. *Fatima*, which may be the woman's name, is not centred within the picture plane due to the object covered by the blanket she carries with her.

In both paintings, the facial expressions convey undetermined emotions, as does their body language leaving the interpretation of these paintings open to subjective readings. Louis Dobay offers a general interpretation of the artworks in the exhibition as:

Simply psychological in their reflection of a shattered consciousness and, simultaneously, specifically Hispanic. They imply a general psychological fetish, but serve as well as a framework for the mystical, the spiritual, and the transcendent quality of Hispanic art expressed in the individual works.  
(12)

Dobay echoes Paz's interpretation, outlined in detail in chapter three, of Hispanic art as isolated, and traumatised. He also introduces the idea of a 'psychological fetish', by which he means a close examination of Latino identity, as one that underpins the artists' practice. At the same time, Dobay attributes this field with ideas of the 'mystical' and 'spiritual' supporting the process of othering and stereotyping criticised by Ramírez and Ybarra-Frausto. Through this statement, Dobay exonerates himself from interpreting the artworks any further, as he underlines the quest for identity as a central concern for Latino artists.

Similarly, Beardsley views Valadez's portraits as rooted in the search for group identity, and points to the non-idealised nature in which this artist paints his subjects (58). On the other hand, Livingston underlines the artist's accomplishment of creating portraits with empathy and specificity so that group identification and potential stereotyping gives way to individual powerful images (100). This contradiction in the curators' analysis underlines the subjective and changing experiences upon looking closely at these portraits. Nevertheless, rather than an attempt at group identification, as expounded by Beardsley and Dobay, I believe that Valadez's portraits create powerful individual images, as stated by Livingston.

Both subjects in Valadez's works pose questions as to their psychological state, however, rather than mystical or spiritual, save for the suggestion of religion through the portrait *Preacher*, Valadez's works are marked by acute observations of people, and the integration of ethnicity in his works as the woman appears Latina, while the man appears of African American background. The idea of a shattered consciousness is not integral in this case; neither is the idea of a psychological fetish. Valadez observes his neighbourhood in East Los Angeles and presents his findings in the form of paintings. He creates deeply personalised and individuated portraits of his environment making subtle political statements about ethnicity and minorities in East Los Angeles.

The presence of race is a component in the artist's work. Valadez challenges perceptions the viewer might have about ethnicity and people in general; however, he leaves this aspect open to interpretation. The portraits contain clues and hints to the subjects' history; however, no resolve or closed narrative is provided. It is up to the viewer to observe and become aware of the people and their potential stories and backgrounds. This is an underlying concern in his work, which does not overshadow the individual stories he seeks to convey. Rather than merely a

representation of ethnicity or a search for group identity, these portraits act as mirrors through which the viewer might recognise himself or herself without providing definitive answers.

#### 4.4.2. Carmen Lomas Garza (b.1948)

This artist also works in relation to storytelling. Lomas-Garza, who was born in Kingsville, Texas, explores traditions and narratives of Tejanos (Zamudio-Taylor 321-322). She was also influenced by political ideas of the Chicano movement in Texas, and seeks to preserve this culture and its history in her work by incorporating references to pre-Columbian themes. This poses an example of Ybarra-Frausto's observation that states that artists incorporate these influences in their art.

Lomas-Garza's work *Abuelitos piscando nopalitos/Grandparents cutting Cacti* (1980) chronicles her grandparents' ritual of harvesting cactus, also known as nopales, that are later prepared and eaten (see fig.30). This custom originates in pre-Columbian culture and has been preserved by several generations in the artist's family (Jackson 120-121; Zamudio-Taylor 322). The painting is purposely rendered in a naïve style, which is indicative of this artist's practice. This includes a flat picture plane and she paints the clothes and landscape in block colours foregoing a realistic depiction. Her work is devoid of psychological depth and forms a representation of family history. This contrasts with Valadez's realistic and individuated portrayal in the previous example.

Lomas Garza presents the viewer with a visual history of Tejanos whose traditions and culture survive as an integral part of this community in the United States. Beardsley observes that it is through isolation of the Tejano community that these traditions and cultures survived (80). He also discerns that this poses 'an expression of resistance to the dominant group' mirroring the assertion of the

existing chasms that exists between the Latino and Anglo community outlined in chapter three (46). Poignantly, Beardsley asserts the acceptance generally perceived in the United States of remaining tied to one's national identity as he states:

We seem to be making peace with and even coming to appreciate the fact that many Americans will continue to take comfort and pride in their sense of kinship with an alternative tradition or national identity long past the second or third generation of family presence in the United States, the time when such feelings have traditionally been expected to wane. (50)

The curator interprets Hispanic art from a centric perspective that thinks of the Hispanic community as integrating within the United States rather than developing parallel to it. He points to the expected loss of identity and the integration into mainstream culture, the aims of which are frustrated as is shown in Lomas Garza's work and mirrored in Beardsley's assessment. At the same time, he recognises the change in perception of this unequal condition and underlines the tolerance of other cultures and identities within the United States.

*Abuelitos piscando nopalitos/Grandparents cutting Cacti* does not portray merely isolation; rather, it highlights a parallel culture that exists within Texas and the United States. The artist emphasises family, community and tradition and strives to 'depict in fine art form all the things of our culture that are important or beautiful or very moving' ("Artists' Biographies" 172). Most importantly, the artist actively works against the loss of memory by documenting significant traditions that survive within the Tejano community.

Lomas Garza highlights the roots of Tejanos in pre-Columbian cultural traditions that hail from Mexico, of which Texas used to be a part until the Mexican-American War. Her work is further steeped in the idea of family and the connectedness with their history in the wider context of their status as minorities in the United States. This aim illustrates the artist's intention of reflecting her own

history that is inextricably intertwined with that of the Tejano community and the United States.

#### 4.4.3. Luis Jiménez (b. 1940)

The themes of community, history, and family are also found in the works by Luis Jiménez. Livingston underlines this artist's visual language as one that explores the experiences of the Tejano community, including their popular culture, border crossings, and personal histories (105). Two works by this artist were included in this exhibition. *Cruzando el Rio Bravo /Border Crossing* (1986), a working drawing; and *Honky Tonk* (1981-1986), a series of installed fibreglass sculptures. The drawing for *Cruzando el Rio Bravo/Border Crossing* was later realized as a large fibreglass sculpture and is now part of the MFAH collection.

Both works tap into the themes expounded by Livingston in distinctive ways. Firstly, *Cruzando el Rio Bravo/Border Crossing* depicts the artist's family history (see fig.31). The scene portrays the artist's ancestors and their crossing into the United States from Mexico in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His grandmother is carried over the River Grande and into the United States by her husband. She is holding her child, Jiménez's father, who is protected under her blue and yellow striped cloak. In this case, they fled the violence of the Mexican Revolution and remained in Texas for subsequent generations ("Artists' Biographies" 190).

The catalogue does not discuss this drawing in detail or the politically loaded issue of historic and contemporary immigration. Neither are the circumstances behind the border crossing, depicted here, elaborated upon. Nevertheless, Jackson points out that

The border [...] is symbolic, but the Mexican American experience also has a history of negotiating a real border, the U.S.-Mexican border. The border both as a metaphor for cultural mestizaje and as a geopolitical reality has been a prominent theme among Chicano artists. (4-5)

This becomes apparent in the example outlined here. Further, Beardsley's notion outlined above, stating that generations of Tejanos that remain in the United States still honour their connection with their past, remains at the core of Jiménez's and that of Lomas-Garza's work as is apparent here. In both examples, a symbolic and actual border crossing, as well as drawing borders anew by refusing to integrate within the mainstream, are indicative of the visual negotiations undertaken by these artists.

In contrast, Jiménez's several fibreglass sculptures for *Honky Tonk* explore contemporary Tejano culture and dance halls (see fig.32). This installation consists of exaggerated sculptures of various couples dancing and cajoling in a nightclub setting. Their dynamic dance movements are conveyed through swerving moulding and brushstrokes as their bodies are entwined. The neon lighting conveys the sense of a nightclub by emanating fluorescent colour within the darkened space in the museum. This work contrasts with the previous one, as it explores popular culture within the Tejano community and chronicles their way of celebrating life.

Much of Jiménez's visual language borrows from popular culture and exaggerated forms. His works present narratives that are rooted in the artist's personal history and Tejano way of life in the United States. Transposed to the museum, the group of sculptures for *Honky Tonk* present a lived experience that became decontextualised within this institutional setting. Notwithstanding this, the historic aspects inherent in these artworks are impossible to ignore, and the curators could have done more to discuss the background and politics of immigration and integration into the United States based on Jiménez's work.

Livingstone states that Jiménez has developed his own visual language that veers away from approaches developed in Los Angeles and those by, for example, Valadez outlined earlier (105). While the visual craftsmanship and distinct language

employed by Jiménez is undeniable, the core of this artist's work deals with his personal experiences and family history, much like the work by Lomas-Garza. This echoes Ybarra-Frausto's assessment of Chicano art above, and that it is rooted in personal experiences and observations. Jiménez's approach to creating art, distinct from Los Angeles, highlights variations in regional Chicano art underlining its heterogeneity within the United States.

The examples discussed here by Jiménez, and Lomas-Garza explore Tejano ethnicity, culture, history, tradition, and border crossings in symbolic and actual terms. The works depict idealised cultural and regional traditions. Lomas-Garza's works originate in observing pre-Columbian traditions. Her paintings do not speak of individual psychological states; rather they preserve memories and illustrate the role of family, community and resistance within this minority. By the artist's own admission, her work is specifically characterised through Tejano themes that deal with this community's spirituality, history and tradition. The same is true of Jiménez's works, although this artist observes contemporary life, popular culture, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century history. Both artists locate their works in Texas, and embody Ybarra-Frausto's idea of pan-Latino consciousness transcending borders through memory and lived experiences.

On the other hand, Valadez adopts a focused and individuated approach in his work exploring his East Los Angeles neighbourhood. Rather than presenting spiritual or mystical aspects, all artists explore their culture as it exists within the borders of their States, cities, and immediate communities. Their works show that this culture is as rooted in this country as much as it is in Mexico.



#### 4.5. Responses and Reception

*Hispanic Art in the United States* ushered in a significant debate that investigated the problems of multiculturalism, pluralism, mainstream museum practices, ethnic representation, and the agency of artists and minority communities. Marzio outlines the resistance this project was met with:

Some people debated that non-Hispanics had no right to curate a Hispanic exhibition, others complained that one Hispanic group was being favoured over another, and some leaders in Hispanic arts organizations fought against the exhibition because they felt that the art and artists were being taken from the Hispanic organization's sphere of influence. ("Minorities" 122-123)

This illustrates some of the criticisms already outlined in this chapter and that emerged during the early stages of this project, and after its realisation. Marzio was aware of the reproaches surrounding the selection process and the MFAH's status as a mainstream institution. The quote also underlines the anxieties felt by the Latino community and its cultural leaders that its art would be misappropriated and misunderstood. Nonetheless, it is to the MFAH's and Marzio's credit that the director was aware of these criticisms and responded to them throughout the entire process. This speaks for the efforts to establish a dialogue and was the MFAH's most successful strategy.

Numerous reviews and essays supported the shows attempt to include and introduce Latino art to a wider audience. This was after all the main motivator for the curators, Marzio, and the MFAH. On the other hand, at the symposium of the same title, held at that institution, several scholars asserted that this attempt overlooked the purpose of Latino art, and reinforced the power of mainstream institutions to determine the terms of inclusion for art created by minorities. Writing Latino art into an art historical narrative, as outlined and discussed above, was not debated at that time.

Nevertheless, recently, Ybarra-Frausto asserted that the writing of Latino art

alongside American art history is still at its inception. He suggests a reflexive engagement to successfully narrate this field of art history:

That is what American art is all about- not an individuated ethnic base of narratives, but all these stories calling and responding to each other. Somewhere in this "dialogical imperative", simultaneous with global tensions, are the contours of a new cartography of the imagination, of a new sense of American visual culture that is not restrictive but open and expansive; that is not national but integrates the local with the global. ("Imagining" 11)<sup>25</sup>

Rather than the inclusionary and disarming approach adopted by the curators and Marzio, Ybarra-Frausto advocates an open and imaginative method to the writing of this history. He suggests a levelling of fields in which a dialectical engagement takes place that expands this narrative through criticality and counter histories.

Conversely, some reviews celebrated the MFAH and the exhibition as a success. This included Martin Ennis who highlights the combination of European and pre-Columbian styles presented. He describes the artworks as ranging 'from native folk carvings to cutting-edge works of Neo-expressionism and Neo-minimalism' echoing Livingstons inclusion of these movements outlined above (50). He states that Hispanic artists 'have transcended mere homage by blending classic modern art and Hispanic traditions to create hybrid images of sophistication and originality' (56). Further echoing Livingston's approach, he also underlines their affinity with modern artists such as Braque, Cézanne, and Matisse (56). Through his observations, and the various statements made by the curators outlined earlier, a legitimate reason to include Hispanic art in the mainstream is provided since it is sanctioned through a comparison with artists that are recognised as Modern Masters of European art.

Another review penned by Dobay asks the crucial question: What is Hispanic art? The author points out that this is a controversial enquiry, since the images of

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<sup>25</sup> In 1997, this scholar donated his personal archive of ephemera and documents to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington to aid the expansive approach this institution adopts to writing American art history with Latino art as a counter voice. See Ybarra-Frausto. "Imagining a More Expansive Narrative of American Art."

graffiti and low-riders, modified cars that rest low to the ground and are painted in bright colours, permeates its perception by a wider audience (12). He goes on to underline that the curators of the show chose 'highly accomplished works' that did not comply with such stereotypes (12). Dobay's review praised the show as one that challenges stereotypical ideas about Hispanic art. He also states that through its focus on quality in the works, the exhibition questions the 'meaning in contemporary art' through the inclusion of ethnicity in its narrative (12). He mirrors the curatorial approach adopted by the curators of the exhibition, and recognises the critical capacity inherent in these artworks and their inclusion by the MFAH.

Dobay's and Ennis' reviews are indicative of an audience that has no prior experience of Latino art or awareness of its history. Through this exhibition they were exposed to the curators' interpretation that glossed over histories of civil rights struggles and conveyed a mainstream interpretation of this field. At the same time, their reviews echo the appreciation sought after for quality art and introduced the MFAH's idea of Latino art to those who are not familiar with it.

Their assessment is countered by Mari Carmen Ramírez, who points out that the history of Latinos is a history of conquests and United States foreign policies in Latin America, accelerating immigration and the sustained forming of Latino communities in that country ("Beyond the Fantastic" 237). She also outlines the integration of minorities within a pluralistic society that underlines a benevolent, yet dominant culture at the centre of a one-sided power structure ("Beyond the Fantastic" 238). This results in a process of 'othering' through which Latino art becomes 'outsider' art that is viewed through the interpretation by the MFAH ("Beyond the Fantastic" 239). Ramírez's observations underline the separation of Latino art from the mainstream, which is remedied by the MFAH's inclusion of this field. Moreover, the emphasis upon the artworks and their quality contributed to a

singular understanding of the works and their intentions, while leaving the politically loaded issues of labelling ethnicity, immigration, and the power of mainstream institutions unattended.

Touching upon these topics, and offering a more critical approach, Mark Stevens asks poignantly: 'Does the show confine Hispanic artists to a cultural ghetto or does it introduce them to the mainstream? Is it an exhibit of art or a making of amends?' (66). The author cites the marginalisation of Latino communities and their continued exclusion from mainstream institutions in the field of art and elsewhere. The political act of recognising the Latino community within the MFAH is underlined by him. At the same time, Stevens states that the criteria by which the artworks were chosen drew out the quality of the artworks transcending mere political statements (68). Stevens suggests that this is a reductive approach and that the collision between Hispanic and Anglo cultures does not create a new field of art, rather it creates displacement and paradox, traits that are not drawn out through the show (68). He therefore recognises the intentions of the curators as laudable; however, the result does not compensate for the 'cultural ghetto' it seems to create.

Kimmelman goes further and calls the selection of artworks an act of pigeonholing. Both writers mirror the notion of ghettoisation that, by way of a tokenistic approach, found a brief place in the mainstream. Stevens' review of the show is perhaps the most poignant in that it critically evaluates its premise steeped in ethnicity, and its curatorial strategy advocating quality in art.

Similarly, Kay Larson points out that shows such as this one result in 'well-meaning attempts to summarize a culture [however] always have a little condescension buried in it' (51). The author makes a pertinent observation regarding validation of diversity through pluralism and that originates through one legitimating actor, in this case the MFAH (51). Her review echoes that of Stevens, Kimmelman,

and Ramírez in that she underlines the mainstream approach adopted for this exhibition as one that was not successful in providing equality and recognition for Latino artists.

The exhibition's aim to introduce a mainstream population to Hispanic art was thus partially successful in that it provided a survey of contemporary art produced by Latino artists, yet it did not deal with political dimensions of labelling, othering and ghettoisation. These were fervently discussed in the aftermath of the show, and at the annual Ruth Shartle Symposium held at the MFAH in conjunction with the exhibition.

#### 4.5.1 The MFAH Symposium- Critical Voices and Repossession of the Hispanic Label

Several foremost scholars of Latino and Chicano studies attended this event discussing the outcome of the exhibition. In direct reference to *Hispanic Art in the United States*, Mesa-Bains states that through the attempt by the MFAH at defining what Hispanic art is, it becomes inscribed in an art historical canon that is not written by the Latino community (Johnson). This is visible in Livingston's essay and her attempt at writing this field into art history connecting Latino art to modern European and Latin American art. This points to the loss of control over self-determination and input by Latino scholars and artists.

In this vein, experts in Latino studies criticised that they were not consulted in the research and selection process, leading to lacks and absences in the cohesion of the exhibition (Johnson). Moreover, Elizabeth McBride observes that the exhibition may change the way that 'Anglos view Hispanic art and how Hispanics view it' and themselves (30). This being the result of the art displayed outside of this community and its customary contexts. Again, the difference between what a non-specialised

audience, on the one hand, and a minority group, on the other, may expect is highlighted here.

Still, the criticism rests in the outcome as one that was about art by Latinos, rather than reflexive engagement with this field such as that suggested by Ramos and Ybarra-Frausto. McBride's observation, which echoes Beardsley's assertion that Hispanic artists sought to be viewed differently and outside of their communities, became an issue of self-determination that the numerous scholars felt was missing in this case and despite the efforts on the part of the MFAH to include leaders and docents in the process of realising this exhibition.

Gómez-Peña offers practical solutions to this problem as he suggests that an institution 'must at least have the grace to contact the various ethnic communities in the area, ask for assistance, invite them to collaborate and...hire people of colour for permanent staff positions', he continues to state that 'multiculturalism must be reflected not only in the programmes or publicity of an organization but also in its administrative structure, in the quality of thought of its members, and eventually in the audience it serves' (192-193). The artist vehemently argues for an palpable institutional change that reflects the communities it represents, rather than mirroring cultural policies and tokenistic gestures. This demand has been met, to a degree, by the MFAH as it recruited several leaders from the Latino community and docents to undertake outreach programmes specifically aimed at schools and Latino organisations in Houston. Due to the response outlined here, this measure was perhaps less successful than anticipated; however, it still proves the wider efforts undertaken by the MFAH to integrate this community on an institutional level.

Despite these measures, Quirarte took issue with the role of white, non-Hispanic curators who chose the artworks. Since they are not part of any of the numerous Hispanic communities, he stated that the issue of ethnicity extended to

the selection of artworks as 'someone from outside [who] chooses what strikes *his* eye' (emphasis in original text; Johnson). The crux of contention remains the lack of involvement of Latino scholars, highlighting a lack in the integration of researchers from the Latino community.

In this vein, McBride asks if this show is representative of Hispanic art at all (30). She concludes that this exhibition focused on the art more than it did on the political issues inherent in the framing and organisation of this exhibition:

To some extent the fragmentation of purpose we see in the curator's choices may be inspired by the work itself- these are the creations of a divided people, torn between the flashy but elusive power of constantly changing Anglo culture and the pull of the older traditions, walking the borders both literally and figuratively. To dive so intensely into the art may destroy an outsider's perspective. One might almost merge with the objects themselves. Still, in a show of this kind, it's the curator's job to overcome this bonding process finally, to stand outside, and I don't believe that's quite been accomplished here. (34)

This quote eloquently points to the intense focus upon quality in art and the lack of empathy with the circumstances experienced by Latinos, which compromised the overall objective of the exhibition. McBride doubts that this gap has been bridged; rather, the focus upon quality took away the potential for this show to be more attuned to the artists and the intentions behind their works. In this sense, Gómez-Peña assesses the increased inclusion of Latino art in mainstream institutions throughout the 1980s and its repercussions as follows:

On the one hand, it has opened doors to many talented artists whose work was practically unknown outside the Latino milieu. On the other, it has brought foreign values to our milieu. Those chosen are pressured to become more slick and 'professional' and therefore more individualistic and competitive, and to produce twice as much as before. The result is devastating: museum-quality art framed by cultural guilt and spiritual exhaustion [...] We want something more ambitious. And that is to be in control of our political destiny and our cultural expressions. (191)

Gómez-Peña asserts a crucial motivation for Latino artists, which remains steeped in the political aims outlined at length in chapter three. These encompass equality,

recognition, and the ability to be self-determined. Beardsley's justification that places the onus with artists, who chose to move to the mainstream, does not hold true in this case, since the exhibition discussed here measured the art according to standards that do not compare to those established by Latino artists.

