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ESSAYS

Ways to Talk About Latin American and Latino Art

This year, the Getty initiative known as Pacific Standard Time has focused on the very broad categories of Latino and Latin American art. How we talk about these categories matters.

Elisa Wouk Almino | 6 days ago



Raphael Montañez Ortiz, “Archaeological Find #22: The Aftermath” (Hallazgo arqueológico n.º 2: resultados) (1961), destroyed sofa (wood, cotton, vegetable fiber, wire, and glue) on wooden backing (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

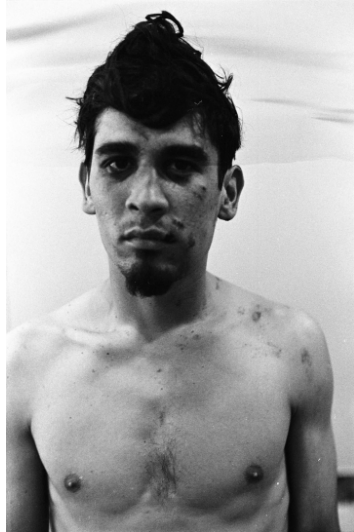
LOS ANGELES — If you’ve been driving through Los Angeles recently, you might’ve noticed some curious ads plastered around the city. “There will be struggle. There will be art,” reads one. “There will be dissonance. There will be art,” reads another. They advertise the more than 75 exhibitions on Latin American and Latino art spread across the city and other areas of Southern California. Together they are a part of [Pacific Standard Time \(PST\)](#), an initiative founded by the Getty to encourage art institutions across Los Angeles to collaborate every few years on one theme. The first, in 2011, was centered on art in [LA from 1945 to 1980](#) and the second, in 2013, on [modern architecture in the city](#). The third installment, known as [PST: LA/LA](#), which opened this September and runs through January, is by far the most ambitious and definitely the most generously funded — to the tune of \$16.3 million, to be exact.

So why the focus on Latino and Latin American art? According to Deborah Marrow, director of the Getty Foundation, it took them and their partners — the Hammer Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) — almost a year to settle on the topic. Marrow explained there was both a “historical” and “contemporary” reason for their decision. “We were, in our origins, part of Latin America,” Marrow said, pointing to how this heritage in LA is still palpable. “In the last census, which was 2010, nearly half the population of LA identified themselves as Latino or Latin American. And many people think that was underrepresented.”

And it mostly was — at least at the major art institutions. Chon Noriega, the director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and an adjunct curator at LACMA, affirms that over the past five decades, the big museums in the city have dedicated very few exhibitions to Latin American and Latino art. “But, if you look at the full range of exhibitions from galleries to community-based spaces,” he said, “you see a large amount in terms of numbers.” Some of these spaces are participating under the umbrella of PST, including the [Social and Public Art Resource Center \(SPARC\)](#), [Self-Help Graphics & Art](#), and [Plaza de la Raza](#).

The [PST: LA/LA](#) programming has been celebrated, in both its advertisement materials and by art critics, as broadening our world view and tearing down walls. “A Celebration Beyond Borders,” reads one of its slogans. *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter says the exhibitions share a goal: to “build bridges over borders and pull those damn walls down.” This kind of language feels hyperbolic and slightly opportunistic given the current political climate. I get the same sense when, back in the car, I look up at those PST ads: “There will be differing opinions. There will be art.” “There will be challenged perceptions. There will be art.” “There will be

anger. There will be art.” It’s not to say the exhibitions do not contain or offer these things, but the narrative somehow feels convenient, and somewhat stereotypical and patronizing — playing into the image of a passionate, rebellious people — all while highlighting that these shows offer something ‘different.’



La Raza staff, “La Raza photographer documents police abuse” (circa 1970) (image courtesy the photographers and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © La Raza staff photographers)

Of course, a program like this shows a necessary openness and scholarly commitment to other cultures and it’s true that the exhibitions do feel scarily poignant at a time when wall prototypes are being constructed at the US-Mexico border and Latin American and Latino populations are being targeted for deportation in this country. *La Raza*, at the Autry Museum, is one exhibition that feels particularly relevant. Through the articles and photographs published in a local Chicano newspaper, the show traces the Chicano Rights movement of the late 1960s and ’70s. Until recently, the LA Unified School District had not approved the exhibition for field trips, expressing concern over the violent images of police brutality. Thankfully, according to the Autry Museum’s Communications department, the school district just changed its mind.

