

Latin America at the End of Politics

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they did not learn the lessons of Europe when they should have done, too bad for them because the moment has passed.

If nothing else, Torres-García, writing his manifesto in 1935, was premature in dismissing the siren of Europe and the United States.

The end of the Second World War brought with it a dramatic change in the artistic climate of Latin America. Artists looked beyond their indigenous subject matter, prompted in part by the growing dominance of the New York school of abstract expressionism. New York became the new mecca. Although abstraction remains popular, many artists have returned to figurative art, but often in a much-transformed way. The influence of surrealism and expressionism lingers.

Though there has been greater plurality in the second half of the twentieth century, Latin American art has become decidedly less nationalistic and less socially committed. Regardless of the “style” of presentation, it has become more academic, more cerebral, and more tied to the psyche of the artist. For example, the work of the Mexican artist Nahum Zenil, who has received considerable attention, explores his personal anxieties of being a homosexual in the traditional social framework of Mexico. The art historian Edward Sullivan describes the common denominators of Zenil’s work as being “self-absorption, self-possession, and narcissism.” Similarly, the Venezuelan artist Alexander Apóstol makes creative use of photography to explore the “enigma of identity.”

✕ The caprices and challenges of being a Latin American artist at the juncture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are suggested by a Brazilian artist, Marcia Grostein. Marcia is a successful artist, but she is not a prominent artist. But which Latin American artist born in the aftermath of the Second World War, and so truly an artist of the second half of the twentieth century, is prominent? The 1997 fall and spring sales of Latin American art by the auction house Sotheby’s are revealing. Only 14 percent of the artists whose work was offered were born after the Second World War. And none of the contemporary artists represented in Sotheby’s auctions is well known. There are so many young (and middle-aged) Latin American artists. But their art has not seized the public imagination, even of that small segment in Latin America who are university educated.

Marcia is the daughter of Jewish emigrants to Brazil. Her mother came from Russia and her father from Poland. Family lore has it that a paternal ancestor was one of Napoleon’s financiers. But the turmoil of Europe drove both sides of Marcia’s family to South America. Marcia’s extended family is spread throughout southern Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. Her own family settled in São Paulo, where her father opened a

jewelry store. Marcia’s mother saw to it that Marcia had a good education, one steeped in European culture. Marcia had piano lessons and studied ballet. And Marcia was frequently taken to see an aunt who was an artist. The aunt taught Marcia to draw. Marcia remembers being taken with the work of the Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani and spending hours copying his portraits. But dancing was her passion. Her father, though, firmly said, “My daughter is not just going to be a dancer.”

So art it was. In 1969, at the age of nineteen, Marcia went to London to study drawing and painting (above all with watercolors) at the Royal Academy of Art. She recalls being drawn to the watercolors of the famed nineteenth-century English painter J.M.W. Turner. She spent hours looking at his work in the Tate Gallery.

After two years in London, Marcia returned to Brazil in 1970. Brazil was in turmoil. The armed forces were clumsily repressing small groups trying to ignite a socialist revolution. Neighboring Uruguay and Argentina were in even more turmoil. But Marcia was not drawn to politics. She remained focused on art. And, as she says, “At the time, art did not mean much in Brazil.” The country’s folk art did not “touch” her, and neither did the country’s colonial or “modern” artists. Yet Marcia continued to draw and to paint. Icons for her were the English painter Francis Bacon and the American—or New York—painter Willem de Kooning. In 1977, at age twenty-eight, Marcia left Brazil, moving to New York.

One summer day on one of Long Island’s nicer beaches, Marcia was introduced to “the assistant” of Willem de Kooning. Marcia could not resist asking for de Kooning’s telephone number and calling him, saying, “My dream is to meet you. Is that possible?” They met the next day, at ten in the morning. She stayed until eleven that night. Another day she showed him photographs of her work, asking him not to critique the work, but instead to recommend a teacher. He said, “You don’t need a teacher; you need to show your work in New York.” De Kooning introduced her first New York exhibit, giving her a breach into the vaunted world of “established artists.”

Other shows followed, in both museums and galleries. And Marcia’s work has been included with the work of other contemporary artists in museum exhibits. Public showings of her work have enabled her to sell paintings and, more recently, sculpture. In many though not all showings of her work, Marcia is identified as a Brazilian artist. For example, her work was included in a 1985 exhibit titled “Today’s Art of Brazil,” at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. In 1994 her work was included in an exhibit titled “Small Formats in Latin America,” at a gallery in Puerto Rico. Moreover, in her native Brazil her

work has not only been shown in private galleries, but also included in the biennials of São Paulo. Thus, in Brazil she is accepted as a “Brazilian artist.” Indeed, she has been honored with a twenty-year retrospective at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo and the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro.