Paradoxically, the resulting discussion surrounding this exhibition echoes the insistence on difference between Anglo and Latino culture, which the MFAH sought to bridge. It becomes apparent that the division between these communities was re-enacted in the aftermath of this exhibition. The criticisms divided Latino and non-Latino spokespersons and artists, as well as community and institutional conceptions of the purpose and value of artworks. I believe that this discussion underlined the ghettoisation of Latino art since Latino scholars rejected the attempts by the MFAH to approach this field through an institutional view.

At the same time, and as already elaborated at length, the MFAH insisted on mainstream criteria to define this field outside of its context. As an experiment, and an opener for the discussion of such an important debate, *Hispanic Art in the United States* was a noteworthy step. While it was not successful in dealing with its inherent political and ethnic dimensions, the exhibition underlined the growing Latino community and the need to recognise its culture and artistic contribution. While the artworks sat uncomfortably within this wider institutional context, the ensuing debate dealt with the displacement and paradox this caused. The result was a lengthy hiatus in exhibiting Latino art at the MFAH which has, to date, not been lifted.

*Hispanic Art in the United States* may not have been a successful attempt at providing a reflexive and thoughtful engagement with Latino art; however, it opened the debate on the relationship between institutions and minorities. The MFAH stands out as an institution that took a risk with this exhibition and remains the first



mainstream institution that observed possibilities of representing and incorporating minorities in its framework and through a curatorial strategy bound up in pluralism, multiculturalism, ethnicity, and mainstream institutional criteria that define quality of artworks.

The attempt by the MFAH to inscribe this field into an expanded narrative of American art history is illustrated by the production of the publication accompanying the exhibition. The catalogue essays sought to ground the exhibition within scholarly research initiated by the MFAH. This underlines this institution's commitment to pioneer new fields of artistic production and curatorial strategies. Furthermore, the support by several corporate sponsors, as well as the enquiries by institutions to host this exhibition, are further prove of the institutional value inherent in this project.

The inclusion of docents and leaders to encourage outreach and art education was furthermore a crucial aspect that legitimised this project's aims to integrate this community. Nevertheless, the overall institutional approach failed to recognise Latino art as a counter history and ignored its potential for critical reevaluation of an already established narrative.

The exhibition showed an array of paintings and sculptures by what the MFAH termed Hispanics, living throughout the United States. The disparate origins and heterogeneity within this term, and that of the artists, did not support the attempt at cohering this minority under this criterion. The use of the term Hispanic has been discussed at length in chapter three and underlined its controversial and inaccurate meaning in this instance. Similarly, the term Latino, employed here, stretches across States and countries in the Americas and responds to the social and political struggles experienced by this group. Nonetheless, both labels do not sufficiently advocate the many differences within these groups. Moreover, the

artworks discussed in this chapter respond to local and regional histories and circumstances underlining a nuanced approach adopted by individual artists.

The term Hispanic, and the interpretation of the artworks as related to European techniques and lineage, contributed to a homogenisation of the diverse artistic practices. This contributed to the disarming of this field rather than a recognition of its critical potential. This was not mitigated through the mainstream criteria of aesthetic and European Modernisms by which the MFAH attempted to categorise this field further.

The attempt at cohering the artworks under one ethnic label and a Eurocentric framework jarred with their content in that they bear witness to observations of traditions, culture, and preserved memories of the Latino community. As discussed, Lomas-Garza and Jiménez incorporate traditions and culture of Tejanos in their work. Their art has clearly been influenced by the Chicano movement and its wider political objectives. Both artists remain faithful to Mexican traditions, culture and language. Valadez, on the other hand, touches upon everyday occurrences in East Los Angeles. His work observes more than the psychological makeup of the people who live and work in his neighbourhood as he incorporates ethnicity and individuated portraits that tell fleeting, yet powerful stories.

The analysis presented here has shown that the artworks could not have been successfully pitted against European Masters as suggested by Marzio. Rather, the recognition of Latino art as a parallel and critical development of American art, as expounded by Ramos, Mari Carmen Ramírez, and Ybarra-Frausto would have been a more successful way of presenting the artists and artworks. Their respective assessments of Latino art state that this movement forms a diverse response to the conditions and lived experiences of Latinos in the United States. Thus, Latino art cannot be inscribed into an art historical canon through mainstream criteria.

Nevertheless, the debate resulting from the MFAH's experimental approach opened important avenues for mainstream institutions and marginalised communities in engaging more successfully with each other. Finally, it remains to the MFAH's, the curators, and Marzio's credit to have taken this risk. Marzio's awareness of the exhibition's shortcomings during the planning stage, as well as his and the curators' active engagement with the criticisms in its aftermath, are testament to an institution that remains open to innovation and dialogue.

The efforts of the MFAH outlined here, lead to further developments in 2001 with the establishment of the ICAA and the appointment of Mari Carmen Ramírez as Wortham curator of Latin American Art. Again, the MFAH invested time and finances in becoming an alternative and experimental centre for the study of art from Latin America and Latino art. Its first major exhibition, *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art from Latin America*, provided a selective re-writing of Latin American art and a re-examination of the criteria through which this field is explored in the United States. This included extensive research rooted in archival material, and a catalogue containing scholarly essays that underpinned this project and the conceptual basis of the ICAA.

## Chapter 5- Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America (2004)

We saw that museum work could be far more appealing in terms of reaching out to audiences and this utopian vision of changing people's views and kind of transforming the world...I was against every form of formalism...of course the roots of all of that was my training, was my education, in Latin American culture. I was...of the first generation...to be exclusively dedicated to curatorial work, and in Latin America there were people like Olivier Debroye, Gerardo Mosquera, Marcello Pacheco, Paulo Herkenhoff. We were the first to really map out this field in terms of Latin American art.

(Mari Carmen Ramírez; Personal Interview)

Ramírez, the co-curator of *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, traces her curatorial approach unequivocally to her roots and education in Puerto Rico, where she was born and grew up, and Latin America. I will refer to this exhibition as *Inverted Utopias* for the remainder of this chapter (see fig.33). She criticises the criteria by which art from Latin America and Latino art are judged in the United States. The quote above also illustrates her aim to review the historical narrative of these fields and their curatorial strategies as she applies her convictions to her work and, together with Héctor Olea, curated the first major in-house exhibition of art from Latin America at the MFAH. The individuals mentioned above contributed to the catalogue for this exhibition with in-depth essays forming a crucial part of the curatorial strategy for this exhibition, namely the rooting of research in archival documentation and original research.

*Inverted Utopias* was organised under the auspices of the newly formed ICAA at the MFAH, and with substantial support from Marzio. The director sought to establish art from Latin America as a field at the MFAH as early as 1987. In a letter to Paulo Herkenhoff, then director of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, Marzio emphatically states: 'I want to raise the consciousness of Houston about Latin American art, and I believe exhibitions can do just that'. This objective ran concurrently to his efforts of integrating Latino art at the MFAH.

Today, the ICAA continues to conduct research, stage exhibitions of art from Latin America, publishes texts and books, and organises symposia and events.<sup>26</sup> In 2012, it launched a far-reaching online digital archive of primary documents through the *Documents of Twentieth Century Latin American and Latino Art* project.<sup>27</sup> In conjunction with the exhibition discussed in detail in the following pages, this development at the MFAH marks the most significant shift in this institution's efforts to establish a centre dedicated to art from Latin America and Latino art in the United States.

For *Inverted Utopias*, Ramírez, as the Wortham curator of Latin American Art, and Olea, assert their opposition to Eurocentric art historical narratives. The earlier version of this exhibition, *Heterotopias. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1918-1968* (*Heterotopias-Half Century Without a Place 1918-1968*), occurred between 2000 and 2001 at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid. This was staged as part of *Versiones del Sur* (*Southern Versions*), a series of five exhibitions exploring art from Latin America at that institution. *Heterotopias. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1918-1968* was organised in collaboration with the Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte/Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport in Spain, underlining a national interest and support from official government organisations for this project.

In the catalogue for that exhibition, the curators outline their premise, which extends to the version staged in Houston some three years later:

From the perspective of our continent, and due to the unilaterally inflexible axis of hegemonic legitimisers with their known rules and axiology, HETEROTOPIAS responds to the initial modernist model as having had-no-place. In other words, they [Avant-Garde] materialized through a WITHOUT-PLACE effect, however, only with respect to Euro-centric, Western literature

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<sup>26</sup> The ICAA lists publications, events, and exhibitions on their website: <https://www.mfah.org/research/international-center-arts-americas/icaa-about/>

<sup>27</sup> For more information and access to digitized primary documents see <http://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/>

and, equally, to that of the United States.<sup>28</sup> (emphasis in original text; "Reflexión" 23)

This quote refers to the framework applied to Latin American art that is based on Barr's initial conception of quality and the established narrative of this field in the United States and Europe. The curators call into existence Latin American art as outside of these parameters, as they assert their position outside of Europe and the United States and offer an approach that originates in Latin America. More specifically, the curators assert that:

What makes the Latin American versions of the neo-Avant gardes so unique is not so much their radical artistic postulates but a non-aesthetic goal: the social function they were called upon to play with regard to the paradox of unstable societies and their status quo. Therein lies their innermost utopian dimension. ("A Highly" 5)

This assertion is not new and has been articulated by numerous scholars in this field including Baddeley and Fraser (2), Ades (5), and Lucie-Smith (7), to name a few. At the same time, the curators locate their premise within a wider art historical context, and consider individual artists and their works within a framework that overturns the aesthetic and technical criteria insisted upon, first in Europe, and later, in mainstream institutions including MoMA.

In practical terms, both exhibitions present the exchange of ideas and contributions of artists through constellations of fluctuating terms. For *Inverted Utopias*, these included: 'Progress and Rupture', 'Vibrational and Stationary', 'Touch and Gaze', 'Cryptic and Committed', 'Play and Grief' and the 'Universal and Vernacular'. By grouping the over 200 artworks within these flexible terms, the curators proposed an alternative to the curatorial frameworks of previous showcases of Latin American art that emphasised linear narratives originating in modernist

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<sup>28</sup> Translated from Spanish by the author: Desde la perspectiva de nuestro continente, HETEROTOPIAS significa que estas respuestas al modelo modernista inicial no-tuvieron-lugar debido a la unilateralidad inflexible del eje hegemónico legitimador con sus reglas y axiología conocidas. O sea, que sucedieron y tuvieron efecto SIN-LUGAR, pero solo con respecto a la lectura eurocentrada de Occidente o ensimisma de los Estados Unidos, que es lo mismo.

theories from Europe and North America (Ramírez "A Highly" 5). Ramírez states that these traditionally focus on surveys of art from Latin America that are imbued with ideas of difference, 'exoticism' and the tracing of aesthetics and techniques to European criteria of quality art ("Beyond the Fantastic" 240). The curatorial approaches I discussed in the previous chapters illustrate this outlook.

The constellation framework highlights paradoxes and developments that originated because of Latin American artists engaging critically with ideas and concepts of modernity, to which some were exposed while living in Europe and the USA. Some of these artists include Hélio Oiticica who practised in the United States and Brazil; Torres-García, who spent time working in Europe and his native Uruguay; and Luis Camnitzer (b. 1937) who left Uruguay and now lives and works in the United States. Their practices remained wedded to concerns for social and political circumstances in their respective countries and within their local contexts.

To prove their thesis, the curators incorporated archival documents by artists and theorists extensively in their catalogue and throughout the exhibition (see fig.34). Both exhibitions and their accompanying publications argue that artists inverted European modernisms, rather than imitating them, creating a critical and parallel history rather than posing an attempt at being inscribed within European and United States narratives of art history.

This poses a shift from the premises of the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* and *Hispanic Art in the United States*, which are examples that showcase artworks framed through Eurocentric criteria, and in narrative, geographical, or survey formats. This chapter also differs in its framework in that it does not include close analysis of singular artworks. Rather, I examine the constellations proposed by the curators one by one. The following pages contrast *Inverted Utopias* to its predecessor *Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1918-1968* to illustrate deviations in

both cases and reaffirm the attempt to re-focus this field through the curators' strategy. This also includes their extensive use of archival documents.

I will begin this chapter by outlining the philosophical grounding of both exhibitions before analysing and discussing reviews and responses authored by various writers in the wake of its realisation in Houston. Ultimately, this chapter illustrates another shift in curatorial strategy at the MFAH that includes scholarly engagement that was corner-stoned by archival documentation and the constellation framework.

## 5.1. Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1918-1968 and Inverted Utopias-Avant-Garde Art in Latin America

### 5.1.1. Philosophical Anchors

Ramírez's and Olea's curatorial premise maintains that art from Latin America has not copied ideas and artistic practices that originated in Europe and the United States; rather, it retains its own language and alternative matrix of themes ("Prologue" XV). These were created in response to European theories and ideas, inverting them in the process. At the same time, the curators root their approach in European philosophical ideas. The title for the exhibition staged at the Reina Sofia Museum, namely 'Heterotopías', is a term borrowed from Michel Foucault's famed essay 'Of Other Spaces'. In the MFAH version the title changes to *Inverted Utopias* promulgating the idea of turning ideas upside down or changing them. In both cases, the philosophical approach is anchored in the creation of alternative spaces and the adaptation of ideas and theories. Foucault establishes a distinction between the terms utopia and heterotopia in his pivotal essay. He describes utopias as:

Sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case, these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. (capital letters in original text, 24)



Already, the philosopher suggests an inversion of reality in utopias, however, one that presents an idealistic version of reality and society. On the other hand, he explains heterotopias as real and man-made spaces: 'Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality' (24). For example, he cites museums and libraries as heterotopias since they are spaces in which objects are accumulated over time and exhibited for visitors who experience them (26). Thus, such spaces are built and inhabited by people, as well as accessible.

In her introductory essay for *Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1918-1968*, Ramírez underlines the idea of heterotopias as a productive, critical and inverting factor imbued in the radical vanguard in Latin America ("Reflexión" 23). Since artists did not recognise the modernist utopias imported from Europe, they created their own versions by reformulating and re-working these ideas. According to her, this stance continues to influence the creation of art in Latin America ("Reflexión" 23). This forms a key characteristic in the curators' overall thesis, namely that the production of art remains dependent upon hegemonic and Eurocentric criteria which artists question and invert. The change to name the exhibition *Inverted Utopias* for the MFAH spelt an adjustment and clearer argument about modernism being inverted rather than created anew.

Ramírez also underlines the aims of both exhibitions as bringing to the fore key artists and movements from the Avant-Garde that have not been much studied and are not widely known outside of their countries of origin ("Reflexión" 23). This also responds to criticisms citing the lack of inclusion of well-known masters of Latin American art including Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) (Indych-López). Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros are included in the exhibition with numerous artworks; however, the

emphasis is decidedly removed from Mexican Muralism. Ramírez justifies these exclusions:

They had belonged to the surrealist movement, so they had a certain notoriety. Frida Kahlo because of her life and her relationship with Trotsky [...] Diego Rivera and the Mexican Muralists were darlings of the US establishment since the 1930s and since Alfred Barr. [...] It was predictable that they would be the people to fill that, that notion, but the problem was that they were being upheld as being the paradigm for all of Latin America and in the process the real developments, the movements, all this plethora of movements that had taken place that had been so innovative and so experimental etc. they were being wiped out. (Personal Interview)

She underlines the wish to re-focus the paradigmatic art history introduced by Barr and move away from essentialist ideas of art from Latin America that are rooted in Mexican Muralism. Similarly, José Emilio Burucúa and Mario H. Gradowczyk trace the origins of Latin American art in the United States to Barr echoing Ramírez's conception of this history in that country ("Constelaciones" 5). She also stresses that both exhibitions are not surveys of the vanguard in Latin America, and explains the lack of artists including Fernando Botero (b. 1934), Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991), and the already mentioned Kahlo, in that they too escape the vanguard that developed in the various countries between the 1920s and 1960s ("Reflexión" 24). In other words, the curators highlight radical inversions of modernist theories, rather than their re-enactment. The artists that were purposely omitted are already well known to audiences in the United States. By re-focusing the narrative and highlighting hitherto unknown artists, new inroads into research and ideas are created, and art from Latin America acquires a shift in its perception.

### 5.1.2. Adjustments in Houston

Olea outlines the philosophical precedent of the constellations that are set out according to opposing terms. He states that the framework is rooted in Theodor W. Adorno's conception of constellations that map a field of enquiry ("Versions" 443). In practical terms, this meant that rather than a linear narrative and presentation of artworks, loosely defined terms creating constellations open a space in which their exploration is made possible.

The seven constellations for *Heterotopías. Medio Siglo sin-lugar 1918-1968*, and their equivalents in *Inverted Utopias* were: Conceptual/Cryptic and Committed, Impugnadora/ Play and Grief, Universalista-Autóctona/ Universal and Vernacular, Promotora/ Dogma and Resistance, Cinética/ Vibrational and Stationary, Concreto-Constructiva/ Progression and Rupture, Óptico-Háptica/Touch and Gaze (see figs.35 and 36). Moreover, *Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1918-1968* also consists of a diagram outlining the artists in each constellation (fig.37). This second diagram was not repeated in the catalogue for *Inverted Utopias*. Its inclusion, however, would have provided more context to the many artists in the Houston show.

Further adjustments were made as *Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1918-1968* showcased over 400 artworks, while *Inverted Utopias* counted 200. The artworks and essays published as part of Promotora/Dogma and Resistance were removed in the MFAH version altogether.<sup>29</sup> This included artworks by Dr. Atl (Mexico 1875-1964), Rafael Barradas (Uruguay 1890-1929), Carlos Contramaestre (Venezuela, 1933-1996), and Victor Valera (Venezuela 1927-2013) among others.

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<sup>29</sup> The essays omitted in the catalogue for *Inverted Utopias* are: Cuauhtémoc Medina 'El Dr. Atl y la aristocracia: monto de una deuda vanguardista'/Dr. Atl and the aristocracy: An Avant-Garde Debt'; Tomas Llorens-Serra's 'Torres-García y el mito del arte como utopía de salvación/Torres-García and the myth of art as Utopian Salvation; and Robert S. Lubar's 'Arte-Evolución: Joaquín Torres-García y la formación social de la vanguardia en Barcelona/Art-Evolution: Joaquín Torres-García and the social formation of the Avant-Garde in Barcelona'. This essay served to establish a tangible link between art from Latin America and Spain since Torres-García lived and worked there between 1891 and 1934.

This constellation remains part of the documents section in both catalogues with facsimiles of archival material.

Extensive use of original and reproduced documents in both, the exhibition and catalogue, was another key feature. Through this approach, Olea and Ramírez shifted the emphasis away from purely aesthetic concerns so prevalent earlier in the century, and outlined in the previous chapters, to underlining the ideas inherent in the artworks and their theoretical basis. The archival documents rooted this exhibition in primary material, further authenticating the curatorial strategy and research presented.

Although some artists were omitted in *Inverted Utopias*, the curators added Puerto Rican artist, Julio Tomás Martínez, with two of his paintings in the constellation 'Play and Grief' for the MFAH exhibition. Martínez was member of the Society of Independent Artists and the American Artist Professional League through which he promoted his art throughout the 1930s and 1940s in the United States. *El manicomio o cada loco con su tema/The madhouse or Everyone has his hobbyhorse* (1936) and *El secreto de la maldad/The Secret of Evil* (1930) are underlined as influential on the Chicano art movement and its murals, as the paintings depict plural narratives, a process that was later adopted by Chicano artists ("Biographies" 568) (see figs.38 and 39).

The curators claim that Martínez's works also anticipated trends of the trans-Avant-Garde in the 1980s and Neoexpressionist figurative chromatism propagated during that time; however, they do not provide detailed analysis of these claims ("Biographies" 568). The inclusion of this artist establishes a link between art from Latin America and Latino art in the United States. This forms a significant, if weak, nexus as his work is not placed in the foreground. This would have tied the curatorial strategy more successfully to the overall aim of the ICAA, which includes

the research of Latino art. This brief mention remains unexplored, failing to establish a successful grounding of Latino art in the curators' approach.

The installation at the MFAH also differed from that at the Reina Sofia Museum. Annie Laurie Sánchez's review of the exhibition considers the installation of the artworks and the visitor experience created. She outlines, for example, visual breaks in red, as well as introductory texts in Spanish and English explaining the premise of each constellation. Furthermore, interaction with replica artworks was a feature highlighted by Sánchez and will be discussed in more detail later. She concludes that the exhibition is vast, interactive, and goes to every effort to explain its premise. This illustrates an attempt at presenting an immersive experience that also educated its audience about the histories of movements and artists included.

Comparing both incarnations of the exhibition, it becomes clear that the exhibition in Houston formed a more concise version of that presented in Madrid. Nevertheless, both versions were imbued in philosophical ideas determined by Foucault's idea of heterotopia and the notion of constellations as critical tools. In both exhibitions, the matrix of relations between the terms was used to frame the artworks and allow for a flexible reconsideration of their history outside of established narratives and hegemonic legitimising criteria.

