

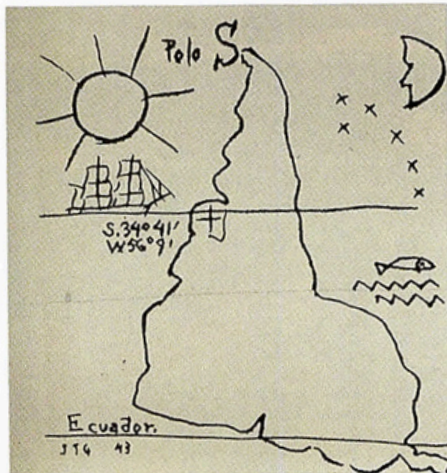
True South

LATIN AMERICAN ART RISING



LATIN AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY ART IS VIBRANT, CULTURALLY DIVERSE, AND WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED BY A NEW GENERATION OF COLLECTORS. **BY JOHN DORFMAN**

In 1943, the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García sketched a map of South America with the continent turned upside down, so that its southern tip was at the top, marked “South Pole.” Titled *América Invertida*, the drawing was intended as a declaration of independence for all Latin American artists, expressing the belief that in order to fulfill their destiny, they must stop seeing themselves as peripheral. In a manifesto published at the time, he wrote, “I have called this ‘The School of the South’ because in reality, our north is the south. There must not be north for us, except in opposition to our south. Therefore we now turn the map upside down, and then we have a true idea of our position, and not as the rest of the world wishes. The point of America, from now on, forever, insistently points to the South, our north.” In the decades since, the art worlds of Iberian America—from Mexico to Brazil to Chile, including the Spanish-speaking



Joaquín Torres-García, *América Invertida*, 1943.

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Caribbean—have established themselves as unique and original powerhouses of creativity. Fed by a diversity of energies and influences including European tradition, modernism, indigenous culture, and current-day political crises, Latin American art today is vibrantly exciting. And while it is increasingly sought after by international collectors outside the region, there is plenty of room for growth.

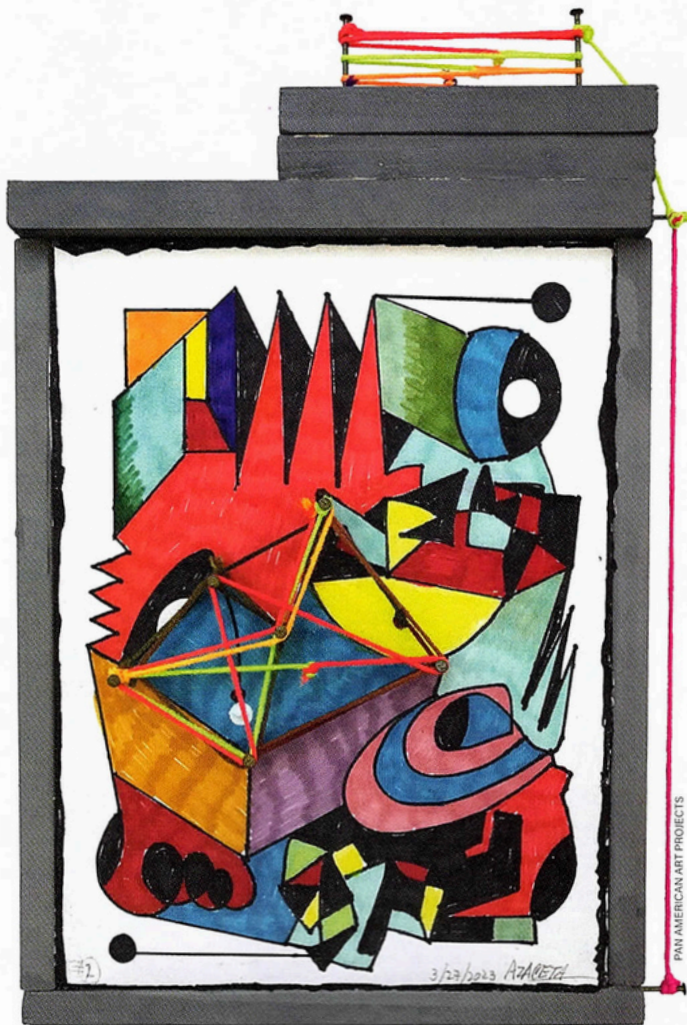
“It is still at the level of curiosity,” says Robert Borlenghi, owner of Pan American Art Projects in Miami, which has been dealing in Latin American art, especially from Cuba, for three decades. “There are very few real collectors of exclusively Latin American art, and they are mostly Latin Americans.” Of course, Latin American masters have long since been admitted to the modernist canon, from Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco to Torres-García, Rufino Tamayo and Wifredo Lam—not to mention the one-woman art industry