Marcia is aware of the different facets of her identity: a Brazilian, a member of a large but tight-knit family with a European heritage, a Jew, a woman, a New Yorker, an artist. . . . But Marcia says she has no special affinity for any one facet of her identity. She does not want to be part of any clique or part of any movement. She dislikes labels. She draws a parallel with how she clothes herself: she aspires “to have style, but not to follow fashion.” When I, daringly, asked her what makes her art “Brazilian,” she replied, after a shrug of her shoulders, that her work “reflects the color, energy, and anxiety of Brazil.”

An erudite art historian in New York, trained at Columbia University and specializing in medieval European art, gave me a cruel but haunting critique of Latin American art. He said it is *derivative*, the dreaded word in art criticism, suggesting there is little that is original. Latin American art, he said, is not much more than René Magritte—French surrealism—Ernst Kirchner—German expressionism—and assorted tropical motifs. I asked Marcia what she thought of the caustic remark. I was surprised when she said, “Oh, I agree.”

For Marcia, though, it is now New York that has a hold over Latin American artists. “To be a successful Latin American artist, you have to come through New York. Doing so—and prospering—gives you the stamp of approval, which is foolish, but that is the way it is.” Marcia adds, however, “It is dangerous coming to New York. You lose your purity.”

Marcia has prospered in New York. After being introduced by de Kooning at the Suydan Gallery, she had a solo exhibit at the Sutton Gallery. A blurb for that exhibit was written by the artist James Rosenquist, with whom she had a relationship. He was, Marcia acknowledges, helpful to her career. And Marcia met Betty Parsons, a celebrated art dealer, fond of promoting “new talent.” She showed Marcia’s work. Subsequently, Marcia had a relationship with another celebrated New York-based artist, Malcolm Morley. They were together five years, part of which—sandwiched in the middle—they were married (the only time Marcia says she has been “married on paper”). Marcia always wanted to have children, but it never came to be. But Marcia is comfortable in New York. She has a wealth of friends and “contacts,” a beautiful apartment between Madison Avenue and Park Avenue (on the Upper East Side), and her cherished walks in Central Park.

In New York, Marcia works in the living room of her apartment.

(In São Paulo she has a studio.) Marcia does not have a routine for working. And she does not have a plan for how much time she spends in New York and how much time she stays in Brazil. She can go three months without working, though during this time she may, as she says, promote her work, look for opportunities to exhibit it, and sell it. When Marcia turns to creating art, she often works all day and well into the night for weeks on end. If she is painting, she goes straight to a blank canvas; she does not do preliminary sketches. She takes a long time to finish a composition—repainting and repainting until she is satisfied. She also does sculpture—especially of chairs—and sometimes “choreography,” which is photographed, recording a series of images. Marcia says her art is influenced by everything. She strives to avoid what she feels is a common fault of artists—to find a formula and never evolve. If there is a constant to Marcia’s art, across mediums, it is, she believes, that all her art “has some ironic content.”

One of Marcia’s most well-received paintings, one that has been exhibited on numerous occasions, is a large work titled *Matisse in the Ocean and Crabs in the Sky*. The painting is a riot of creatures from a tidal pool, thrown together and rendered in bright colors—red, yellow, orange, green, blue, and violet. I like the painting. It conveys energy, unease, and all the mystery of the sea. As I looked at the painting in Marcia’s apartment, she explained to me that she conceived the work when Mikhail Gorbachev was visiting the United States. Marcia thought of Henri Matisse’s two paintings called *Dance*, one copy of which is in Russia (then the Soviet Union) and the other in the United States (at the Museum of Modern Art in New York).