Moreover, the constellations overlap, since numerous artists and their works re-appear in other groups throughout both exhibitions. An attempt has been made to link the later version at the MFAH to Latino art, however, this attempt fell somewhat short of being convincing or well-discussed. Considering the trajectory of this thesis that considers art from Latin America and Latino art, and the establishment of the ICAA which aims to promote both fields equally, this remains the exhibition's perhaps most glaring omission.

### 5.1.3. Re-viewing Latin American Art History in the United States

The incarnations of both exhibitions discussed here are underpinned by archival documents that were exhibited alongside the artworks and included in their respective constellations in the catalogue. Some documents were digitised and made accessible to the audiences alongside the exhibited artworks through a computer (Sánchez). The inclusion of documents is a strategy employed by Ramírez and Olea as a significant feature to aid the historical review of art from Latin America and 're-construct an entire period' (Personal Interview). This further rooted the premise of the exhibition in archival and historical documentation.

In addition to this, the constellation model sought to destabilise an already accepted narrative of art from Latin America. Ramírez clarifies hers and Olea's position and approach in this respect:

The reason why we wanted to do something different is because this comes out of my efforts in the early 90s to critique the whole notion of essentialism to which Latin American art was being reduced. [...] In the United States in particular, [...] when we talk about this issue of Latin American art this is all a US construct of which Latin America has participated, [...] It was born here in the United States with Alfred Barr and the Museum of Modern Art. [...] We are all part of one continent [...] It's a very symbiotic relationship which is not always understood in those terms in Latin America because of the persistence to imperialism, but this idea of creating a comprehensive collection of Latin American art, a field of Latin American art, studying Latin American art [...], that is all the United States. The 90s we were all fighting against that extreme reductionism which was market driven, essentially, because there was no basis of scholarship established here in the United States, there was no publications [that] were circulating in English. Hardly anything got here from Latin America. There was extreme ignorance on the part of people about what the difference was between Mexican, Argentinean or Brazilian [art]. So we were running up against all of this ignorance, biases, cultural stereotyping and all sorts of reductive criteria. And then all of that was being channelled through this notion of the survey, of the geographical, chronological survey. [...] It was all creating these false constructs which did not hold up to reality and it was also making everything extremely linear and very simplistic which is not the way that art history or any history has evolved. (Personal Interview)

Ramírez insists on re-visiting and re-focusing the narrative of art from Latin America that was created in the United States. She traces its origin to Barr and MoMA who in the 1940s called for an establishment of the field of Latin American art and for this to be seriously researched and collected. He hoped to build a base from which this area can be studied further in future. At the same time, Ramírez is sensitive to the reductive ideas that emerged through these early approaches and, later, through multiculturalism, identifying a lack of knowledge that she, and Olea, sought to expose and review. Her assessment also points to a skewed power relation between the United States and Latin America that is, nonetheless, beneficial in some instances.

One such case is Ramírez's and Olea's continued efforts to re-visit and research this field at the MFAH, and under geographical, geopolitical and narrative constructs originating in the United States and with Barr. The location of narratives and their re-writing is discussed by Gerardo Mosquera who evaluates its results:

No matter how valid a different and oppositional transcultural strategy might be within the dominant structure, it implicates a perennial condition of response that reproduces this hegemony. Although it contests it and still manages to take advantage of this structure much in the manner of the martial arts which, without arms, avail themselves of the strength of a more powerful opponent. It is necessary as well to invert the direction of the current, not by reversing a binary scheme of transference but rather by contributing to pluralisation in order to enrich and transform the existing situation. (28)

Mosquera's assessment allows the approach adopted by the curators to be read as overturning the flow of ideas between Europe, Latin America and the United States. However, their response remains steeped within a narrative that was created in the United States reaffirming hegemonic museum and historical power structures already in place. Both curators respond to Eurocentric and U.S. centric perceptions that have been established over the years contributing to this framework in equal measure as to contest it.

Through the inclusion of archival documents and the establishment of the ICAA, the MFAH attempts to partially remedy this situation and presents art from Latin America through a perspective that originates in that continent and from the point of view of artists and scholars including Ramírez and Olea. This extends to the writers and curators mentioned in the quote at the beginning of this chapter. All assert that artists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century attempted to find ways to contest conditions of neo-colonialism and created art that responded to local circumstances:

Confronted with entrenched oligarchies and highly uneven forms of capitalism, with precarious infrastructures for art and culture, as well as with the presence of native traditions and vernacular expressions, they [artists] adapted avant-garde procedures, transforming them to suit the realities of their local milieus. ("Prologue" XV)

This outlines the premise from which artists from Latin America created artworks and echoes that promulgated by Gómez Sicre who recognised local influences, such as those inherent in Afrocubanismo and artists influenced by pre-Columbian art. Rather than propagating global or international art, such as that evinced by Barr, artists considered their local influences to be of fundamental importance. Moreover, the aim was to create works that were traceable and relevant, rather than creating art that appealed to North American, and European audiences alone:

Our forward-looking pioneers proceeded to recalibrate the postulates of the avant-garde to fit the socio-political conditions of their pre-industrial countries. The notion of Latin America as the exotic *no-place* of the European imagination would be quickly replaced by the avant-garde chimera: art itself as a form of utopia. That is to say, art as embodying brand-new values that liberated it from its mere instrumental function and transformed it into a source of enjoyment and participation for the masses. ("A Highly" 3)

The glaring differences between, on the one hand, Barr's conception of quality art and prescribed aesthetics and, on the other, that of Ramírez's and Olea's constellation approach become apparent here. Their approach is rooted in the ideas of the artists as they developed and emerged in Latin America, while Barr sought to bring Latin American art closer to a Euro-centric conception to justify their inclusion



in the collection at MoMA. This is also true of Gómez-Sicre whose approach, although sensitive to local ideas, was still framed by Barr's insistence upon quality and aesthetics in artworks. Similarly, *Hispanic Art in the United States* underlined similar Euro-centric approaches tracing artworks by Latino artists to aesthetic criteria inherent in European and Latin American Modern Masters.

Ramírez points to artistic practices originating in movements including Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Neo-Plasticism, Constructivism, and Surrealism that were inverted once they reached Latin America ("A Highly" 3). The search for utopia in these movements connect them with that of the Latin American Avant-Garde. Nevertheless, once there, the function of art was re-appropriated. Far from the modernist postulates outlined previously, the curators insist that art acquired a function that excluded the need for an international visual language. The specificity under which art from Latin America is framed opens possibilities for new interpretations. At the same time, the constellations provide parameters within which it is possible to explore these claims.

The catalogue is perhaps one of the most important examples of this and illustrates the aim to canonise art from Latin America in the United States with the result that it partially legitimises the already established narrative and museum structures, as pointed out by Mosquera, since the curators respond to this condition. In the following pages, I will outline each constellation, as well as discuss and analyse their associated essays and documents.

## 5.2 The Constellations

### 5.2.1. Universal and Vernacular

Located throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the artists in this constellation rooted their art in autochthonous elements from their countries of origin and fused these with European modern ideas. This method was developed during extended

stays in Europe where artists were exposed to these concepts. Movements and manifestos that developed in Latin America, and that are particularly underlined in the catalogue, include 'The Anthropophagous Manifesto' which was written by the poet Oswald de Andrade (Brazil, 1890-1954) in 1928. He adopted a cannibalistic metaphor toward appropriation of European ideas and approaches.

Further, AfroCubanismo is highlighted as a significant movement. This has already been discussed in some detail in chapter one and echoes Gómez Sicre's selection criteria some sixty years earlier. The catalogue includes artists such as Eduardo Abela (1889-1965), Carlos Enríquez (1900-1957), and Antonio Gattorno (1904-1980) as significant contributors to this movement. Finally, the School of the South, a manifesto written by Torres-García is given most emphasis in this narrative as an early pioneering effort to invert European modernisms in Latin America (see fig.40). In her essay, Ramírez points to all artists in this constellation as observers of a centre/periphery tension:

What unites these artists with Torres-García and his students is their shared experience of marginality, which originates in their status as artists working on the peripheries of the centers of cultural and political power (even if they were physically in centers, such as Barcelona and New York). ("Inversions" 73)

This quote asserts that although artists were part of the art world in Europe, their status remained peripheral due to their origin. For example, Torres-García lived in Europe for over forty years before returning to Uruguay to establish his synthesis of geometry, abstraction and mysticism with pre-Columbian visual emblems evoking a universal language of symbols and signs (see fig.41). His approach reached Argentina, where Xul Solar (1887-1963), Gonzalo Fonseca (1922-1997), Francisco Matto (1911-1995), and Julio Alpuy (1919-2009) are underscored as having incorporated Torres-García's theories in their art (see figs.42, 43, 44, 45).

Solar's works are featured as inversions that combine poetry and painting.

Olea expands on Solar's practice beyond its usual interpretation through Expressionism and compares the artist's approach with that of Irish writer James Joyce (1882-1941), Paul Klee (Switzerland, 1879-1940), and Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina, 1899-1986). Olea asserts that the artist 'shared with Borges an interest in magic, dreams, Eastern philosophies, and the human brotherhood' ("Xul's" 65). Borges remains a key figure in Spanish language literature and is credited for his contribution to visual art through Solar's interest in linguistic innovation and play ("Xul's" 66). Solar, as all artists in this constellation, was also influenced by pre-Columbian art that he observed during several museum visits throughout Europe in the 1920s. This was a direct effect of the displacement of cultural artefacts from Latin America to museums in Europe.

Similarly, Torres-García rooted his practice in Constructive Universalism merged with pre-Columbian themes. His conception differed from the Mexican Muralists in that Torres-García viewed pre-Columbian themes as 'translation[s] of ideas into signs through geometry' ("Inversions" 74). On the other hand, the Mexican Muralists saw this culture as 'nationalist ideologies' and 'revindication of indigenous cultures', according to Ramírez ("Inversions" 74). The process in both cases remains the same, namely an inversion of modern ideas in the context of Latin America and a rooting in pre-Columbian themes.

The *Manifiesto of the Union of Mexican Workers, Technicians, Painters and Sculptors* (1923) written by Siqueiros and others, is included in the documents section of the catalogue. Similarly, artworks by this artist are part of this constellation, as are illustrations created by Rivera, and Orozco for the movement's magazine *El Machete*. The selective inclusion of artworks by these artists and the deliberate omission of Mexican Muralism as a key movement illustrate the re-focusing of art from Latin America proposed by the curators.

In the case of Afrocubanismo, it is Abela, Enríquez, and Gattorno that are particularly highlighted as vital proponents of this movement, as is the magazine *Revista de Avance*. As already mentioned, the magazine was published concurrently with the Cuban artistic Avant-Garde movement which published 'The Negro Question', a key text underlining this movement's intellectual rooting and approach in the racial and cultural identity of Cuba. The assertion of authenticity and re-claiming of authority over race and culture, forms an underlying strand in Afrocubanismo's manifesto.

Finally, the Brazilian anthropophagy manifesto, written by de Andrade, marks another nexus in this constellation and a theoretical grounding of the Avant-Garde in Latin America. In Andrade's case, the metaphorical eating, swallowing and assimilation of imported ideas to adjust them to the Brazilian situation, arose as a response to colonisation. This included the imposition of religion through the Jesuits and that of government structures through the Portuguese royal court (Nunes 58). The purpose of the anthropophagic manifesto is reiterated by Nunes: 'The antropófagos, en route to Utopia, considered politics the redistribution of social goods, as it returned power, divested of any authoritarian aura, to society' (61) In other words, the metaphor of cannibalism became a form of, not only appropriation, but also, resistance against imposed rules and the reorganisation of power.

In all cases included in this constellation, the artists rooted their approach in their respective countries and appropriated modernist European ideas by critically inverting them in their work. The contents of this constellation also touch upon Gómez Sicre's approach outlined in chapters one and two, which placed emphasis upon pre-Columbian themes in art from Latin America, and repeats his support for Afrocubanismo. Nevertheless, this time, the approach is not steeped in diplomacy and the creation of markets for art from Latin America in the United States. Rather,

the curators of this exhibition start with the manifestos and theoretical ideas preceding the creation of artworks. This approach embeds art historical discourses within the exhibition and refocuses hitherto less considered narratives.

### 5.2.2. Play and Grief

This constellation discusses artists and movements that were pushing the acceptable standards of what was perceived as good or quality art. Their sometimes playful, other times aggressive, approach was aimed at hierarchies and conceptions of quality art imported from Europe that were long established and entrenched in Latin American societies. Their aim was to break with rules, establish critical frameworks, and point to the shortcomings in their respective surroundings. Most of the artists in this constellation eventually became co-opted within institutionalism, or fled dictatorial regimes in their countries.

The installation of artworks in this section wound through the interior architecture of the MFAH's Caroline Wiess Law building. It was partially underscored by red walls evoking a visual break from the previous constellation, 'Touch and Gaze' (see fig.46). A digital version of the artist books by *El Techo de la Ballena (The Roof of the Whale)*, discussed below, was included in this constellation via a computer where the visitor was encouraged to leaf through the pages and read explanations and translations in English and Spanish (Sánchez). This offered visitors an additional layer of engagement and understanding of this constellation and the artworks exhibited.

*El Techo de la Ballena (The Roof of the Whale)* was a group of artists founded in 1961 in Caracas, Venezuela. It was most active over three years, and dispersed toward the end of the decade. Marked by a combative attitude, the artists sought to abolish the idea of bourgeois culture that looked to Europe for validation.

Rama highlights Carlos Contramaestre (1933-1996) as one of this movement's most committed protagonists who stayed until the group's disintegration (121). The catalogue includes the facsimile of part of the introduction written by Adriano González León for the exhibition *Homenaje a la necrofilia (A Tribute to Necrophilia)*, 1962.

Contramaestre's paintings exhibited there included materials such as intestines, ointments, powdered rubber, shrouds, and zippers that are thrown over wooden boards and cease 'to be a collector's beautiful piece' (León 485). He continues to assert that 'the pride of a museum, transforming itself as it does into an arid persecution of the human condition, (is) rightfully placed in the very heart of squalor' (León 485). The artist's processes and materials used de-construct the perceived good tastes assumed by the bourgeoisie and the collectability of artworks once they are rendered aesthetically displeasing. This poses an example of the curators' idea of a radical vanguard that sought to achieve non-aesthetic goals and introduce criticism in their social sphere.

Argentina also features comprehensively in this constellation. Developments of artistic practices throughout the 1960s are discussed in two essays. One deals with emerging responses to Informalism, between the years 1957-1965, while the other looks closely at Luis Felipe Noé's (Argentina, b.1933) writings that grounded his artistic practice.

In the first essay, Marcelo Pacheco charts how artists broke with visual traditions that were perceived to be good art. He states that this originated in the conception of an international canon (129). This recalls Barr's stance on the use of sophisticated materials and a universal visual language. These criteria were dismantled through diverse inexpensive resources that were incorporated into artworks. Pacheco cites, for example, Alberto Heredia's (1924-2000) *Cajas de*

*Camembert (Camembert Boxes)*, 1962-64 (see fig.47). He outlines how fifteen of these containers were filled with every day, cheap objects (131). Furthermore, the idea of positive creation was countered by artists such as Rubén Sanantonín (1919-1969) who destroyed almost all his artworks in 1967, in an act that opposed the commodification of art and the role of the artist as producer (133). These irreverent undertakings critiqued the inclusion of artists in institutional circuits and their becoming part of collections.

In the essay written by Olea, Noé's role as critic and practitioner of pop art in Argentina is the central theme. Specifically, in the context of dictatorships and precarious political conditions in that country throughout the 1960s, Olea describes the artist's practice as resisting homogeneity, power and established rules:

Noé found it necessary to adopt a position of open-minded commitment in which concerning oneself with both theory and praxis meant, among other things, denying the universality of language, radically rejecting power, and defying society. ("The Anti-Aesthetics" 143)

The artist's strategy consisted of deliberately employing anti-aesthetic elements in his paintings (see fig.48). Olea does not discuss the artworks; however, he focuses his essay on Noé's radical approach to creating expressions of his ideas. Luis Camnitzer identifies Noé as a key artist whose works

Awakened artistic and political consciousness in upcoming artists in a way that would only have been delayed by subscribing to the waves of Pop Art and Minimalism that were taking place in North America. ("An Ode" 155-156)

Camnitzer reiterates Olea's insistence upon the artist's political awareness, and extends upon Noé's impact on subsequent generations of artists who were mindful of the urgency of their practices, and did not follow the decidedly non-political artistic movements from the North.

Similarly, the works by Beatriz González (b. 1938) are discussed in a republished essay by Marta Traba. The author's assessment of González's work was

written for an exhibition in 1977 at the Museo de Arte Moderno/ Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá, Colombia. Traba defends González's body of work as one that is playing with the desires of the bourgeoisie in Colombia to own artworks (149). By painting imitations of Old Masters on furniture including beds, mirrors, and coffee tables, among other, she renders them unusable while referencing art history's most famous paintings. This includes a depiction of a Madonna and Child for *Gratia plena (tocador)* (*Full of Grace, a Dressing Table*), 1971, which the artist painted on a vanity chest (see fig.49). Traba views this as a critical approach toward the consumer culture inherent in the bourgeoisie and states that González

Sought out fetish-fragments already established in society in order to confront real myths [and] desecrate not the world but merely the prevailing system in Colombia, exposing the system's hidden apparatus of pompous, bombastic narratives, which are brought down to the level of artistic support. (150-151)

Mirroring the assessment of Noé's work by Olea above, Traba attributes González with irreverence towards established structures in Colombia. The artist used well-known iconography that she reworked into mundane, every day furniture and painted these images in flat, garish colours far removed from the intricate brushstrokes often described by art historians when discussing the original painting of European Masters. By inserting art historically significant imagery such as this on to otherwise useful furniture, González levels functionality and art as equally important and, in this case, impractical.

Play and Grief enacts woe, as in the case of *El Techo de la Ballena* and Sanantonín, or overt mischievousness, as in the case of Noé, Heredia, and González. Political and institutional critique through anti-aesthetic approaches underpin this constellation. All artists attacked the systems of art and its very foundations of quality, deconstructing perceived standards through creating artworks with cheap,



mundane materials devaluing their appeal through destruction, misappropriation, and disassociation of objects.

### 5.2.3. Progression and Rupture

This node emphasises theories of art that were established in the southern Cone and, again, includes Torres-García. Other artists represented here are Oiticica, and Lygia Clark (Brazil, 1920-1988). This constellation consists of two essays. The first, by Ramírez, offers a reading of Constructivist art between 1920 and 1960, and through artworks by Torres-García. Ramírez relates this to Grupo Madí, and Neoconcretismo which took place in Argentina and Brazil respectively. She relates these movements further to Grupo Ruptura, based in São Paulo in the 1950s, and underlines parallels between all movements and Constructivism ("Vital Structures" 192). This concerns the idealism inherent in their approach toward art and theory that collapsed the tensions between object and subject, or the artwork and the viewer ("Vital Structures" 197). This means that artworks are instrumentalised serving a purpose that exceeds their aesthetic value.

For example, Oiticica's series of *Bólides* (1963-1966), consist of glass containers holding colour pigments and infusions of odour that embody a "universal idea" ("Vital Structures" 197; see fig.50). Ramírez claims that this echoes Torres-García's universal visual language that was inspired by Constructivist ideas and which he employed in his work ("Vital Structures" 197). In both cases, the personal visual language employed by the artists, is replaced by concepts imbuing the artworks with new meaning beyond their immediate visual representation.

The collapse between object and subject, or viewer and artwork, is further illustrated by Clark's practice that involves the engagement of viewers in her works with her series of *Bichos (Creatures)* 1960-1963 ("Vital Structures" 195; see fig.51).

These small-scale aluminium sculptures consist of hinged geometric parts that allow the viewer to manipulate them into different shapes. Thus, the passive viewer becomes actively involved with the artwork creating a subjective experience.

Ramírez also mentions kinetic art in Venezuela, which similarly uses optical and colour combinations to create movement in their artworks. This sensation is activated through the viewer's changing position in front of the work. Artists who worked with kinetic art include Carlos Cruz-Díez (b. 1923) and Jesús Rafael Soto (1923-2005). They are discussed in more depth as part of 'Vibrational and Stationary' and 'Touch and Gaze' below. Ramírez concludes that the movements discussed in her essay are disparate and not reducible to 'one single proposal, history, or category' ("Vital Structures" 200). Thus, she creates an arc that transcends borders, periods, and movements, creating an, at first, seemingly incongruent reading. Nevertheless, the parallels and overlaps in her essay echo those present throughout the exhibition and through the constellation model. Ramírez's essay underpins shifts and parallels in the approaches toward art as they emerged and developed across Latin America.

This is followed by Ana Maria Belluzzo's treatment of Grupo Ruptura and its engagement with concrete art. Ruptura originated in São Paulo in 1952 and was inaugurated through an exhibition that was staged at the Museum of Modern Art in that city. Together with the show, a manifesto was published. Ruptura sought to introduce new 'knowledge deducible from concepts, situating it above opinion and demanding, for its review, a previous knowledge' (Charoux 494). Belluzzo points to the group's rejection of expressions of individualism and opinion to create works that were rooted only in knowledge (203). She underlines the aim to eliminate the artist's hand in the concrete art movement and links them to the Russian constructivists since their ideas were also rooted in a non-individualistic approach and industrialism

(205-206).