José Clemente Orozco,
The Demagogue, 1946.



Joaquín Torres-García, *Estructura constructiva con formas geométricas*, 1943.



Luis Cruz Azaceta, *Innocent Incongruities 5*, 2023.

that is Frida Kahlo. The other Latin or Latin-based women Surrealists, such as Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Kati Horna, are following in her footsteps, gaining in art-historical cred and market value by the day. However, when it comes to the contemporary art scene—or rather, scenes—in Latin America, international recognition is still a work in progress.

Miami is often said to be the northernmost city of Latin America; certainly it has long been the center of the Cuban exile community and more recently a second home for wealthy people from all Latin American countries. Fittingly, then, Miami is the

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Gary Nader

epicenter of the Latin American art market in the U.S., and the art fairs that take place each December are reliable sources for such works and are frequented by collectors from all over the Americas. Dedicated in particular to Latin American art is Pinta Miami, produced by a company that also holds events in Buenos Aires and Lima. The Pérez Art Museum Miami, while diversified in its collection, has a major strength in Latin American art. Another Miami institution that focuses on Latin American art is the Gary Nader Art Centre, founded by the longtime Lebanese-born Dominican art dealer and collector Gary Nader. Its collection comprises works by some 220 artists spanning Mexico to Chile, which Nader says are seen by around 40,000 visitors a year. Speaking of the appeal of Latin American art to North American audiences, Nader says, “They are attracted by the exotic, the life stories, as with Kahlo and even Fernando Botero, the storyteller of Colombia. And then of course there are the avant-gar-



Cecilia Paredes, *Cupcake Rose*, 2023.

de movements, which are extremely important and influential.” Nader also collects non-Latino artists and in December—timed to the Miami art fairs—will open a sculpture park that will feature large-scale works by Botero as well as Frank Stella, Alexander Calder, and Mark di Suvero.

Borlenghi believes that in order for Latin American contemporary art to

really arrive, commercial success is not enough; museums hold the key. He cites an epoch-making show at the MFA Houston 20 years ago, titled—with a clear nod to Torres-García—“Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America.” “That was a very important moment in Latin American art,” says Borlenghi. “It showed that Latin American art is not derivative of North Amer-

ican art, but in reality Latin American art came before North American art.” Considering that Spanish settlement predated English settlement of the New World, that statement is literally true, but it is also arguably true of modern art, in that abstraction and Surrealism achieved a toehold in Latin America earlier than in the U.S. As Nader observes, the Chilean Roberto Matta was a sem-

inal influence on Abstract Expressionism, usually considered a North American movement. The Houston show focused on the period 1920-1970, with 200 works by 67 artists from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and Venezuela. In order for there to be more exhibitions of equal importance devoted to contemporary Latin American art, museums must first possess a critical mass of the works. "There is very little activity of sale of Latin American art to museums in the U.S.," says Borlenghi. "That's where our focus needs to be if we are to do our job well."