So while the exhibitions are inspiring at least a few uncomfortable conversations, a five-month art program won’t fulfill some utopian ideal, or suddenly make the Latino community feel included in happy La La Land. I am not saying this to be cynical or because the programming isn’t good — it’s excellent — but I want to foreground a discussion that has mostly been tucked toward the very end of critical reviews of *LA:LA*, perhaps because they don’t want to shoot down what is a valuable, well-intended, and vital contribution. Yet, in order to make an initiative like

this truly worthwhile, we need to hold these same institutions accountable after the programming is over. To actually collapse those divisions and borders, museums will have to undergo structural change and hire, for starters, more Latin American and Latino curators (as of now, the majority of curators at LA’s largest art institutions is white, though that is not a problem particular to the city).

PST, at its best, is an auspicious start. It doesn’t make the world go round and bring harmonious bliss, but it does accomplish a lot else. Unlike the ads and grander narratives being drawn from the program, the exhibitions themselves resist stereotypes and easy narratives, and tackle Latin American and Latino art as complex topics.

According to Marrow, “Latin America” was a hotly debated term at one of the panels held in the process of organizing *LA:LA*. “Everyone on the panel was critical of using the term to cover so many time periods, places,” Marrow said. Indeed, the relevance and meaning of “Latin America” shifts across exhibitions, which range in focus from the ancient Americas to the Japanese immigrant community in Latin American countries, to artists who were born in Latin America but spent most of their working lives outside the region. “But, in the end,” Marrow continued in regard to the term, “they all agreed it was handy, and so we use it.”

A few years ago, I interviewed Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, the director of the *Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*, one of the most acclaimed collections of Latin American modern, contemporary, and colonial art. We spoke about the increased visibility of Latin American art in the US and how institutions are choosing to frame it. “There’s this whole debate about what is Latin American art, the separatist position and integrationist position,” he said, referring to the tendency to either isolate Latin American art as its own category or incorporate it into a larger global discourse. Institutions will often take the former approach, creating, for instance, a Latin American art wing at a museum. Pérez-Barreiro, who is on the integrationist side, owed this divide in approach to a “tension between a very sophisticated curatorial debate and institutional politics.”

LA:LA would seem to suffer from this problem — by its very nature, it isolates Latin American and Latino art as their own categories. But with over 75 exhibitions, you won’t come away with a neat definition of either. In fact, some of the strongest exhibitions share an underlying theme: that a sense of place and belonging is a slippery, changeable thing.

Among these is the outstanding exhibition *Home — So Different, So Appealing* that was formerly at LACMA and is now traveling to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. According to co-curator Chon Noriega, before organizing the exhibition with Pilar Tompkins Rivas and Mari Carmen Ramírez, they asked themselves: “How do we get out



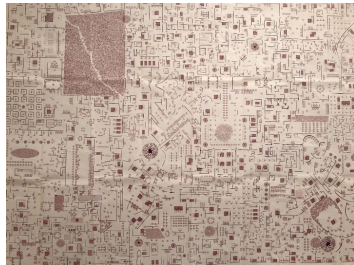
Installation view of *Home — So Different, So Appealing* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) with Leyla Cárdenas, “Excision” (Extracción) (2012) at center

of the conundrum of a category that is in some ways defined by its exclusion from art history?” In the end, they decided to “not focus energies on defending the category, and showing the artwork how it exists more broadly in the world.”

To feel less confined by a premise, they wrote on a sheet of paper the artworks that have remained with them over the years. And they realized they all had to do with the notion of home.

The result is a stunning display, where home is at turns haunting, oppressive, and even unattainable. Houses are fragile and precarious, as in [Leyla Cárdenas’s “Excision \(Extracción\)” \(2012\)](#), where she took a cross section of a room from a historical 1886 Bogotá home that has since been demolished. The chair and desk are sliced in half and bits of wall delicately hang; the barely intact room alludes to the country’s short-term memory, particularly when it comes to its violent past and present.

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León Ferrari, “Bairro” (Neighborhood) (Barrio) (1980), diazotype on wove paper

Life is often so burdened by violent structures that one can’t even escape them in the privacy of one’s own home. Living during Argentina’s [Dirty War of 1976 to 1983](#), [León Ferrari](#) obsessively drew a plan of a neighborhood, calling it “a sort of quotidian madness that is necessary for everything to appear normal.” Home, in other words, is never strictly of one’s own making.

Other artworks in *Home* feel, as Noriega put it, somewhat more “universal.” In [Carmen Argote’s “720 Sq. Ft. Household Mutations” \(2010\)](#), she tore the carpet out of the home she grew up in and installed it along the gallery floor and running up the wall like a sculpture. The

fabric, stained and used over time, is a poetic memorial to childhood.