The manifesto also borrowed from universal principles including geometric forms that are rendered in a technical manner. This is visible in the work *Idéia visível* (*Visible Idea*), 1956, by Waldemar Cordeiro (see fig.52). This painting consists of a rich red background on which are painted precise lines in black and white. Their arrangement mirror in form and size. The lines consist of swooping semi-circles that lead into straight lines and are drawn with utmost precision. What remains is an image that depicts an idea, as stated in the title and in the manifesto. The principles expounded in it find a visual realisation in this painting.

'Progression and Rupture' incorporates tensions. This constellation is rooted in core concerns by movements that introduced art that was devoid of individual influences and dealt solely with ideas. At the same time, the subjective experience of artworks through the collapse between viewer and object are also explored here. The experience of artworks in Oiticica's and Clark's case is in contrast with Grupo Ruptura's insistence upon knowledge and disinterested engagement with the creation of ideas. The personal experiences created by the Venezuelan kinetic artists are also contrasting with Ruptura's vision, however, only concern their visual perception precluding touch. This constellation overlaps with 'Cryptic and Committed', which concerns the development of conceptualism and ideas in art from Latin America and is discussed later.

Ramírez intensified her interest in Oiticica's work after *Inverted Utopias*. The ICAA organised the retrospective *Helio Oiticica- The Body of Colour* in 2006. The following year, it travelled to Tate Modern in London. Similarly, in 2011, a retrospective of Cruz-Díez's work, *Color in Space and Time* was organised, accompanied by a catalogue. Finally, in 2014, an exhibition of Soto's work, and the installation of his *Penetrable* took place at this institution. It becomes apparent that

*Inverted Utopias* formed the basis for the ICAA's and MFAH's programming in subsequent years, making this exhibition its most important one in terms of providing a starting point from which a programme of exhibitions and publications was developed.

#### 5.2.4. Vibrational and Stationary

This constellation spans from the 1930s in Mexico to the 1960s in Venezuela. One of its essays examines the relationship between Siqueiros, Rivera, and the Russian filmmaker Serguei Eisenstein (1898-1948). It closely dissects how Mexican Muralism was influential in Eisenstein's film making. This is followed by an essay dealing with Venezuela's kinetic art movement, and another that is dedicated to the work of Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt 1912- 1994), a German-born immigrant to Venezuela, who created three-dimensional artworks using material such as wire and paper to investigate the potential of the line in space.

Olivier Debroyse offers a renewed reading of Mexican Muralism and its influence upon Eisenstein who spent time in California and Mexico in the early 1930s (239). In his quest to find a new visual language in film, Eisenstein was influenced by the Muralists and their pictorial solutions to architectural challenges. Debroyse cites, for example, Rivera's use of the space at the Secretaría de Educación Pública/Secretariat of Public Education where the artist used vertical and horizontal lines to relay his visual ideas in a sequential format (241). Eisenstein took on these strategies and translated them into his films showing the varied geographical and arid landscapes between the low lands and high planes of Mexico (242). Debroyse's essay contributes to a re-reading of Mexican Muralism as a movement that dealt with pictorial and architectural challenges and that influenced artists in other fields, rather than emphasising their social and political aims that are so often reiterated in

narratives and exhibitions of this movement.

Adopting a more political and social approach, Ariel Jiménez delves into the history of Venezuela and its racial division between a white elite minority and a mestizo majority. The less predominant presence of a pre-Columbian past influenced a different modernism to that of, for example, Mexico, where this history is prevalent. Cruz-Díez outlines this perennial situation:

I come from a country that is “pre-Columbianly underdeveloped”, in which great historic traditions do not exist...Our legacy, though significant, did not reach the level of development that it did in Peru, Mexico, Central America, and even Colombia. (Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Díez* 21-22)

Already, Venezuela is highlighted as a country in which influences of its autochthonous past are not readily available to inspire artists. This contrasts with, for example, Torres-García’s approach that is steeped in pre-Columbian ideas. Jiménez, therefore, focuses on the emergence and integration of mestizo and white elites through which, it was hoped, to evoke a different utopia (“Neither Here” 248). Jiménez examines the art of Soto and Cruz-Díez whom the author identifies as most successful examples of Venezuela’s modernism. He traces influences to Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), in the case of Soto, and Josef Albers (1888-1976), in the case of Cruz-Díez (“Neither Here” 248). This comparison roots these Venezuelan artists in a universal conception rather than a referential practice that was entrenched in locality.

In this case, the concerns for these artists were rooted in art that was based on aesthetic, architectural, and pictorial interests. Jiménez underlines this chasm and the ultimate miscarriage of modernism, which failed to respond to this country’s reality (“Neither Here” 253). In an extended interview with Jiménez, however, Cruz-Díez talks about the social function of his artworks, which was a central concern throughout his career as painter, and in later years through his series of public installations (Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Díez*, 76). Jiménez states that his later works also

'aspire to be more efficient in its social function...designed for a very specific audience...as was the art in the churches and palaces of yesteryear' (Jiménez, *Carlos Cruz-Díez*, 280). Crucially, Jiménez attributes Soto and Cruz-Díez with successful iterations of modernism in Venezuela:

They are, in spite of their contradiction, the only assured gestures, the only concrete and positive achievements of a modern conviction that has been unable to find the necessary passage from the utopia to the unsuspected complexity of Venezuelan reality. ("Neither Here" 253)

Jiménez ultimately underscores the chasm between art as utopia and the reality in which it exists. While underscoring the artists with successful iterations of modernism, he laments its ultimate failure in Venezuela.

Following this critical engagement with Venezuela's modernism, Gego is the subject of Luis Pérez Oramas' essay. He asserts that Gego's work does not belong to the kinetic realm, rather it stands in opposition to it as her artworks move in space rather than create colour and retinal illusions (255). He emphasises her works as lines that transgress drawing and lead into the architectural space (257). He cites *Tejeduras (Weavings)*, 1988, a series of paper weavings, underlining the rigorous analysis with which Gego undertook her works (see fig.53).

Oramas praises this series as one that ended where kinetic art began (258). He sees in Gego's works a countering of modernism's urge to root works in universal ideas by creating effects that react subjectively with the viewer and refer to locality and the architectural space in which they are installed (258). The artist's rendering of her works also considered the audience as much as the space and the architecture. The author's analysis rings true in some way, for example, that Gego's work is indeed in quiet opposition to that of Cruz-Díez and Soto. While not rooting her art in the idea of universalism, she played with lines, space and the idea of three-dimensional drawing.

Gego's *Reticulárea* (1975) was the first acquisition for the collection of artworks from Latin America at the newly established ICAA in 2001. Her work was subject of one of the first exhibitions at the MFAH. *Questioning the Line: Gego, A Selection, 1955-90* (2002) was accompanied by a symposium and several publications including *Questioning the Line: Gego in Context* (2003); *Gego: Between transparency and the Invisible* (2006); and, *Untangling the Web: Gego's "Reticulárea"- An Anthology of Critical Response* (2013). Furthermore, the ICAA's strategy to incorporate archival documents is illustrated in *Sabiduras and Other Texts by Gego* (2005), which contains writings and facsimiles of the artist's personal archive. This string of publications and accompanying events underline the ICAA's focus on this artist and the creation of scholarship surrounding her work. As already outlined, this was also the case with other artists including Oiticica and Cruz-Díez.

This constellation highlights Venezuela as a significant proponent of modernism. Notwithstanding this, Jiménez is the most critical voice. He describes modernism there as a failure, save for the practices undertaken by Soto and Cruz-Díez. Concerns for social realities influenced the work of Cruz-Díez in particular, as has been shown. On the other hand, Gego investigated the line in space rather than Venezuela's local situation. In all cases, the vibrational and stationary dichotomy is investigated not only in artistic terms, but also in the political and social juxtapositioning of Venezuela's reality.

The concern with film and movement in Debroise's essay establishes a new connector between Mexican Muralism and film-making. The influence of sequential large-scale mural paintings on Eisenstein's practice as cinematographer underlines visual solutions first presented in Mexican Muralism. This cross-fertilization of artistic practices poses the vibrational in film against the stationary in Muralism and

painting. This essay contributes to a welcome re-reading of this well-known movement within new contexts.

#### 5.2.5. Touch and Gaze

This section contains fewer essays. However, it provides extensive photographic documentation of the works installed at the MFAH. The overlap with other constellations including 'Vibrational and Stationary', become apparent here as both constellations explore interactions between artwork and viewer.

This group investigates creations that become part of the viewer's visual and tactile experience. Integral to this are light, material, and the ability to enter an installation to become part of the artwork. Kinetic artists such as Soto and Cruz-Díez are, again, included in this constellation with their large-scale installations including Soto's *Penetrable Amarillo/ Yellow Penetrable* (1973) and Cruz-Díez's *Cromosaturación/Chromosaturación* (1965). Both installations are represented through numerous photographs included in the catalogue in which people are shown submerged in the artworks. The image of Soto's installation shows the flow of yellow nylon strings that are attached to a frame that is suspended five meters above the ground and is located outside the Caroline Wiess Law Building (see fig.54). On the other hand, Cruz-Díez's rooms, pregnant with rich green, purple, and all shades of red and yellow, show people peering into the space and walking through it (see fig.55). The elements of touch and gaze are combined into a multitude of experiences and are integral to this section of the catalogue.

Sánchez explores the display of this constellation at the MFAH, which began at the entrance to the museum with Soto's installation. This formed an optional beginning or end for the visitor, as it provided an immersive sensory experience that set the tone for the remaining exhibition, or ended with a tactile interaction. Sánchez



also cites artworks that were reproduced to allow the visitor to physically interact with them. This included replicas of Oiticica's *Parangolé*; as well as Clark's *Luvras Sensoriais/Sensory Gloves*; and Gego's *Bichos/Creature* (see fig.56). The visitor was encouraged to interact with these models to recreate sensory experience. This shows that the curators remained faithful to the artists' ideas in the realisation of this exhibition.

Neo-Concrete artists such as Lygia Pape (1927-2004), Clark, and Oiticica are subject of an essay written by Herkenhoff in which he looks closely at touch and perception of artworks through philosophical musings and the Neo-Concrete manifesto that was co-written by these artists. The manifesto poses an oppositional stance to the concrete artists and Grupo Ruptura, discussed in the constellation 'Progression and Rupture', and their insistence on rational thinking:

Rationalism robs art of its autonomy and substitutes the artwork's own non-transferable qualities with notions of scientific objectivity; thus the concepts of form, space, time, and structure- which in the language of the arts have an existential, emotional, and affective significance- are confused with the theoretical approach that science makes of them. (Gullar 496)

The idea of tactility and observation as integral to artworks and their subjective experience comes to the fore in this quote. This is also reiterated by Herkenhoff who establishes touch to be an essential ingredient to experiencing artworks and the world (327-328). Herkenhoff discusses Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). This was the first significant philosophical consideration of the body and human sense experience, informing much of the Neo-Concrete movement (327). The results of the manifesto are realized in several of the artworks discussed in his essay.

For example, Pape's *Divisor/Divide* (1968) consists of a 400-yard square of white linen with holes cut out through which people put their heads (see fig.57). The square and cut out placeholders restrict the participant's movements and creates a

division between people. Herkenhoff highlights how this creates 'otherness' in the participants as they become part of a whole, yet, are limited by the holes in the sheet (334). Moreover, by being part of the artwork, the participants' bodies are fully involved in its creation and experience.

This constellation emphasised the tactile, and perhaps playful, experiences evoked through interaction with artworks. Most importantly, the visitors were encouraged to engage with the physical objects and the ideas proposed by the artists. This evoked the social interaction through non-aesthetic goals underlined by the curators, rather than contemplating visual concerns alone in the works.

#### 5.2.6. Cryptic and Committed

The final constellation made a case for conceptualism in Latin America and further underscores the efforts to imprint new approaches and knowledge to the understanding of this field in the United States. This section primarily focuses on art and artists from the southern Cone with forays into Brazil. Chile and Argentina are represented in this segment of the catalogue with extended essays. Ramírez traces the origins and practices of conceptualism throughout Latin America and away from predominant conceptions propagated in the United States and Europe. Olea discusses works by León Ferrari (Argentina, 1920-2013) linking his practice with literature and language.

The section begins with a translation by Olea of one of Ferrari's *El cuadro escrito/The Written Painting* (1964-65) and is printed on opposite pages allowing both texts to be read in Spanish and English simultaneously (356-357) (see fig.58). This is followed by a translated letter from German philosopher Max Bense (1910-1990) to the Brazilian artist Waldemar Cordeiro (1925-1973). Bense responds to this artist's *Popcretos* proposing the amalgamation of pop art and concrete painting by

fusing objects of consumption with concrete approaches to painting. The inclusion of archival documentation becomes apparent here again.

Camila Maroja and Abigail Winograd highlight Ramírez's essay on Conceptualism in Latin America as the most important feature of the exhibition. The authors recognise that Ramírez highlights political aspects and their response to locally specific situations (93).<sup>30</sup> The overarching narrative presented by Ramírez, which disregards borders, is indicative of the aim to move away from nations as a defining criterion by which to judge Avant-Garde art in Latin America.

According to Ramírez, while minimalism was instrumental in the development of conceptualism in North America and Europe, the preceding movements in Latin America included Informalism, Pop Art and Geometric Abstraction ("Tactics" 433). She further divides her essay into three time periods. These include the years from 1960 to 1974 in which Argentinean, Brazilian and South American artists who lived and worked in New York were active; 1975 to 1980 with conceptual practices appearing in Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico; and finally, from the late 1980s until the late 1990s, when developments occurred in Chile.

She cites artists including Clark, Oiticica, Antonio Caro (Colombia, b.1950), Luis Camnitzer (Uruguay, b.1937), and Tucuman Arde, an artist collective active between 1966 and 1968 in Argentina, as proponents of these periods. Tucuman Arde is also highlighted by Camnitzer as a key artist collective that initiated conceptualism in Latin America together with an aesthetic approach enshrined in resistance and rebellion ("Art and Politics" 63). Ramírez identifies common traits including references to the diverse social and political contexts at the time, pre-

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<sup>30</sup> A comprehensive survey of conceptualism in Latin America has been written by Luis Camnitzer and was published in 2007. This book provides an in-depth assessment and historical analysis of the subject. For more information see *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, University of Texas Press, Austin.

dating politically mined art such as feminism and multiculturalism produced in the 1970s and 1980s ("Tactics" 427-428).

Moreover, rather than the dematerialisation of the art object, prevalent in North America and Europe, conceptualism in Latin America re-inscribed objects with altered meanings and used language to evince change and provoke responses from spectators ("Tactics" 428; "Art and Politics" 64). Thus, the object took on a central, yet not necessarily aesthetic role. Ramírez goes on to consider conceptualism in Latin America as a series of local responses to interventions and developmentalist attitudes originating in the United States ("Tactics" 425). She also establishes this as a way of creating art that moves away from the art object and its inherent idea, to a proposal that advocates to think 'about art and its relationship to society' ("Tactics" 425). Similarly, Camnitzer asserts that his role involves using 'art as a tool for social change' ("Exile" 24).

In this sense, art becomes a discursive tool to critique the production, dissemination, and reception of ideas and artworks in their social and political context. Miguel A. López critiques Ramírez's approach as tracing a 'narrow and dichotomous path of analysis, indebted to essentialist nuances that fail to establish a genuine antagonism.' He points to the curator's opposing stance to conceptualism in North America and Europe against which she values conceptualism in Latin America. He states that she positions the latter against the former giving legitimising power to the North American conception of what determines art's visibility. López identifies this approach as one that reaffirms Latin American art to be subversive within a United States narrative. Ramírez does indeed position herself within this discourse as she operates from the ICAA and within the United States museum and scholarly network.

Ramírez also underlines Waldemar Cordeiro's *popcretos* as part of conceptualism in Brazil ("Tactics" 433) (see fig.59). This leads into the following document which is a translation of Bense's letter. This is a response to a conversation between Bense and Cordeiro regarding *popcretos*. In his letter, Bense offers an aesthetic analysis of the works, and poses further ideas to their inherent dialectic, by fusing both, pop and concrete art, into one object. He states that 'the idea of ordinary scrap material is annihilated by the idea of ordering.' In other words, the fusion of ready-made objects with concrete elements creates a tension within the work. Bense concludes by stating that 'new categories of things emerge in your work. [...] this emergence can be achieved just as an aesthetic process' (400). In addition to the idea of conceptualism as a critical vehicle, Bense confirms that Cordeiro's practice is also aesthetically valuable.

Conversely, the translation of Ferrari's *El cuadro escrito/The Written Painting* underlines the use of language and literature in this artist's practice. Olea discusses Ferrari's practice as an amalgamation of literary influences. These span across writings by, for example, William Blake (1757-1827) and the Bible allowing Ferrari to excavate 'the most diverse strata of historic phraseology, hinting that the artist is nothing but a mere manipulator of meaning conveyed through texts and images' ("León Ferrari" 411). Similarly, Camnitzer asserts Ferrari's work as a tautological exercise that describes itself through the text, and, at the same time, inscribes the viewer with expectations of the artwork ("Revisiting Tautology" 159). Ferrari uses language to convey ideas. His artwork emphasises the linguistic content in conceptual art in Latin America, linking to Ramírez's assertion that communication and language are key components.

The curator's re-visiting of established narratives is perhaps *Inverted Utopias-Avant-Garde Art in Latin America's* most valuable contribution to the canon of art

from Latin America in the United States. This section poses an interesting review of predominant historical narratives that place the origins of conceptualism in North America and Europe. 'Cryptic and Committed' alters this account. This constellation makes visible a series of ruptures and re-considerations of previous avant-gardes with the result that conceptualism became a way of forming new ways of critical engagement with political and social circumstances in Latin America. However, as has been shown, Ramírez's approach embeds this movement and indeed art from Latin America throughout the exhibition and catalogue, within a narrative that is located in the United States. This traces a narrative that remains dependent upon hegemonic legitimisers to provide a counter history.

## 6. Responses and Reception

The response to Olea's and Ramírez's concerted efforts to review the history of art from Latin America in the United States was met with great interest. Guy Brett, British scholar and expert on art from Latin America, stresses how this exhibition unearths previously unknown histories and artists presenting them to an audience in the United States. The article provides brief insight into the constellations. The review uses extensive quotes by Ramírez and Olea from the catalogue and provides an overview of the exhibition.

Nevertheless, Brett underlines that one of the exhibition's strengths rests in its 'extended view of individual creativity, communicating something of the intellectual ferment in which so many of these artists worked' ("Inverted Utopias"). This is detectable through the constellations and the contexts in which the artworks are discussed as part of the essays, as well as through the installation of the artworks at the MFAH as outlined by Sánchez. Similarly, he praises that the installation allows the visitor to 'discover the intense visualization of violence, chaos,

and suffering' in works by several artists. He mentions Débora Arango (Colombia 1907-2005), Carlos Raquel Rivera (Puerto Rico 1923-1999), and Antonio Berni (Argentina 1905-1981) among others. He states that these, and artists including Oscar Bony (Argentina, 1941-2002) and Roberto Jacoby (Argentina b. 1944) are not well known outside of their countries of origin. This highlights the curators' aim to include hitherto unknown artists as significant proponents of the vanguard in Latin America.

Brett's assessment also highlights the potential of this exhibition to create monographic shows of these artists in future. This was indeed the result as already outlined in detail previously. Brett's review stresses the curatorial framework for *Inverted Utopias* and focuses on individual artists and their expansive practices. At the same time, he underlines the attempt to draw out critical art histories proposed through the exhibition.

A thorough analysis of the constellations is provided by Maroja and Winograd. Their analysis of the constellation model concludes that it presents:

An original curatorial concept that mounted serious challenges to the chronologies, geographies, and canons of Western art by highlighting artists, relationships, and aesthetic proposals that were internal, parallel, or adjacent to existing narratives of the modern. (92)

The writers observe that the exhibition sought to re-write the various forms of modernisms that were used to explain art from Latin America in the United States and Europe, and decidedly moves away from the idea that art from Latin America embodies 'the fantastic' and related ideas of the surreal (83-84). They identify the omission of expected histories surrounding Mexican Muralism as a valid attempt to re-focus the narrative surrounding this movement.

Conversely, Anna Indych-López critiques the omission of this history and singles out Frida Kahlo as a yet more significant oversight. The author states that this weakens the argument of inverting utopias by excluding major figures and art

movements. Ramírez addresses these omissions, especially in the United States context, in her introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue:

We must consider the conventionalism that stubbornly corrals these trends in the exclusive categories of Indigenism and Figurativism, as if we were condemned to a sort of *historic brainlessness*. The same operates with regard to the category of so-called political art, crassly understood as the explicit denunciation of social issues disseminated by the tireless manifestations of socialist realism. Such biases are undoubtedly anchored in a fetishistic fixation of the art markets for a clichéd period: 1920-1945. While the significance of these years is unquestionable, the immobility of the hobbyhorses at play in auction-houses and the mainstream press is not only suspect but it hinders, as time goes by, other possible approaches to the production under consideration. (emphasis in the original text, "A Highly" 2)

Correspondingly to Gómez Sicre's rejection of Mexican Muralism, and the rise in popularity of Frida Kahlo perpetuated through a thriving art market in the United States throughout the 1980s, Ramírez and Olea push against commodified and entrenched approaches toward art from Latin America. Crucially, they reject closed-down narratives created in the United States that disallow for art from Latin America to be viewed in a critical field. Instead, through the introduction of unknown artists, such as those cited by Brett, art from Latin America in the United States is subject to review.