In the meantime, though, the artists continue to create, and to some extent, they don't care much about the category of "Latin American art." For one thing, most simply wish to be seen as artists, full stop. For another, the situations in their home countries are so different that it can be difficult and even unproductive to generalize. Take Cuba, for

example, a country that has long been particularly fertile for art. The mixture of influences—Spanish, Indigenous, and African—is partially respon-

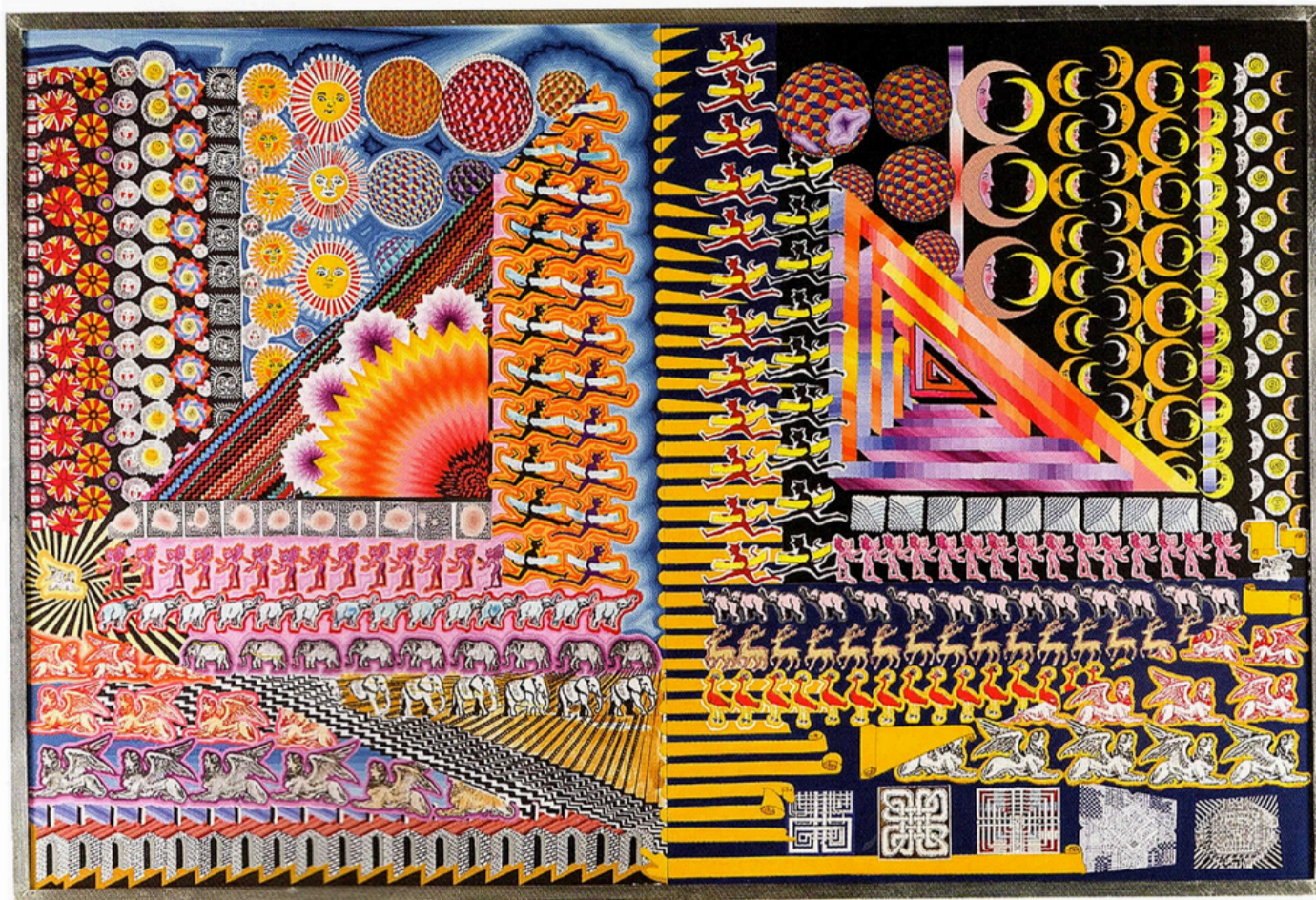
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sible. One of the very greatest modern masters, Wifredo Lam, was from Cuba, and his work integrated the avant-gar-

de conceptions he learned in Europe with the Afro-Cuban aesthetic he grew up with. In the generations since, due to the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath, Cuban art has been deeply preoccupied with migration and exile, which has profoundly affected its character. Ironically, after Cuba opened up to U.S. travel and commerce in the 1990s, artists began to do quite well financially; for a while they were among the wealthiest people in the country. Now, it is much harder to make a living there as an artist, artistic freedom is limited, and many artists have chosen exile. "There is now much less of a market for Cuban artists in Cuba," says Borlenghi. "Typically they have been coming here, and recently going to Spain for a variety of reasons. The trend of migration continues."