Carmen Argote, “720 Sq. Ft.: Household Mutations” (720 pies cuadrados: mutaciones domésticas) (2010), carpet from artist’s childhood home and house paint

Looming over *Home*, and other *LA:LA* exhibitions, is the promise of a better life in the US. At the Japanese American National Museum, [Taro Zorrilla’s](#) moving video “[Dream House](#)” (2007) documents the surreal reality of the Mexican village of Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo, which is inhabited predominantly by women, children, and the elderly. Each year, thousands of men travel to the US to send dollars back to their families, and mainly for one express purpose: to build the type of big, beautiful house associated with the American Dream. The families in Ixmiquilpan move ahead with construction, but often the houses are left uninhabited and the families are rarely reunited.



Taro Zorrilla, “DREAM HOUSE” (2010), mixed media installation (collage-maquette)

Zorrillo’s video opens [Transpacific Borderlands: The Art of Japanese Diaspora in Lima, Los Angeles, Mexico City, and São Paulo](#), an exhibition centered on the experience of Japanese immigrants across these diverse cities. Included is the Japanese-Mexican sculptor Kiyoto Ota, known for his alienating, life-size [sculptures of houses](#) that evoke his

empty, lonely family home in Japan. Here, he has installed a wooden, nest-like sculpture that he likens to his mother’s womb. Elsewhere, Olga Moriyama presents her ceramic plates that appear incised with a language composed of squares. A caption accompanies each plate, such as: “I tell people that I don’t have a homeland. I’m Mexican but they insist that I’m Japanese. I feel Japanese, but Japan is not my homeland.”



Kiyoto Ota, "El Nido" (2007), red wood

What and where is home? The question pops up again in the Brazilian artist Valeska Soares's solo exhibition, *Any Moment Now*, at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Throughout the museum, Soares has gathered and created a taxonomy for domestic objects, from a collection of antique glasses, to perfume bottles, to foot stools. This obsession with serializing reminds me of a video by María Teresa Hincapié on view in *Home*, in which she arranges her belongings in concentric squares. Both artists at once treat objects with care and detachment; over time, through the cataloguing process, the objects become deeply lonely. In an accompanying text, Hincapié writes: "the dresses laid out. the black ones close to me ... the bags are alone. the pencils are alone ... everything is alone. we are all alone ... a pile of coffee. a bunch of things."



Valeska Soares, "Finale" (2013), antique table, 151 antique glasses, five pitchers, three decanters, liquor and mirror

Walking through *Any Moment Now*, you encounter hard marble pillows laid about the floor, 500 books about love stacked tightly on a shelf, a ghostly glass chair, and headboards detached from their beds. We cannot sit in these chairs, or read these books, or sleep in these beds; the objects in this largely uninhabitable house seem lost, distant, or out of place.

In the exhibition catalogue, project consultant Júlia Rebouças writes that "displacement" is "both circumstance and essence" in Soares's art. The artist, who is Brazilian but has lived in New

York for 25 years, "is ambivalent about belonging to either of these countries," Rebouças continues.



Valeska Soares, "Et Après (Pillow)" (2012), hand-carved marble

While these shows are just a small fraction of what there is to see in *PST:LA/LA*, they feel emblematic of a larger, resounding point: that one's geography or nationality is just a slice of one's identity, and that to try to sum up Latin American or Latino art is of no real use or service. When you step into the personal worlds of these artists, yes, there will be struggle and dissonance, but there will also be many shared rooms and views.



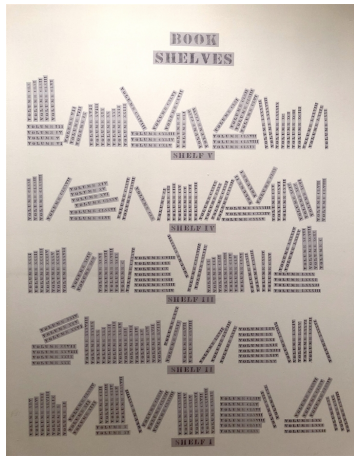
Valeska Soares, "Love Stories IV (Collections V, VI, VII, VIII)" (2008), 500 printed and bound books, wooden shelves

PST: LA/LA continues through January. See [here](#) for a complete schedule of exhibitions and events.

The author's travel expenses were covered by the Getty.

Correction: *A previous version of this article stated Júlia Rebouças was a curator of the Valeska Soares exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. This is incorrect; she*

was a project consultant. This has been fixed.



Luis Camnitzer, "Living Room (Sala de estar)"
(1968) (detail), vinyl



Oscar Oiwa, "Crowd" (2010), oil on canvas