Similarly to Maroja's and Winograd's observation, Indyk-López points to the shift of focus from figuration and surrealism toward abstraction and conceptualism as an underlying feature of the Avant-Garde in Latin America. She also points out that 'figuration and politics are not eschewed but recontextualised as products of a dialogue among a variety of modes of production and aesthetic strategies.' Following this assertion she suggests that the inclusion of artworks by European and North American artists would have supported the argument posited by the curators, and provided a fruitful dialogue that questioned more successfully the status quo of European Modernism versus the Avant-Garde in Latin America. The writer also



makes a persuasive argument about the premise from which the curators have defined the inclusion of some artworks over others:

The curators seek to negate the subordinate status of Latin American art by demonstrating how the artists included in the exhibition played an integral role in the development of global modernism. While their efforts are laudatory, their claims are perhaps at times overstated. By making implicit aesthetic value judgements and claiming that these avant-garde movements rival European modernism, they are in danger of falling prey to the same qualitative logic they are supposedly critiquing. (Indych-López)

This quote echoes quality judgements made by Gómez-Sicre, Barr, Livingstone and Beardsley discussed in chapter one, two and four. The selection criteria by these curators was based upon modernist values and a Eurocentric framework. Indych-López points to this in Ramírez's and Olea's approach in that theirs remains somewhat linked to these conceptions. This imbues the exhibition with an attempt at including art from Latin America in a narrative that remains located in the United States and echoes López's critique above. Nonetheless, the curators are unlikely to disagree with this as their approach responds to this situation specifically.

Indych-López continues to critique the 'one-dimensional forward or reverse drive' that is presented as part of the exhibitions' argument that 'risks obscuring the complexity of artistic production on both sides of the Atlantic.' Overall, she points to this as its most simplistic aspect, despite the constellation framework which acts as a questioning device throughout the exhibition.

This is countered by Maroja and Winograd who underline the constellations and their effect as questioning 'the essentialism of Euro-North American modernism, which located the authenticity of modernity outside of Latin America' (91) In a similar vein, Jose Emilio Burucúa and Mario H. Gradowczyk attribute the constellation model with the potential to create multiple and flexible networks that ultimately destabilise engrained narratives (4-5). The result of this is the continued and valuable struggle to conquer truth, freedom and equality (14). This is unquestionably

the motivation for Ramírez and Olea and also rests at the heart of their curatorial strategy.

The reviews by Maroja and Winograd, Burucúa and Gradowczyk, and Indych-López are opposing and indicate their differing methodologies. While Maroja and Winograd, as well as Burucúa and Gradowczyk approach the evaluation of this exhibition from a Latin American perspective, Indych-López does so from the point of view of a history written in the United States. This scholar has furthermore published several books and articles on Mexican Muralism throughout her career. The show's strategies, including the constellation model as questioning device and the omission of already written narratives, become the points of contention and that of approval. This highlights the exhibition's strongest and weakest aspects depending on the review, and the research conducted by the respective writers. In all cases, critiquing the hegemony of Eurocentric criteria remains at the core of the curators' strategy.

Daniel Quiles points to the increased efforts by numerous scholars in Latin American art to distance this field from essentialist definitions that additionally identify it with exoticism and neo-primitivism (66). He points to the show's emphasis on 'privileged wealthier, cosmopolitan capitals' leaving countries including Paraguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, and other Central American nations almost unrepresented (67-68). This creates, according to Quiles, new peripheries within this networked system and presents an inevitable lack in this exhibition (65).

Ramírez explains these absences as European practices originating in movements such as Cubism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism were not successfully inverted in these countries leading to an impasse in artistic practices and academic pursuits of new ideas and theories ("A Highly" 4). Crucially, the exhibition was not intended to be a comprehensive survey of art from Latin America;

rather, its focus is trained singularly on ideas and practices of the Avant-Garde throughout the region and does not focus on specific countries. Moreover, Ramírez's essays illustrate a collapse of borders as she outlines parallels and convergences across movements, nations, and periods.

Finally, Indyich-López praises the catalogue as a significant resource that includes archival documents previously not published and that contextualise the exhibition's over two hundred artworks. Hers is the only review that points out the value of the catalogue and the rooting of the curators' thesis in archival research. This aspect remains a fundamental part of their curatorial strategy legitimising their hypothesis authoritatively through primary sources. As has been shown in this chapter, documents have been incorporated throughout the catalogue and formed a cornerstone in the curators' research. Archival documents have become a key feature for the ICAA through their vast digital archive for the Documents Project. This poses yet another shift taking place at the MFAH that was first introduced there and through this exhibition.

Nevertheless, the constellation model has increasingly been at the heart of scholarly examinations. Quiles revisits this model in relation to the definition of Latin America as a geographical entity and the constellation model as a network. He states that:

The geographical conception of the region and its artistic production have been permanently altered by the use of the network as a curatorial model. The network allows for a paradoxical rejection and reinforcement of Latin America's peripheral status. Networks imbricate "here" and "there", attending to connections and flows of people, exhibitions, institutions and ideas. Therefore, nothing happens in a vacuum, yet developments may occur in localized 'nodes' that delay or distort the transmission of new developments to larger nodes within the network (formerly "centers"). In this way, "Latin America" can at once be seen as a (provisionally) bounded periphery in which important new ideas are formed and circulated, and a set of nodes in a global art ecology- an essential part of a system. (63)

Quiles outlines the recalibration of the hegemonic value system, which through the constellation model becomes part of a bigger network of concepts, people, institutions, movements, and their exchanges. The creation of a level playing field becomes more likely, however, Latin America remains a geographical entity defined from the outside. As a result, it remains a temporary fringe that has the potential to influence progress.

In the same paper, Quiles claims that the exhibition postulates a refusal of the logic of the centre/periphery model and argues against a co-existence with Europe and North America (69). However, later he states that the curators 'had to expose the region's close interrelationship to European and North American art and artists' (72). Through the use of constellations and networks, it is impossible to create a parallel history. The exploration of nodes and their influence upon the development of art creates an extended field through which it is possible to slightly level the field of art production in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and critique the notion of European modernity. This is the latest and most significant shift in the curatorial strategy employed to present art from Latin America.

This chapter illustrated the shift in curatorial strategy at the MFAH that incorporated a re-examination of established canons of Latin American art in the United States. This was achieved through a constellation model of opposing terms and archival documents as fundamental part of the exhibition and catalogue. The establishment of the ICAA further supported this shift and the exhibition markedly.

The reviews discussed here recognise the show's contribution to opening new paths of enquiry in this field. While the argument underpinning the exhibition may have been one-directional, namely one that advocated resistance against predominant narratives and approaches originating in Europe and North America, the method was complicating and encompassing through the constellation model.

This approach proved effective in that it highlighted nuances within the Avant-Garde in Latin America and unearthed hitherto unknown histories, connections, and artists introducing them into a renewed, if broad and selective, narrative.

As has been illustrated, the constellations establish nodes that are malleable, with the effect that, rather than inscribing art from Latin America with a linear narrative, their flexible nature leave this history open, while providing significant signposts for its understanding and potential future nodal connections. Rather than merely presenting artworks and determining their quality through established criteria, as was the case during the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* and *Hispanic Art in the United States, Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* aimed to establish a scholarship that is rooted in archival documents. This highlights original contributions to artistic practices that operated parallel to art produced in Europe and the United States. Art is no longer employed solely for diplomatic ends, or one that seeks to represent ethnicity in institutions, as was the case in previous exhibitions. Rather, art in Latin America arrives with its own concepts and theoretical grounding from which it responds to relations of power, political tensions, and social circumstances.

The tension between using Latin America as a geographical construct, and the reality of this continent's vastness and heterogeneity are underlined by the curators. Upon closer inspection, this tension translates into the exhibition, which becomes defined by its lack of representation of countries including Bolivia, Paraguay, Ecuador in South America, as well as most countries in Central America and the Caribbean. This determines the curators' parameters and curatorial strategy that creates further peripheries within an already marginal field. Notwithstanding this, the essays by Ramírez counter a strict geopolitical separation as she collapses

borders and periods to establish a network of the Avant-Garde, rather than a linear and geopolitical narrative.

As has been identified in this chapter, the link between art from Latin America and Latino art has not been explored sufficiently at that time, creating a weak link between the ICAA's aim to include Latino art in its programme and research. This has been somewhat rectified by now with the inclusion of archival material concerning Martínez in the online digital archive of the ICAA, as well as numerous other Latino artists. The continued inclusion of primary sources throughout subsequent exhibitions and as part of numerous publications mark an important aspect that grounds the curators' strategy in authoritative sources and adds weight to their argument.

Nevertheless, the dialogue with European and North American theories and perceptions imbues this exhibition within a hegemonic position disrupting any attempt to create an entirely alternative and independent history. Moreover, as has been shown, the curatorial strategy locates this exhibition within the narrative of art from Latin America as it has been written in the United States thereby legitimising the systems and relations of power in favour of the United States museum and scholarly circuit. Despite the curators' efforts to present the Avant-Garde in Latin America as a resisting counterpoint to hegemonic powers, the curators reinforce the idea of a symbiotic relationship within the Americas, while recognising that the differences within this region are incommensurable. The curatorial strategy employed here becomes, at the same time, complicating and reaffirming.

Nevertheless, the constellation model remains an approach that has shifted the one-sided narrative of art from Latin America and expanded its reach and inclusion to movements and artists that have previously not been discussed. The idea of a network in which all locations and nodes in the Americas exchange and

cross-fertilize equally is reminiscent of Gómez Sicre's attempt to level this field of art some fifty years earlier. *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* has achieved a shift in approach that, nevertheless, props up already established power relations in which the incommensurability between Latin America and the United States remains at the heart of resistance and inequality. This exhibition is therefore, a testament to this situation that is yet to be reviewed successfully.

## Conclusion

This thesis traced the trajectory of changing curatorial strategies for art from Latin America and Latino art advanced in the United States since the 1930s. I focused on the innovations taking place at the MFAH in Texas over a period of forty-eight years. While intermittently exhibiting artworks from its own collection of art from Latin America, regularly collaborating with national and international institutions, and taking far reaching steps to integrate Latin American and Latino art, the MFAH continues to develop original and risk taking forays into new and unexplored curatorial strategies and art historical fields.

The historical tracing in the previous pages encompassed Cold War policies, pluralism, multiculturalism, constellation models, and non-linear narratives that influence the continuous writing and re-writing of Latino, Latin American and United States art history. I sought to prove that this institution operates as a counterpart to established curatorial strategies, and lately, as a serious emerging entity in the United States, Latin American, and Latino museum and research network through the ICAA.

The MFAH has achieved this by positioning itself in critical distance to the canonization of 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American and Latino art history initiated at MoMA. As has been shown, Lee Malone was committed to initiating the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* and launching a brief alternative southern network through collapsing borders in the Gulf-Caribbean region. Peter C. Marzio's impetus to integrate Latin American and Latino art, to reflect the Latino demographic in Houston, was crucial for *Hispanic Art in the United States*, *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, and the founding of the ICAA. Further, the curators for each exhibition collaborated significantly to enhance the MFAH's aims and contributed vital strategies that reviewed narratives of art history. As a result, this thesis focused on



the role of these gatekeepers and their approaches.

This account began with MoMA's and Barr's method which focused, for the first time in the United States, on collecting and exhibiting art from Latin America. This posed an early attempt at cohering and systematising this field. Barr set the initial standards that were rooted in European movements including Cubism and Abstraction, which he viewed as the epitome of high art. This framing was modified and renewed through Gómez Sicre's approach once this Cuban curator and art critic took office at the PAU in Washington. He was the first significant propagator of Latin American art in the United States who shifted perceptions of this field toward specificity while adhering to European standards of quality first introduced by Barr.

Gómez Sicre's expanded the view of art from Latin America and looked beyond Mexican Muralism, previously ardently supported by Barr. Furthermore, the changing diplomatic and political circumstances lead to a marked change from supporting artist with communist leanings, of which the Muralists were devotees, to a rejection of politically overt content in artworks. The fundamental idea of a harmonious hemisphere that forges better relations through exchanges of culture and art was promulgated at MoMA, and later modified and perpetuated at the PAU.

This lead to the collaboration outlined in detail in chapter two and the curatorial strategy developed between Gómez Sicre, PAU, and the MFAH for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*. This collaboration amalgamated diplomatic aims with criteria for quality art. I believe that the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* was an intentional parallel positioning by the MFAH against MoMA's centric location. The entries by Obregón and Morales were devoid of political language and depicted locally specific subjects in cubist and abstract styles concerning nature in Colombia and Nicaragua. The innovative use of techniques and space by these artists proved Gómez Sicre's criteria for advancements and quality Latin American art. This ran

counter to Barr's assumption that art from Latin America was derivative of European ideas and techniques.

Crucially, the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition* poses an example that allowed the MFAH to suggest a curatorial approach that incorporated Gómez Sicre's eye for quality art, and the MFAH's unique collapsing of borders in the Gulf-Caribbean region. This created a southern network with the MFAH at its centre that was met with positive responses to the levelling of art produced in the territory. This was an aim supported by Gómez Sicre who viewed the hemisphere as an interconnected and levelled region.

The standards of quality in high art continued to guide the exhibition and interpretation of art from Latin America until the 1980s. Marzio, Beardsley and Livingston, employed these standards in their approach to the case study presented in chapter four. I believe this to be of significance as it determined not only the institutional criteria for acceptable art, but also reduced alternative and critical practices to outsider positions. This poses a crucial change in the political and cultural context since Gómez Sicre's time.

This was supported by the analysis presented in chapter three, which asserted the complicated and far reaching differences within the Latino community, as well as the political and cultural struggle this diverse group engaged with to call for recognition and equality rather than acceptance and integration. The chasm between the Latino minority and the mainstream majority became a point of contention. As was shown, Latinos do not necessarily wish to become part of the mainstream.

The issue of labelling and the debates surrounding identity politics unearthed ambiguous responses to the use of the term Hispanic in the title of the exhibition. Latino has been outlined as a term that originated within this group and its political

objectives to gain parity. The narratives of immigration, put forward by Paz and Beardsley, underpinned this exhibition as it sought to integrate this minority in the mainstream. Thus, the MFAH responded to contemporary national cultural policies surrounding multiculturalism and pluralism.

Nevertheless, the MFAH was the first mainstream institutions in the United States, to attempt an expansion of United States art history by including Latino art in its programme. This was underpinned by Marzio's initiative as he hoped to make art from Latin America and Latino art an ingrained part of this institution. The extensive enquiry, consultation of Latino leaders from the community, and financial effort invested for *Hispanic Art in the United States* proves the MFAH's commitment to making this field part of its programme.

Marzio, together with the curators, Livingston and Beardsley assumed a curatorial strategy for the exhibition that consisted of three main components: ethnicity, mainstream criteria of quality artworks, and expanding the narrative of American art history. They emphasised the quality of artworks over the ethnicity of the artist. This resulted in a somewhat contradictory approach in which Hispanic art was exhibited alongside European Masters based on Marzio's demand to exhibit both in the same way, while denying that the exhibition was based upon ethnicity as a qualifying factor.

Although it was stated that the MFAH decidedly stepped away from asserting political statements or actions, the exhibition became inadvertently imbued with these same declarations. It can be safely said that this exhibition's greatest flaw can be detected in its very founding that uses national cultural policies to justify its realisation, yet, at the same time, stepped away from these defining criteria to emphasise artistic integrity that is determined by decontextualised European standards. This was especially exemplified through Livingston's essay that attempted

to bridge a historical narrative to European and Latin American Masters.

As opposed to Gómez Sicre's attempt to cater to European standards, which was a successful strategy earlier in the century, this exhibition fell prey to a change in historical contexts and attitudes that did no longer allow for a purely aesthetic assessment of artworks. By the 1980s, the MFAH's approach was no longer sufficient in analysing artworks that originated from a deeply politicised community. The result of several years of research and the writing of essays published as part of the extensive catalogue, presented a broad and reductive view of Latino art.

In this sense, both exhibitions responded to their contemporary circumstances, only Gómez Sicre understood these in more depth than did the curators of *Hispanic Art in the United States*. While the first acted out a brief within diplomatic parameters, the second attempted to expand a narrative beyond an established canon using criteria outside of identity politics.

The overall approach employed by the MFAH disarmed Latino art within a mainstream context and contributed to its apparently seamless insertion within a United States mainstream museum network and American art history. Recognising this field as a parallel development to the mainstream and as a critical history, as was expounded by Ramos, Ybarra-Frausto, and Ramírez, would have been a more successful way of presenting Latino art in the United States.

Finally, *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* proposed a profound review of the previous criteria, narratives, and conditions under which art from Latin America became to be understood in the United States. This exhibition was framed by a constellation model of six complementary terms that categorised the artworks in approximate fields. Further, the exhibition incorporated archival documents in its display and the catalogue. This espoused an encompassing approach that grounded art from Latin America in the archive. This example was

viewed in conjunction with the establishment of the ICAA and its role as fast emerging and significant entity for the research of art from Latin America and Latino art. It becomes clear that the MFAH learned from *Hispanic Art in the United States* and adjusted its approach to a more reflexive engagement with this field.

The premise from which the curators, Olea and Ramírez, operated asserted that artists in Latin America invert ideas from Europe, creating approaches relevant to the artist's local milieu. These circumstances included political upheaval, dictatorships, artists' rebellious and irreverent use of cheap materials, destruction of artworks, and defacing of European Masters to comment on the bourgeoisie and its incessant consumption of art and culture amongst others.

The constellation model has been underlined as a strategy that established a network of interconnected nodes in which art from Latin America appears as a vital point in need of further investigation. Another crucial aspect of this included the re-reading of Mexican Muralism in the context of film-making and the deliberate omission of this movement's history that is widely known in the United States. Finally, Ramírez's essays on Conceptualism and Constructivism posed a renewed approach toward these fields and a narrative that veered away from nations, again collapsing borders and eras, to present an overview of developments and artists across constellations.

Overall, the inclusion of over 200 artworks for this exhibition illustrate the MFAH, and by this time, the ICAA's, commitment to this field, and includes Latino art. Although both fields developed parallel to each other, they are amalgamated into seemingly one coherent area through the initiative of the MFAH and the establishment of the ICAA. Above all, *Inverted Utopias* was a significant starting point for the artworks the MFAH has sought to collect, research, and exhibit since.

The assertion that art from Latin America and Latino art propose innovation and astute developments echoes again with the approach adopted by Gómez Sicre, Livingston and Beardsley. In all cases the aim was to shine a light on Latin American and Latino art and unearth new ideas and artists in an ever expanding, changing and developing narrative.

While innovation and assuming risks has proven to be at the heart of the MFAH's strategies, their approach remains wedded to frameworks established and perpetuated in the United States, however, rather than acting out a radical alternative, the MFAH takes some risks in response to its position as a southern museum, located in the United States. The location of the MFAH in Texas, its proximity to Latin America, and its distance from MoMA's influence, enables this institution to develop innovative curatorial strategies that are critical of modernist perceptions.

At the same time, the MFAH remains answerable to Eurocentric and modernist ideas and their stringent framing of quality in art. Each exhibition added a new perspective, nonetheless, which placed art from Latin America and Latino art on an art historical map for audiences in the United States. Lately, the ICAA blurs borders between geographical entities and recalls the notion of Pan-Americanism and hemispheric collaboration through creating virtual bridges across the United States and Latin America. Similarly, the inclusion of Latino art reflects the changing demographic surrounding the MFAH and the United States. Again, through these latest developments, on a more sizeable stage and with the establishment of the online archive through the Documents Project, the MFAH once again proves its willingness to take risks.

This does, nonetheless, not deflect from its position in the hegemonic north through which it can steer this narrative. The establishment of the Documents Project and the far-reaching, lasting, and voluntary collaboration with numerous institutions throughout Latin America is testament to this institution's growing significance, not only in the United States, but also within the hemisphere, to further research and promote better intercultural understanding in the Americas.

With continued investment, research, and a clear curatorial strategy, the MFAH is likely to continue with this approach and carries potential for creating critical histories and continues to push for the recognition of these fields, albeit be that in a United States context. This is perhaps the MFAH's biggest contributing shift over the time span of forty-eight years explored here.