In addition to painting, Marcia produces sculpture, most of which are renderings of chairs. Why chairs? Marcia explains that she herself did not know for some time. But through “therapy,” she concluded that she was haunted by the memory of her mother, who was reduced to sitting in a chair, watching “soap operas” on television, after learning that her husband—Marcia’s father—was having an affair with one of her friends. Seeing her mother wasting away hurt Marcia; it depressed her. Marcia’s chairs are sometimes small, sometimes large, always distorted—or contorted. While in Brazil in early 1999, Marcia created two works of art that I find engaging. One work is titled *Political Stress*. It is the frame of a beach chair, which has been “wrapped” with newspaper clippings of articles on politics. The second work is titled *Cultural Stress*. It is another beach chair, stripped to its frame, which has been plastered with newspaper articles about cultural events. *Cultural Stress*, Marcia explains, refers to all of the fervor in Brazil to see cultural events that actually have no depth, that are attended just for the opportunity “to be seen” by members of one’s social class—or, better yet, to

be seen and noticed by members of a higher social class. At the same time, Marcia says, in Brazil there can be a wonderful play that no one will attend because it is being performed in the middle of “nowhere.”

I liked the two works, but I quickly realized that without the presence of Marcia to explain what had prompted her to create the two works, I would not pay attention to them. In fact, walking by them—if they were in a museum—I might even disparage them. Like much contemporary Latin American art, Marcia’s art is cerebral, and so—to the casual viewer—much of the art is inaccessible. Part of the “art” is the concept that inspired it, the context in which it was produced, and the life of the artist. But most viewers—real or potential—do not have the opportunity to do more than glance at the “plastic art” and, perhaps, read from a small label what is often an enigmatic title.

Similarly, in an interview in the winter 2000 issue of the magazine *Bomb*, another Brazilian sculptor, Ernesto Neto, described his work in baffling terms:

My work is first and foremost a contemporary sculpture, it speaks of the finite and the infinite, of the macroscopic and the microscopic, the internal and the external, by the masculine and feminine powers, but sex is like a snake, it slithers through everything.

What, exactly, does this description tell us? I am not sure. But Ernesto Neto, too, like Marcia, is “successful.”

Marcia’s art is in museum and private collections in Latin America (Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina), the United States, Europe, and Japan. The acquisition of her work delights Marcia. She is proudest of the purchase of one of her paintings by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The piece is an oil painting titled *The Sacred Garden of Adam*. The work is part of a series of paintings Marcia did from 1988 to 1990 of imaginary gardens. The subject of the painting is a lone monkey perched on a rococo-looking branch. Behind the monkey is an off-blue sky; on either side is vegetation adorned with flowers. The painting is thick with paint, the monkey and his roost rendered in an expressionistic style.

Marcia says that although the Metropolitan Museum of Art had previously been given works of art by Brazilians, her painting was the first by a Brazilian to have been purchased by the venerable museum. The painting is not on permanent exhibition, but Marcia believes it has been twice put out for exhibition in the galleries of twentieth-century art. I do not know what prompted curators to select the painting for purchase (which they did through a gallery). But I can not help but feel that the painting and its purchase by the Metropolitan Museum is ironic. Whatever else the painting is, it is a picture of a monkey in the

jungle. This image surely can be seen in Brazil; the Amazon is certainly full of monkeys in trees. But is this the image of Brazil, a country of 160 million people and the world’s tenth largest economy, to be seen in New York, in a gallery dedicated to the work of the twentieth century? And does it take a Brazilian of Marcia’s background, training, and talent to contribute such a “picturesque” or “folkloric” image of such a large and complex country? Or am I a prisoner of my long-held association of Latin American art with the murals of Diego Rivera, overflowing with their piercing social commentary and political idealism?

Marcia is proud of her art and enjoys creating it. There are other artists whose company she courts and artists whose work she admires. Among her fellow Latin Americans, for example, she likes the work of the Cuban artist José Bedia (who resides in Miami). And Marcia admires contemporary Latin American photography. Still, Marcia is disenchanted with “the art world.” Being an artist, she says, is difficult. There are so many artists and such competition. Success can be so transient; you can be passed through a corridor of fame “like a potato.” Artists have “to hype themselves, do the politics” to find a livable place in a cruel hierarchy, “where if I am someone powerful, I can make you a star in two minutes.” (Left unsaid, I suppose, is that if I am powerful, I can also take your stardom away if I want.) What is slighted in this “marketing” is the art itself. Moreover, according to Marcia, artists are increasingly atomized. Yes, there are art journals that serve as forums, but true community among artists is rare. Marcia is creative, energetic, and savvy, but she is still hostage of the caprices and constraints of the “art world.”

At the juncture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the sensibilities, the aspirations, and even—perhaps—the art of Latin American artists seem prescribed by a larger social context, one that is anxious to be free of unsettling political questions, international (or “global”) in setting standards and tastes, rushed, atomized, self-conscious, and unabashedly elitist.