One of the greatest Cuban contemporary artists, Kcho (Alexis Leyva), remains on the island and has a dedicated public at home and abroad. None-



Pedro Friedeberg, *Bodas triangulares orgánicas interacciones morganáticas*, 2021.

theless, migration is his major theme, and his found-object sculptural works pun visually on the homemade craft that Cubans use to sail to Florida. J. Roberto Diago, another major figure on the Cuban art scene, also uses found materials, turning them into semi-abstract works that explore Afro-Cuban symbolism and history. José Toirac has an innovative strategy for evading censorship; he makes his graphic compositions, which are highly critical of the Communist regime, out of cut-up fragments of Cuban newspapers and magazines, which are presumably above reproach because they have already passed through the censors. Belkis Ayón, a remarkably talented and visionary woman artist, used a distinctive printmaking technique to depict the rituals of an all-male Afro-Cuban secret society, to which she gained access, if not admission. She died by suicide at the age of 32 in 1999, but her reputation has only grown since then, with a solo museum show that traveled through the U.S. in 2016 and 2017.

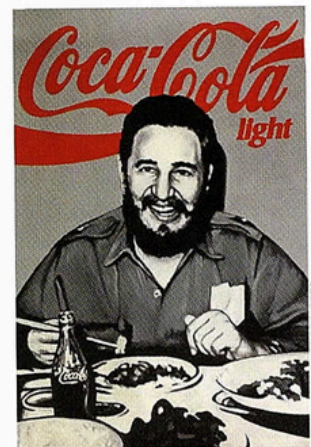
Other regions of Latin America have other concerns, other aesthetics. The late Argentine artist León Ferrari, who died in 2013, discovered his vocation late in life, during a stay in Italy, a country with which Argentina has a long historical connection. His abstract art is based on calligraphic mark-making, inspired by handwriting but conveying only formal, not verbal meaning. Ferrari moved to Brazil to escape the Argentine military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s. Mexican painter Pedro Diego Alvarado-Rivera creates richly colored still lifes that reflect the biodiversity of Mexico as well as the cultural history of the country. Pedro Friedeberg, also from Mexico, works in a vein that can be called Surrealist or Fantastic Realist, combining an enthusiasm for rendering architectural spaces with a colorful exuberance that conjures a candy-colored M.C. Escher-like dreamworld. Cecilia Paredes, from Peru, does “photo performances” in which she depicts herself behind intricately patterned, often floral, backdrops, so that the artist all but disappears into



Pedro Diego Alvarado-Rivera, *Reflejos de Naranjas Chinas*, 2024.



J. Roberto Diago, *Untitled*, 2012.



José Toirac, *Coca Cola Light*, from the *Waiting For the Right Time* series, 2021.

the imaginary landscape.

The achievements of Latin America's contemporary artists testify to a degree of creative ferment that fuels business at home as well as abroad. While the U.S. is where the highest prices tend to be realized, Latin American markets are thriving, too. Nader observes that Rio de Janeiro has some 50 art galleries, all supported by local demand. In a way, the current situation fulfills Torres-García's dream of a self-actualized Latin America, setting its own compass

to true south and creating by and for itself. From the point of view of those who are not of or in Latin America but love its art, much remains to be done. “The gap between Latin American art and the other art worlds is still too big, considering the quality,” says Nader. “For me, it's been a 50-year-long battle. If we don't make it happen, nobody is going to do it for us. We see a difference lately—every major museum in world is collecting the most important Latin American artists. It's really working.”