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## Illustrations

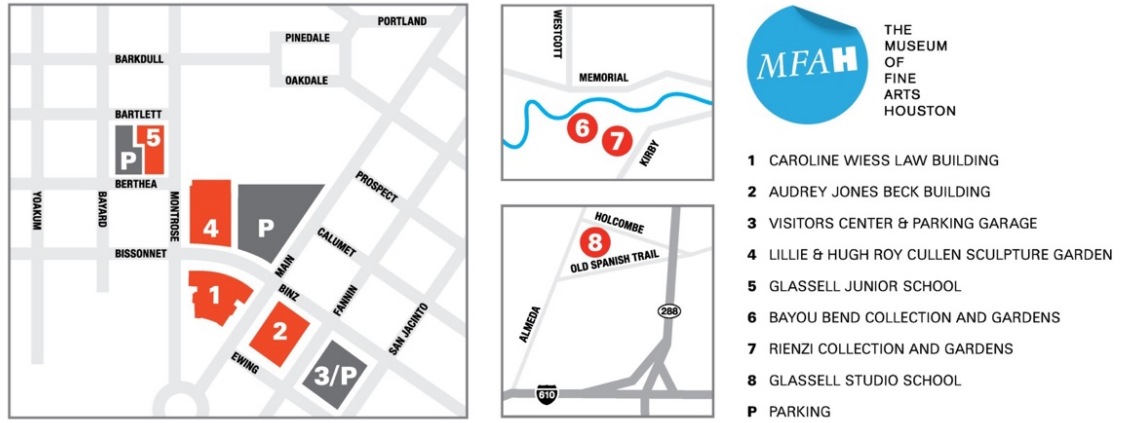


Fig. 1. Map of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



Figure 2. Paul Cézanne, *The Bather* (c.1885) oil on canvas, 127 x 96.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 3. Paul Gauguin, *Te aa no Areois/The Seed of the Areoi* (1892), oil on burlap, 92 x 96.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

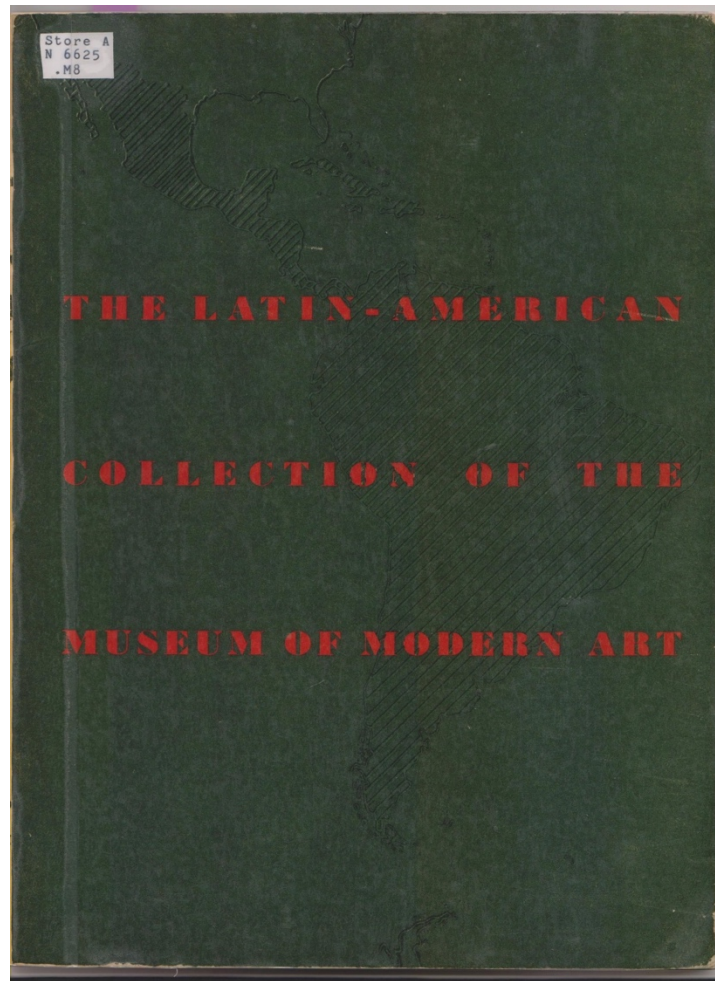


Fig. 4. MoMA's first publication of its collection of Art from Latin America printed in 1943, containing essays by Barr and Kirstein following their research stays in various countries in Latin America.





Fig. 5. José Clemente Orozco, *The Subway* (1928), oil on canvas, 41 x 56.2 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 6. Diego Rivera, *Young Man in A Gray Sweater (Jacques Lipchitz)* (1914), oil on canvas, 65.1 x 54.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 7. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Echo of a Scream* (1937), enamel on wood, 121.9 x 91.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

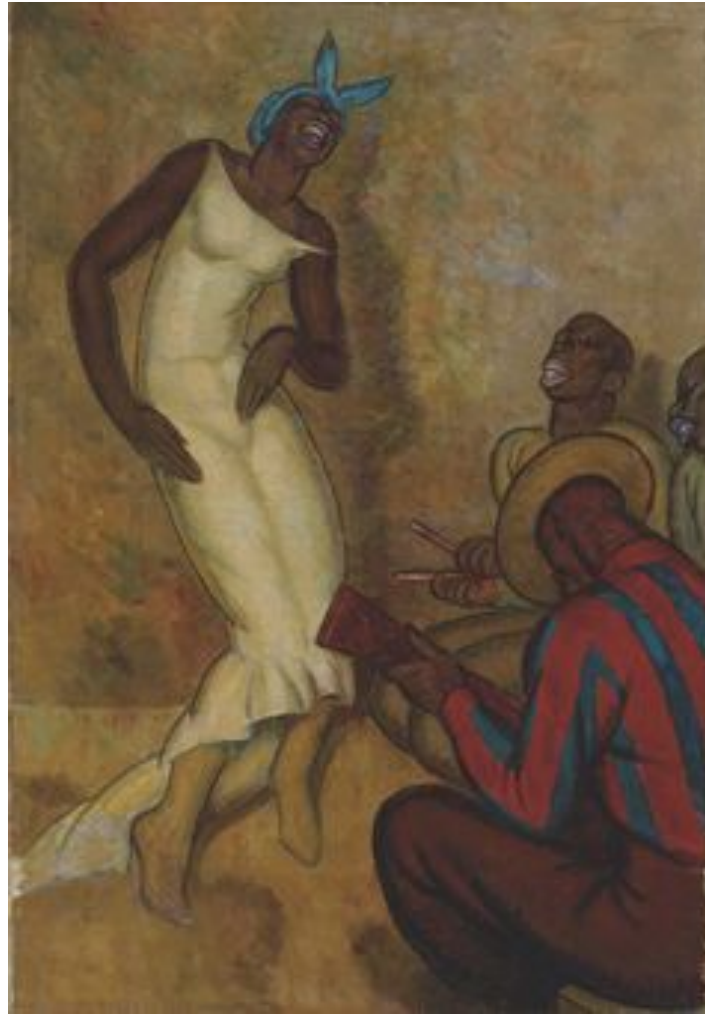


Fig. 8. Jaime Valls Díaz, *La rumba/The Party* (1928), oil on canvas, 95.2 x 67 cm.

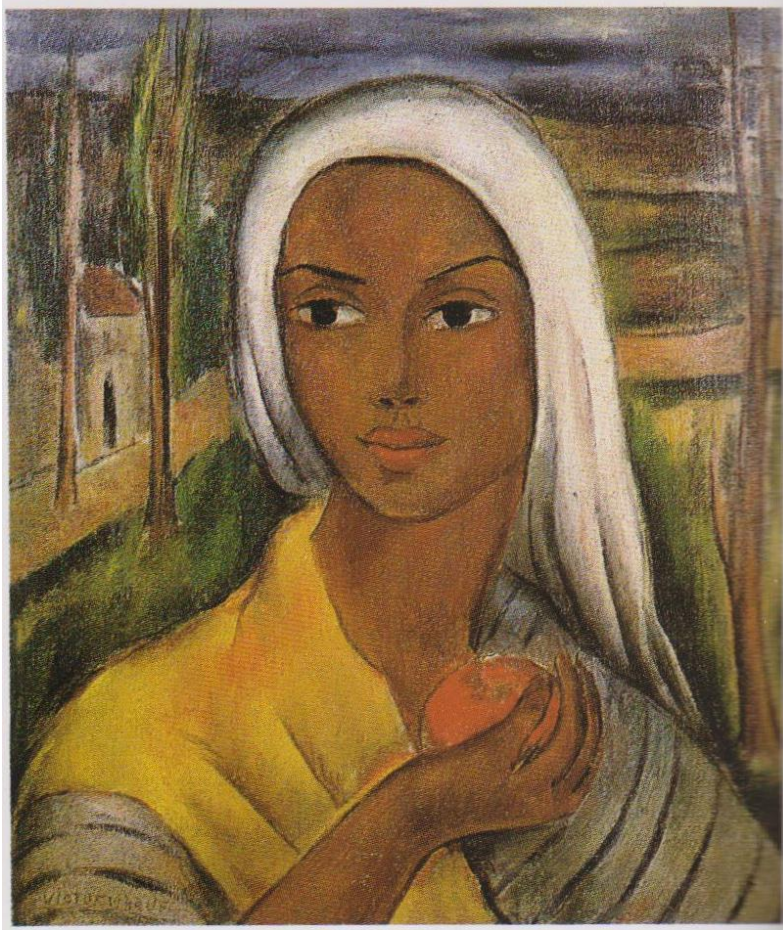


Fig. 9. Victor Manuel, *Muchacha con Manzana Roja/Girl with Red Apple* (c.1940), oil on canvas, 55 x 47 cm.



Fig. 10. Photograph of the Opening Night at the MFAH for the *Gulf Caribbean Art Exhibition*, from left to right- two unidentified visitors talk to Lee Malone, director of the MFAH (1953-1959). They stand in front of Cundo Bermúdez's *Havana Sextet* (1953), MFAH Archives, Exhibition Files.



Fig. 11. Photograph of the Opening Night at the MFAH for the *Gulf Caribbean Art Exhibition*, unidentified woman in front of a landscape and abstract painting, MFAH Archives, Exhibition Files.



Fig 12. Cover of the catalogue for the *Gulf-Caribbean Art Exhibition*.





Fig. 13. Alejandro Obregón, *Cattle Drowning in the Magdalena* (1955), oil on canvas, 158.6 x 126 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



Fig. 14. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937), oil on canvas, 349.3 x 776.6 cm, Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.



Fig. 15. Alejandro Obregón, *Estudiante Muerto (El Velorio)/Dead Student (The Vigil)* (1956), oil on canvas, 140 x 175 cm, OAS Art Museum of the Americas Collection, Washington.



Fig. 16. Armando Morales, *Bird Cage* (1955), oil on canvas, 70.8 x 100.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

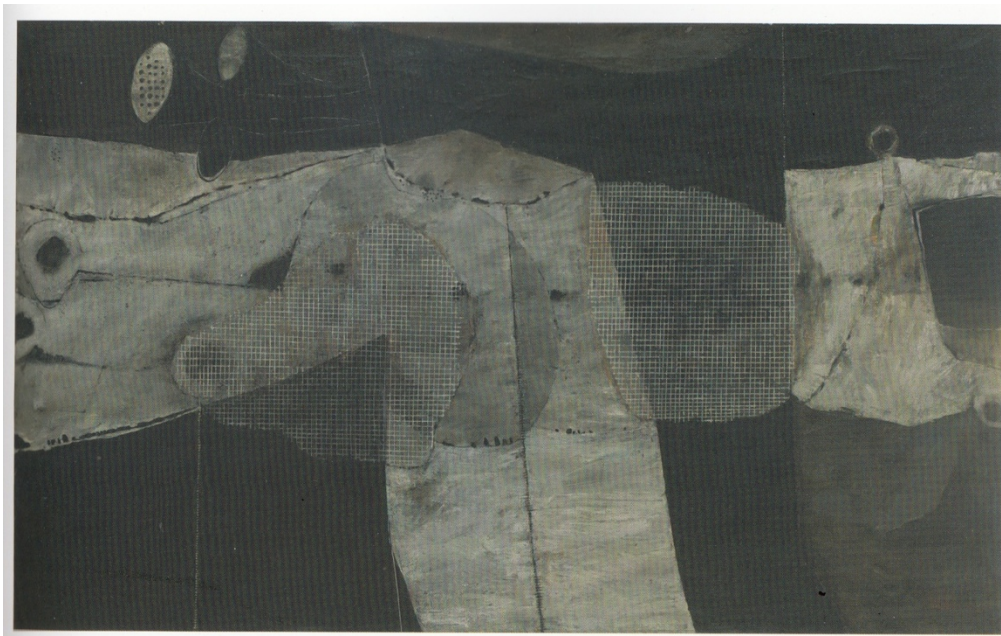


Fig. 17. Armando Morales, *Guerillero Muerto VIII/ Dead Warrior VIII* (1962), mixed media on canvas, 101.6 x 165.1 cm, OAS Art Museum of the Americas Collection, Washington.



Fig. 18. Martín Ramírez, *Untitled (Proscenium Image)* (c. 1953), pencil, tempera, and crayon on paper, 91.4 x 60.6 cm.

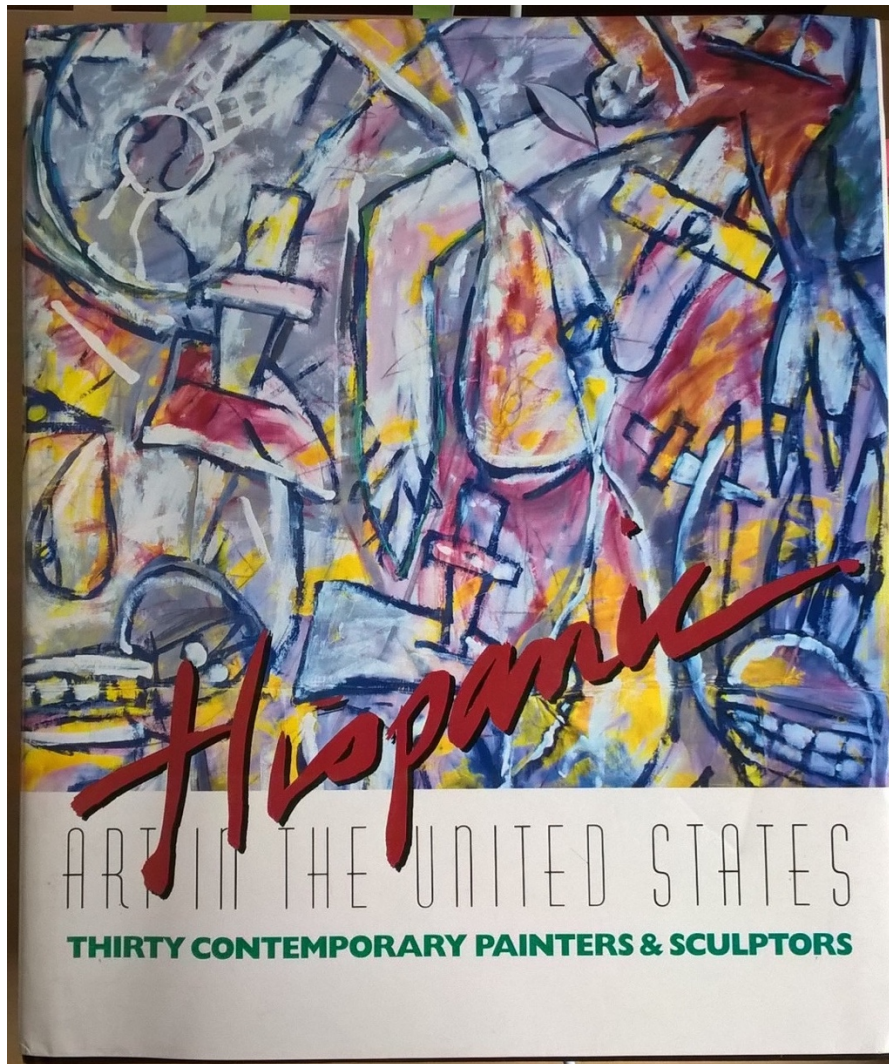


Fig. 19. Cover of the catalogue for *Hispanic Art in the United States-Thirty Contemporary Sculptors and Painters*.



Fig. 20. Wifredo Lam, *The Jungle* (1943), gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 239.4 x 229.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

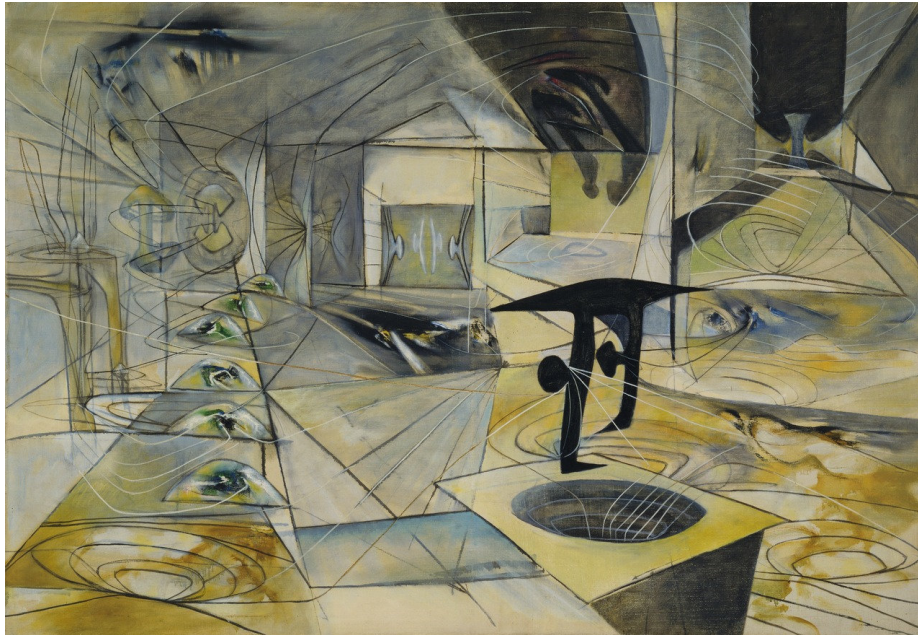


Fig. 21. Roberto Matta, *The Onyx of Electra* (1944), oil on canvas, 127.3 x 182.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 22. Joan Miró, *Hirondelle Amour* (1933/34), oil on canvas, 199.3 x 247.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.





Fig. 23. Carlos Almaraz, *Love Makes the City Crumble* (1983), oil on canvas, 167.6 x 167.6 cm.

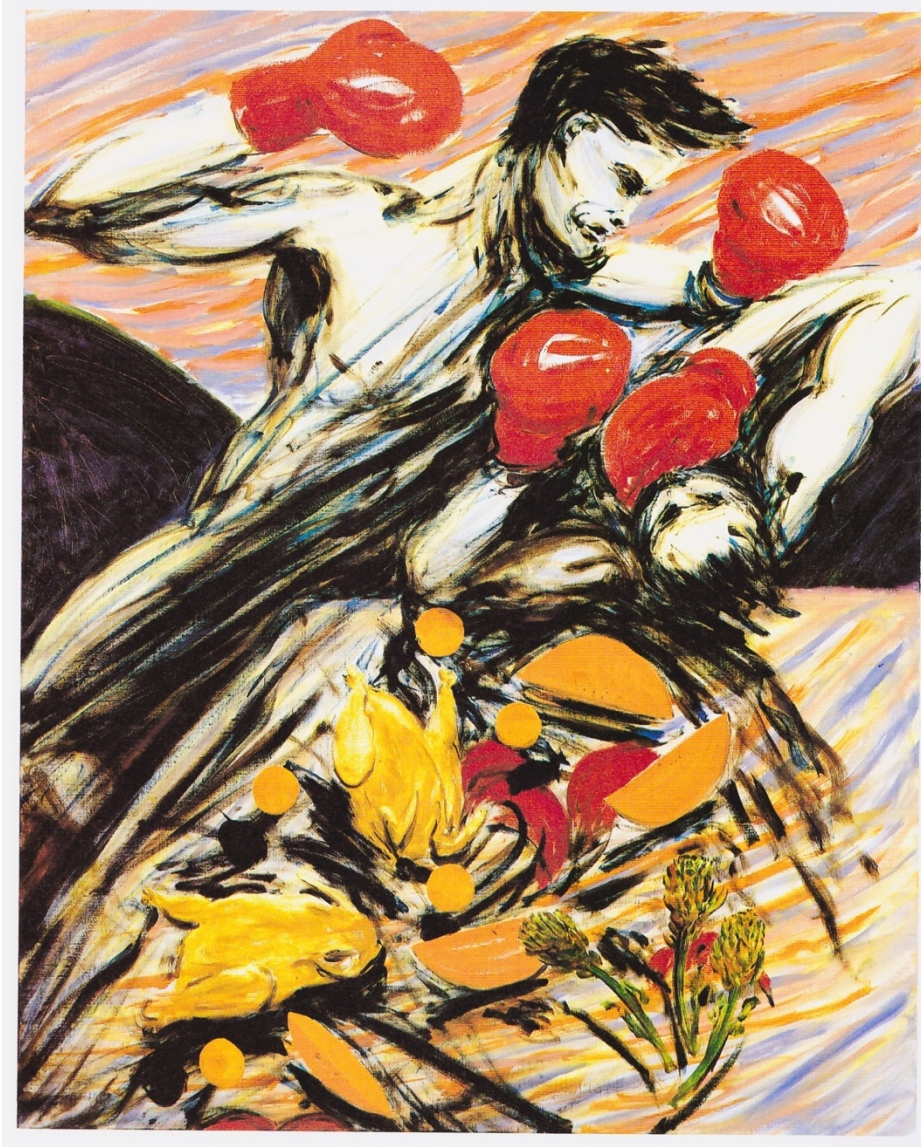


Fig. 24. Rolando Briseño, *Fighting at the Table #4* (1986), oil on linen, 149.8 x 119.3 cm



Fig. 25. Arnaldo Roche, *The Source* (1986), oil on canvas, 182.8 x 152.4 cm.



Fig. 26. Luis Stand, *El general sin manos* (1984), oil on canvas, 274.3 x 101.6 cm.



Fig. 27. Roberto Gil de Montes, *Nocturne* (1985), oil on linen, 127 x 127 cm.

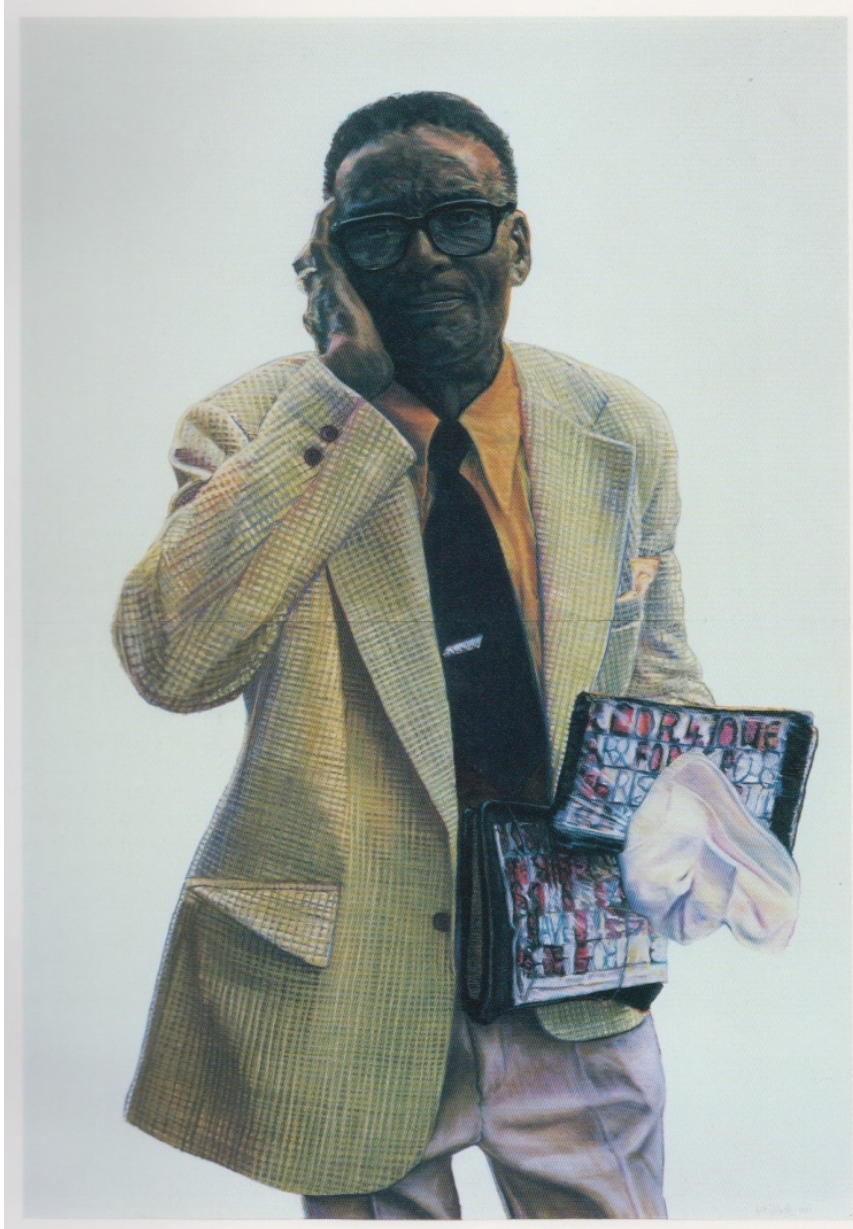


Fig. 28. John Valadez, *Preacher* (1983), pastel on paper, 152.4 x 106.6 cm.



Fig. 29. John Valadez, *Fatima* (1984), pastel on paper, 152.4 x 101.6 cm.



Fig. 30. Carmen Lomas Garza, *Abuelitos piscando nopalitos/Grandparents cutting cacti* (1980), gouache on arches paper, 27.9 x 35.5 cm.





Fig. 31. Luis Jiménez, Working Drawing for *Cruzando el Rio Bravo/Border Crossing* (1986), crayon on paper, 330.2 x 152.4 cm.



Fig. 32. Install shot of Luis Jiménez's *Honky Tonk* (1981-1986) at the Brooklyn Museum, New York; crayon on paper mounted on foam board or plywood, neon lights.

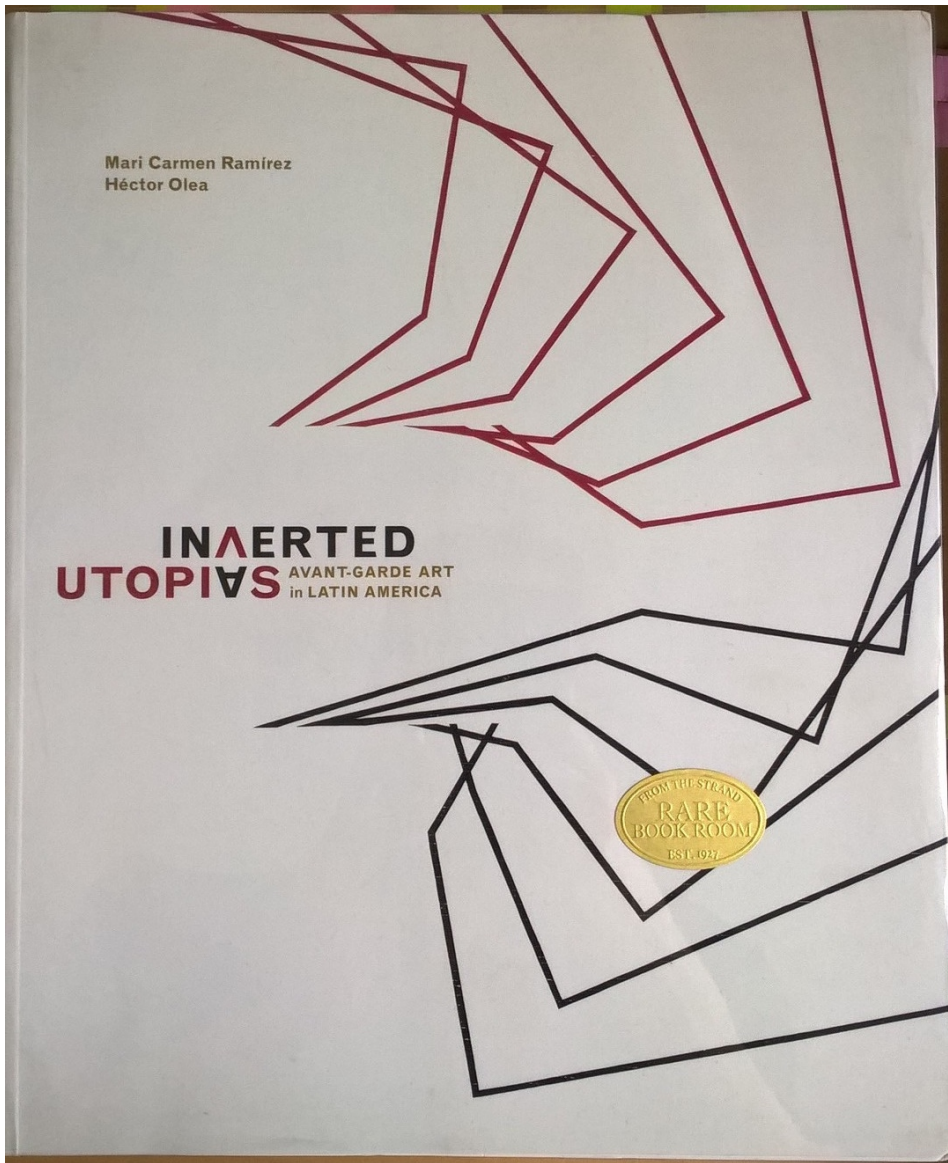


Fig. 33. Catalogue cover for *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*.



Fig. 34. Installation shot of archival documents exhibited as part of *Inverted Utopias-Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*.

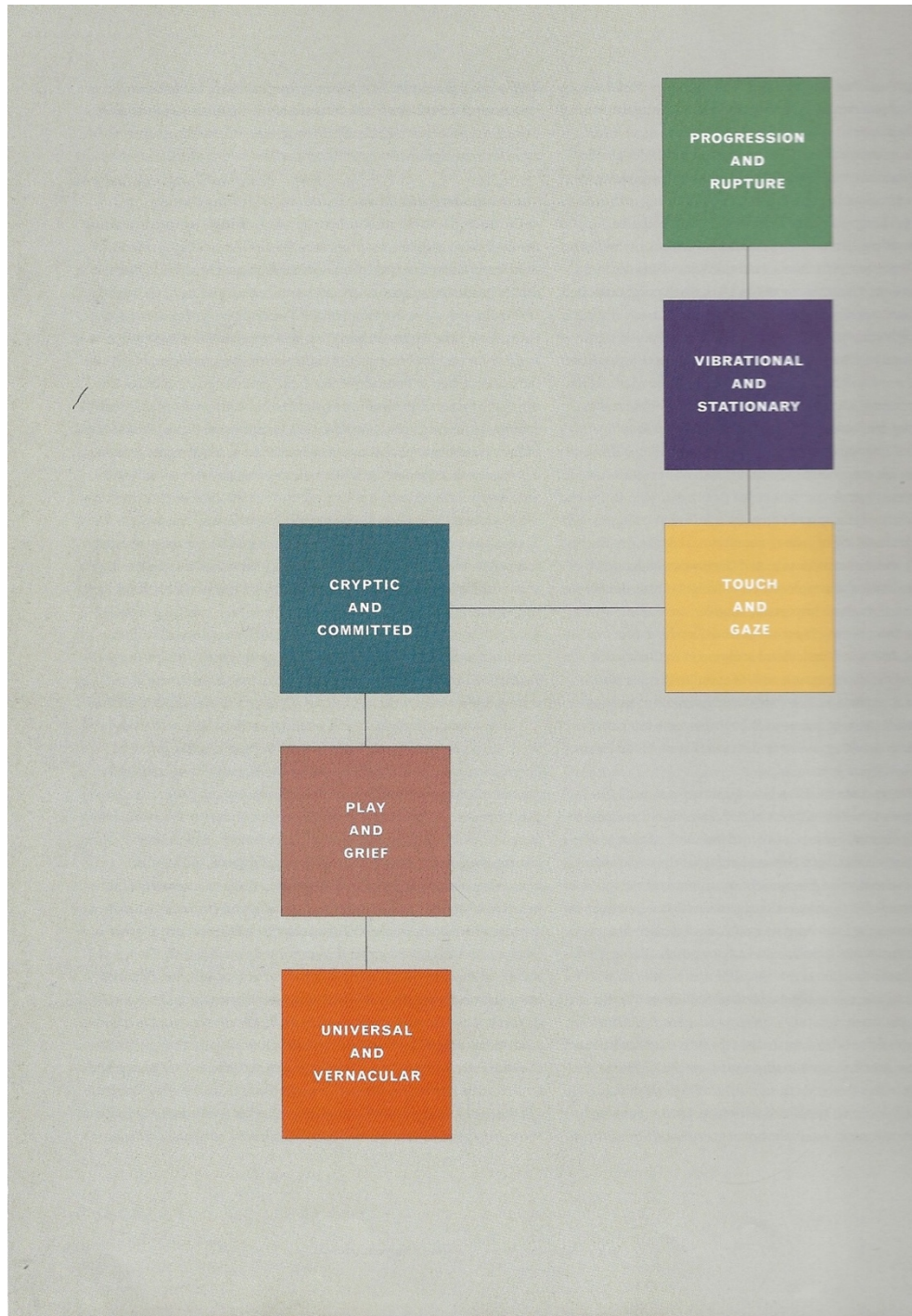


Fig. 35. Constellation Model for *Inverted Utopias- Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*.

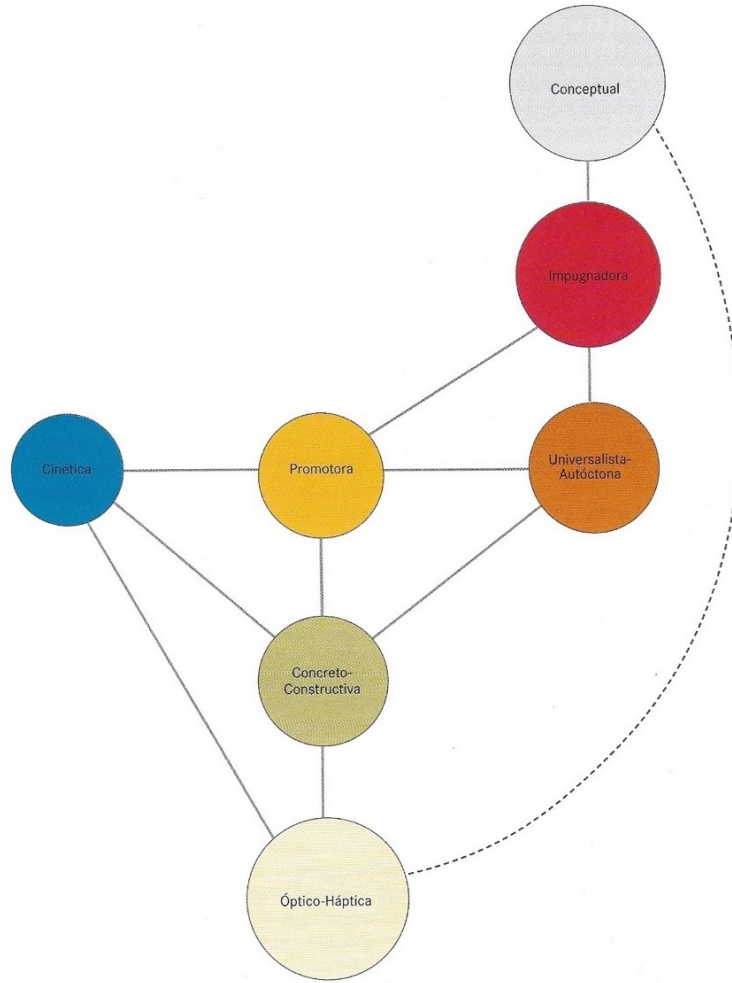


Fig. 36. Constellation Model for *Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1928-1968.*

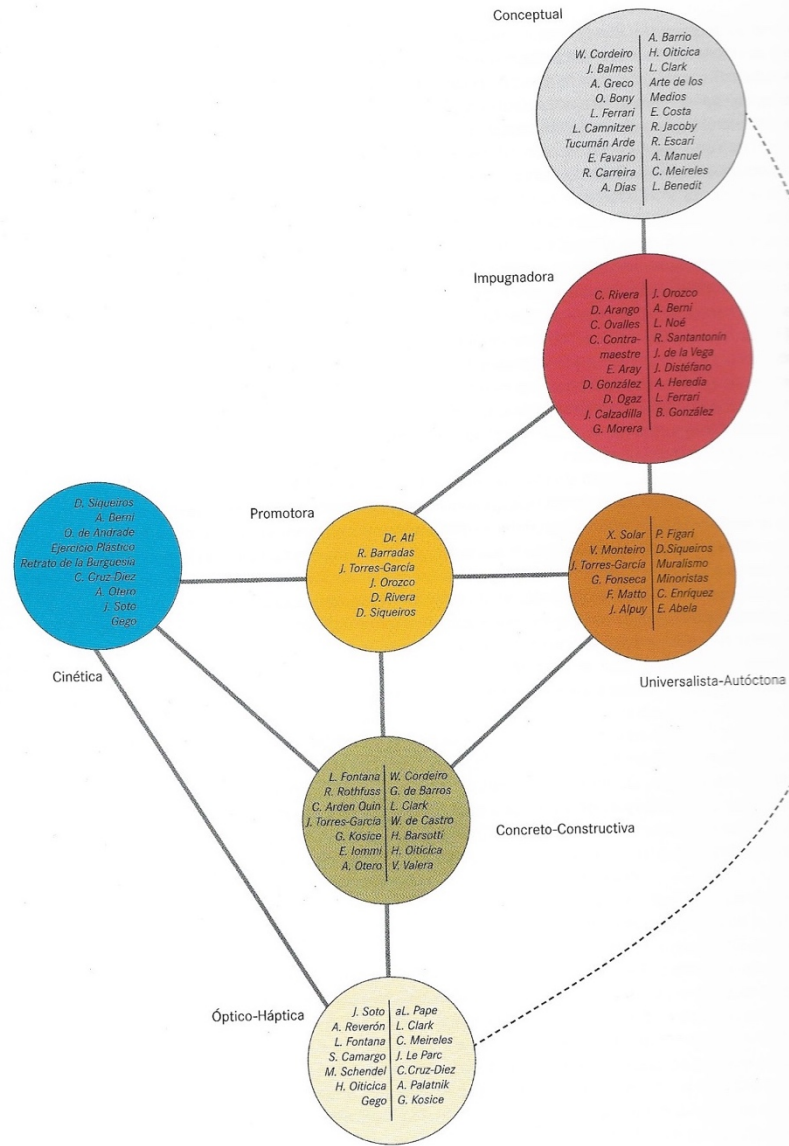


Fig. 37. Detailed list of artists in each constellation for *Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin-lugar 1928-1968*.



Fig. 38. Julio Tomás Martínez, *El manicomio o cada loco con su tema/The madhouse or Everyone has his hobbyhorse* (1936), oil on canvas, 67.3 x 100.3 cm.



Fig. 39. Julio Tomás Martínez, *El secreto de la maldad/The Secret of Evil* (1930), oil on canvas, 71.1 x 86.3 cm.



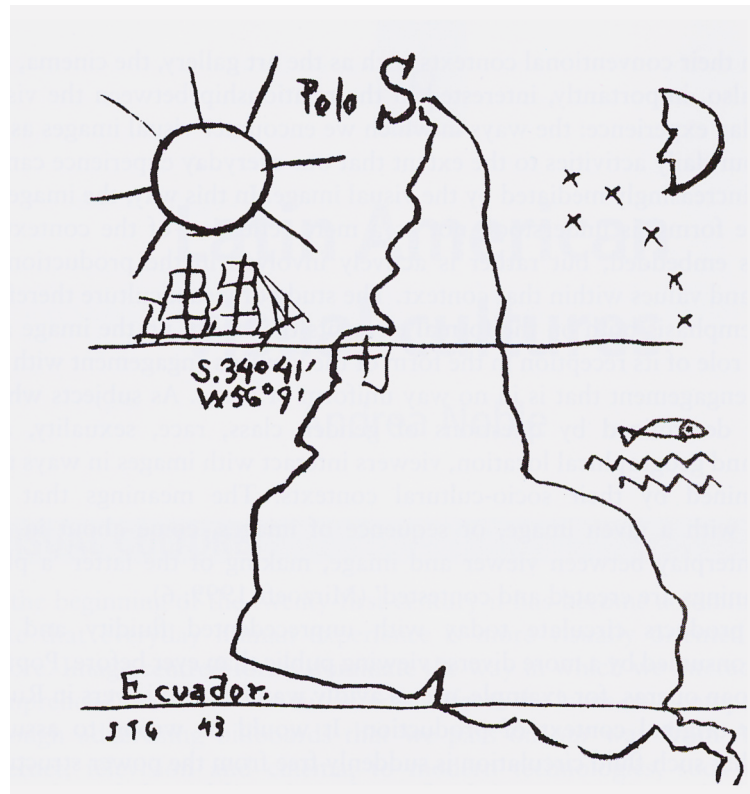


Fig. 40. Joaquín Torres-García, *Upside-down Map* (1943), ink on paper.



Fig. 41. Joaquín Torres-García, *Constructivo con varillas sobrepuestas/Constructive with attached rods* (1930), oil on wood, 60 x 42 cm.



Fig. 42. Xul Solar, *Tlaloc, Aztec Rain God* (1923), watercolour on cardboard, 26 x 32 cm.

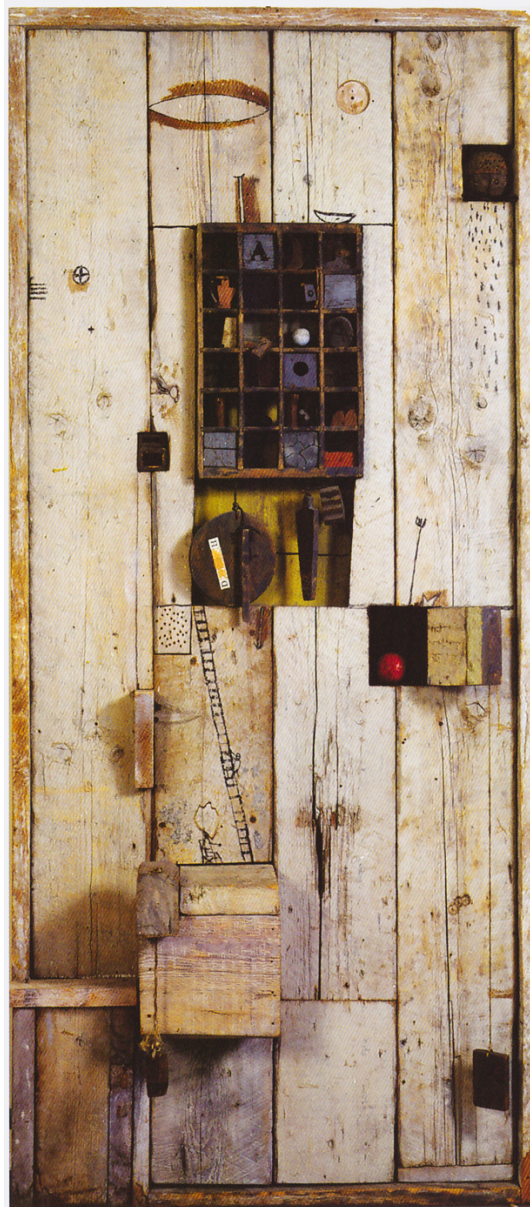


Fig. 43. Gonzalo Fonseca, *Columbarium 1* (1966), scaffolding wood, nails, strings, and paint, 221 x 95 x 24 cm.

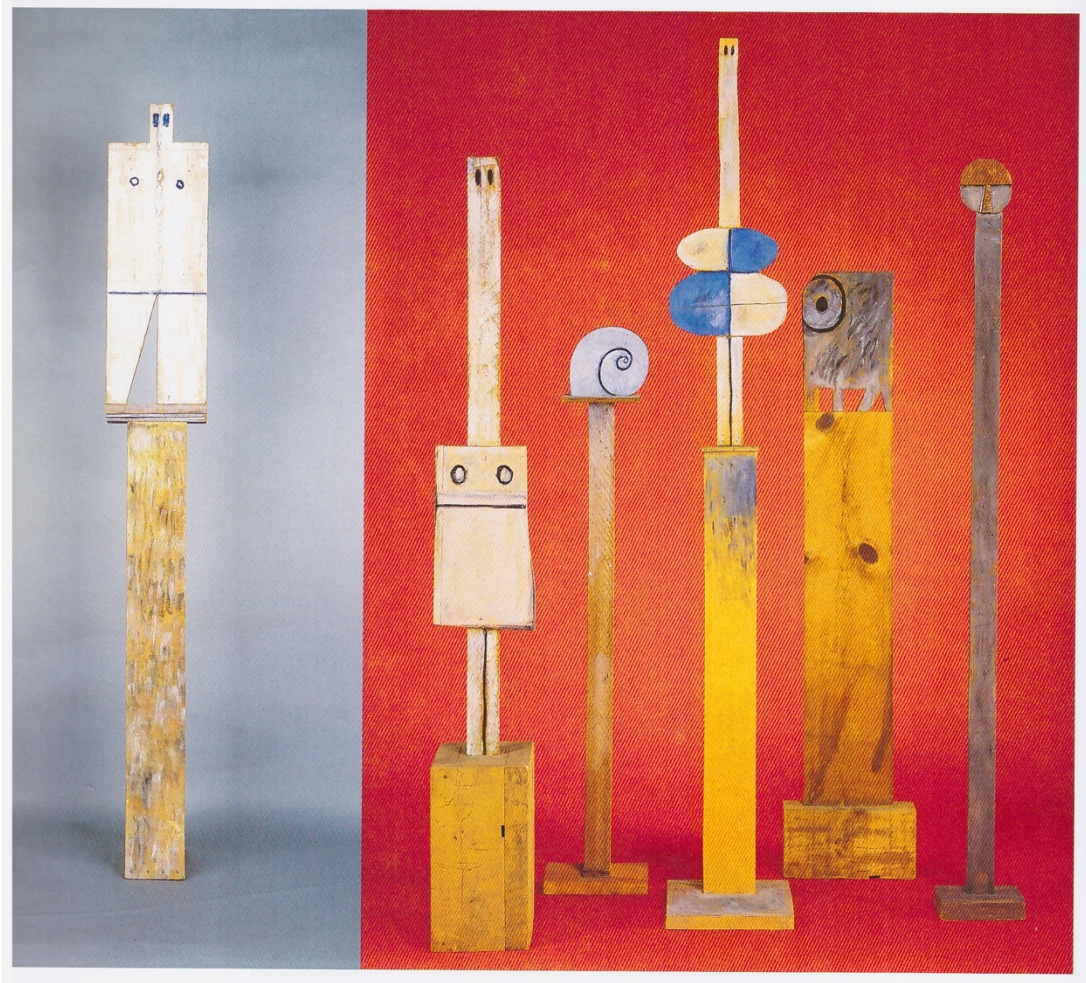


Fig. 44. Francisco Matto, *Totems* (1960-1985); from left: *Hombre universal/Universal Man*, painted wood; *Venus* (1979), painted wood; *Caracol grande/Large Snail* (1985), oil on wood; *Venus blanquiazul/white and blue Venus* (1980), oil on wood, *Cordero/Lamb*, painted wood; *Mascara/Mask* (1979), painted wood.

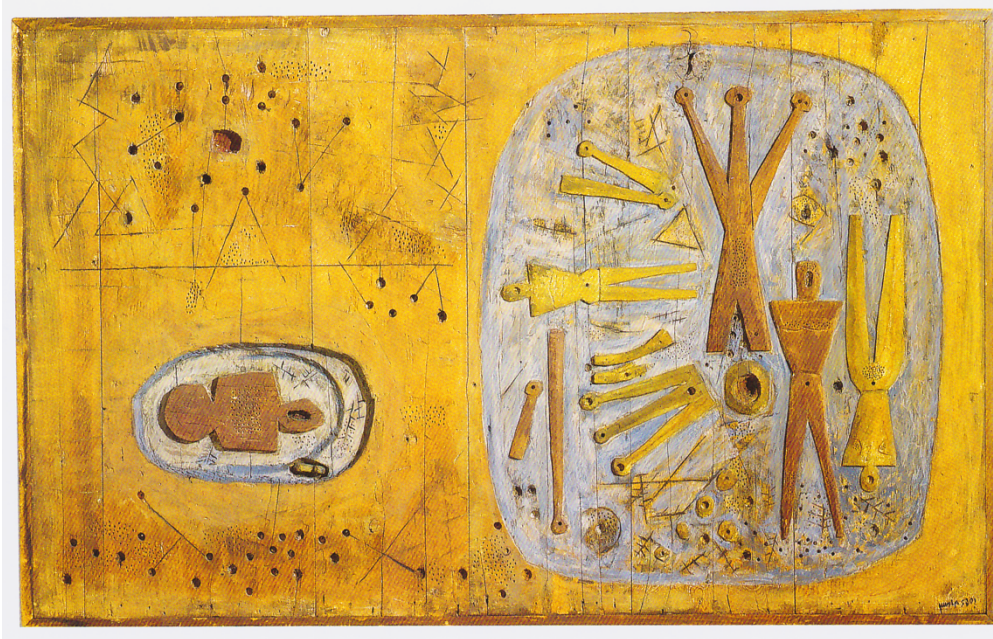


Fig. 45. Julio Alpuy, *The Earth* (1963), incised and painted wood, 99 x 157.5 cm.



Fig. 46. Installation shot of the constellation 'Touch and Gaze' at the MFAH.



Fig. 47. Alberto Heredia, *Caja de Camembert* (1962-64), wood plastic metal springs, cellophane, burnt fragments, and miscellaneous materials, 32 x 17.5 x 5.3 cm.



Fig. 48. Luis Felipe Noé, *Algun día de estos/One of these days* (1963), Mixed media on canvas, 180 x 300 cm.





Fig. 49. Installation shot of *Gratia plena (tocador)/Full of Grace, a Dressing Table* (1971), by Beatriz González; enamel on metal sheet joint on wood furniture, 150 x 150 x 38 cm.

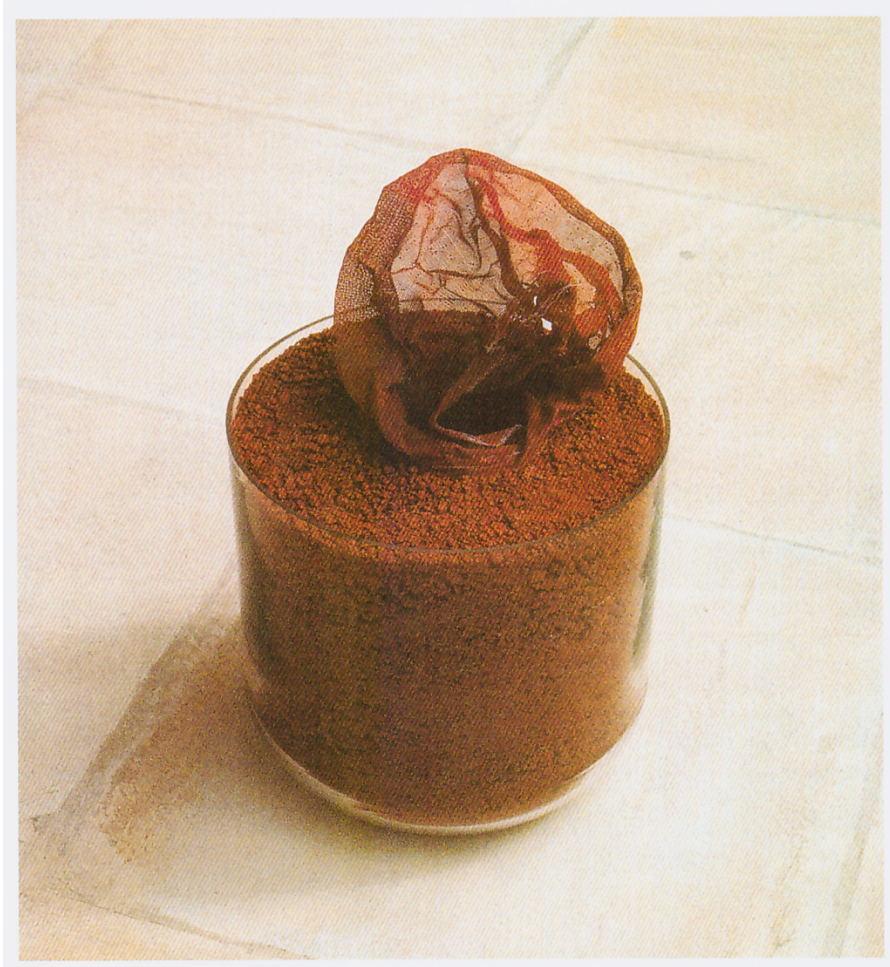


Fig. 50. Hélio Oiticica, *Bólido vidro 4, Terra/Glass Bolide 4, Soil* (1964), glass container with soil and pigments, 30 x 38-44cm.

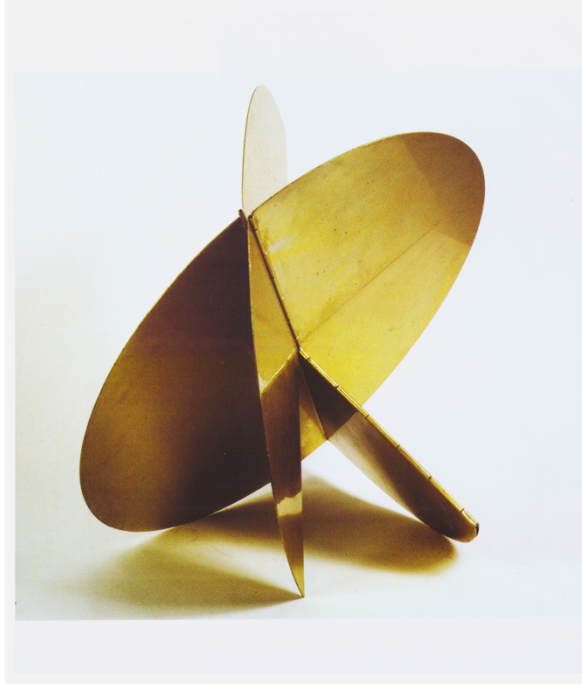


Fig. 51. Lygia Clark *Bicho/Creature* (1960), aluminium and hinges, 33cm approx. diameter.

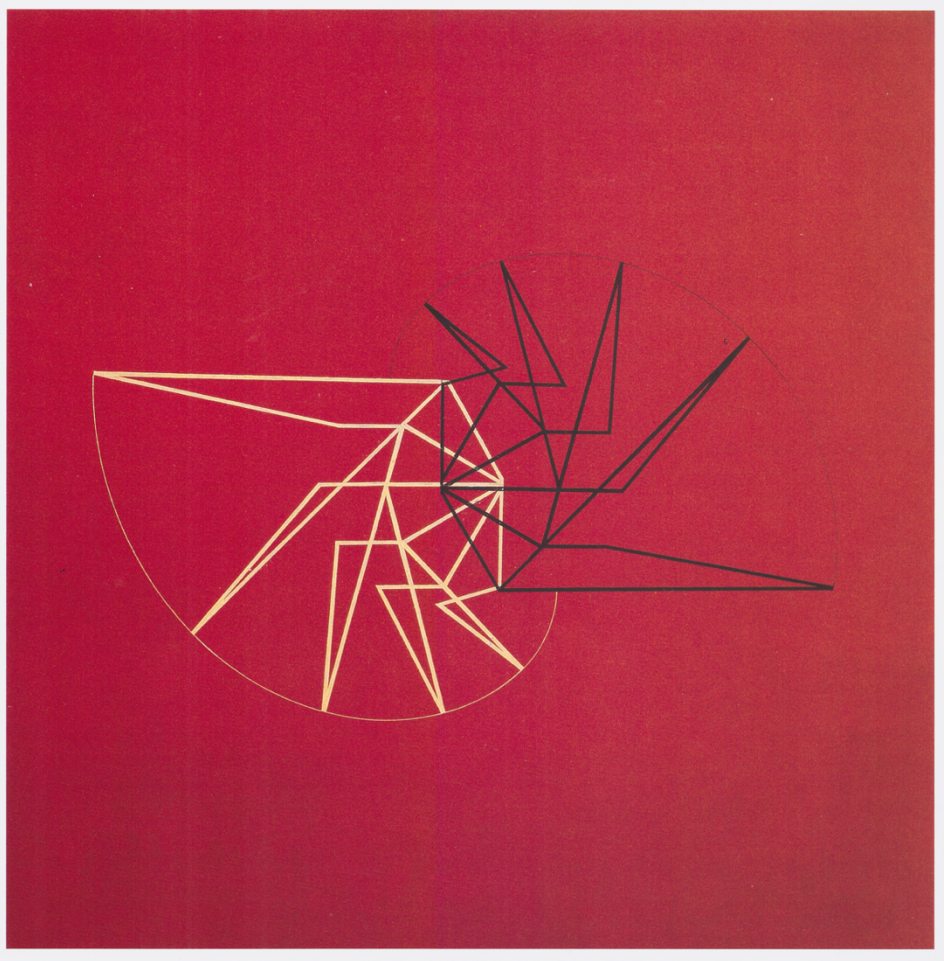


Fig. 52. Waldemar Cordeiro, *Idéia visível/ Visible Idea* (1956), wood plastered with paint, 61 x 61 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

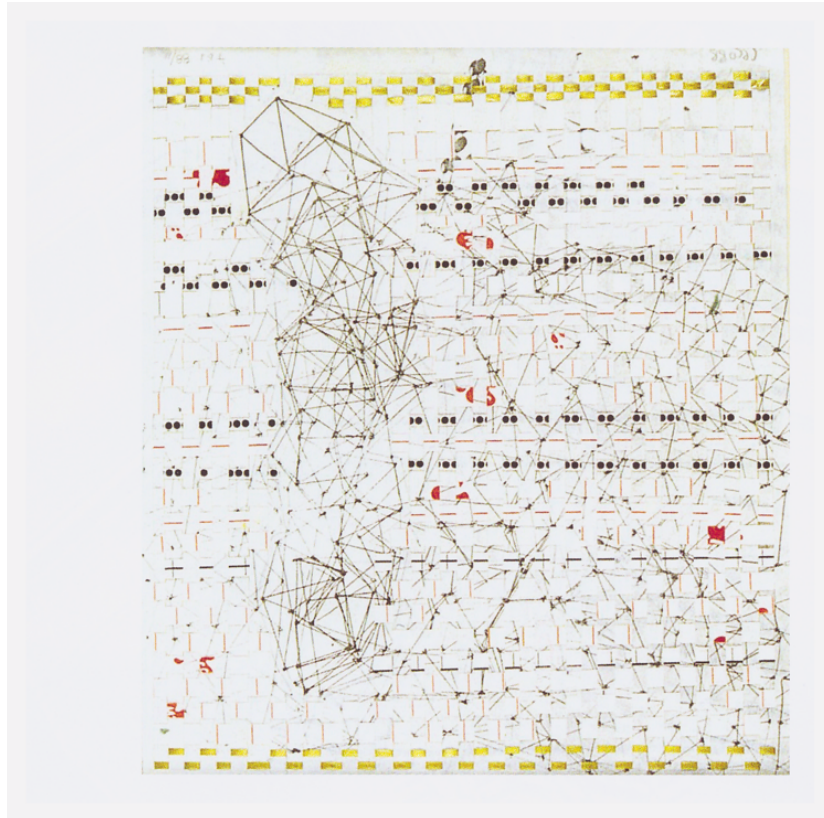


Fig. 53. Gego, *Tejedura 88/11/Weaving 88/11* (1988), woven paper strips, 17 x 15 cm, Fundación Gego, Caracas.



Fig. 54. Installation shot, Jesús Rafael Soto, *Penetrable Amarillo/Yellow Penetrable* (1973), outside the MFAH Caroline Wiess Law Building.



Fig. 55. Installation shot, Carlos Cruz-Díez, *Cromosaturación/Chromosaturación* (1965), at the MFAH.



Fig. 56. Replicas of Lygia Clark's *Luvas sensoriais/Sensory Gloves*, the image shows visitors engaging with the artwork as idea.



Fig. 57. Lygia Pape, *Divisor/Divide* (1968), white sheet, approx. 400 yards sq.



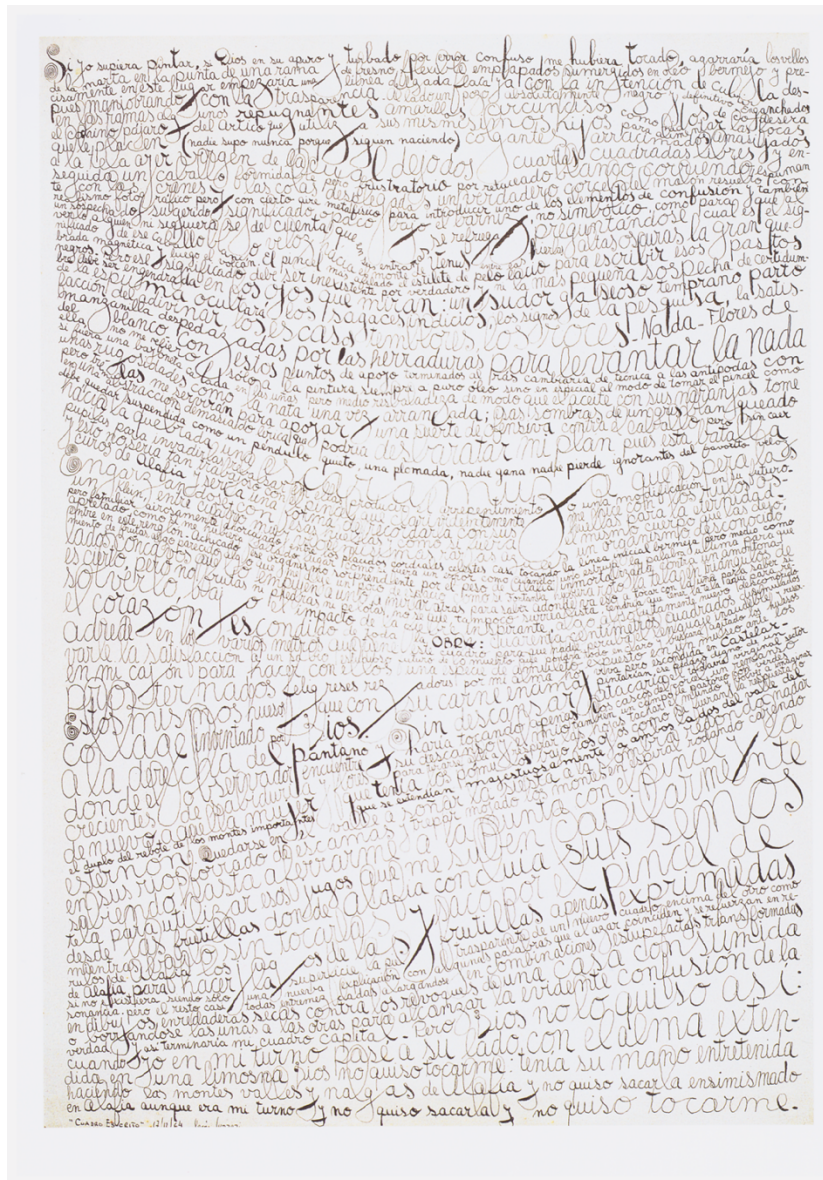


Fig. 58. León Ferrari's *El cuadro escrito* 17-12-64/*The Written Painting* 17-12-64 (1964), from the series 'el cuadro escrito', Ink on paper, 67 x 48 cm.



Fig. 59. Waldemar Cordeiro holding a *Popcret* in front of his studio in São Paulo, mid-1960s, Família Cordeiro papers, São Paulo.