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LA/LA Land

Will PST Be a “Steroid Injection” for the Latin American Art Market?



Mira Schendel, *Untitled*, from the series *Droguinhas (Little Nothings)* (1966) © the Estate of Mira Schendel. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

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This week, almost 100 cultural institutions and galleries throughout Southern California will turn their attention to Latin America and the influence of Latino art on Los Angeles with the second edition of “[Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA](#)” (preview this weekend, public opening 15 September through January 2018). The focus is “perhaps a little unexpected because LA has not been at the forefront of the presentation of Latin American art in the US”, says Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, the director and chief curator of [Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros](#), who will also be the [curator of the 33rd Bienal de São Paulo](#) next year.

PST is like a “steroid injection—it’s an attempt to jump-start a process that hasn’t happened organically by putting the muscle of the Getty behind it”, Pérez-Barreiro says. The Getty Foundation funneled more than \$16m in grants into research and exhibitions following the success of the first edition (which took place in 2011-12 and focused on art made in Los Angeles between 1945 and 1980). “The Getty made a big financial commitment to develop PST. It’s really the only institution that could pull off something at this scale,” he adds.

Such a concerted effort to reconfigure our understanding of Latin American art in the US would have been unimaginable 30 years ago. “Certainly in an institution like MoMA—where I was working in the late 1980s—there wasn’t a real understanding of the significance of Latin American postwar and contemporary art, except perhaps by Kynaston McShine,” says [Lynn Zelevansky](#), the departing director of the [Carnegie Museum of Art](#) in Pittsburgh. “Everybody was still very focused on Europe—even focusing on Europe was new to us.”

The market was similarly limited: the type of material offered in the New York Latin American auctions showed “a very narrow perspective, focusing on Mexican muralism, Surrealism, Boteroism”, Pérez-Barreiro says. Dealers were equally ambivalent.

On the plane back, a group of us thought of importing this work

Yet it was the market that first began to embrace Latin American art. Mary Sabbatino, director and partner of [Galerie Lelong](#), initially visited Brazil in 1993 with a group of American curators and dealers intent on seeing as much art as possible (Sabbatino was already working with the Brazilian artist Jac Leirner).

During the trip she encountered the work of artists such as Hélio Oiticica (the subject of a major retrospective currently at the Whitney Museum, co-curated by Zelevansky, and whose estate Lelong represents). “On the plane on the way back, a group of us thought of importing the work of these artists—who were as yet unknown—to New York. These shows were an integral part of the introduction of many of these artists,” Sabbatino says.



Hélio Oiticica and B33 Box Bolide 17—“Homage to Cara de Cavalo” (poem box 2) (1965-66).
 Courtesy Projecto Hélio Oiticica. Photo credit: Claudio Oiticica

“It is only when the collecting community gets involved in a particular type of art that museums can really engage in a meaningful way,” Pérez-Barreiro says. This explains why certain parts of the US have deeper holdings of Latin American art than others: collectors in places such as New York, Texas and Florida have played a hugely important role in developing the ecosystem of support.

While these collectors are devoted, they are still relatively few in number: “You can count on the fingers of two hands the really serious collectors,” Zelevansky says. This is more to do with supply than demand, says Allan Schwartzman: “Engaging a significant number of collectors in Latin American art has been seamless because the art connects so well to the American and European work they were already collecting, but is also less familiar and therefore engaging. The hardest thing in terms of great postwar Brazilian art is sourcing.”

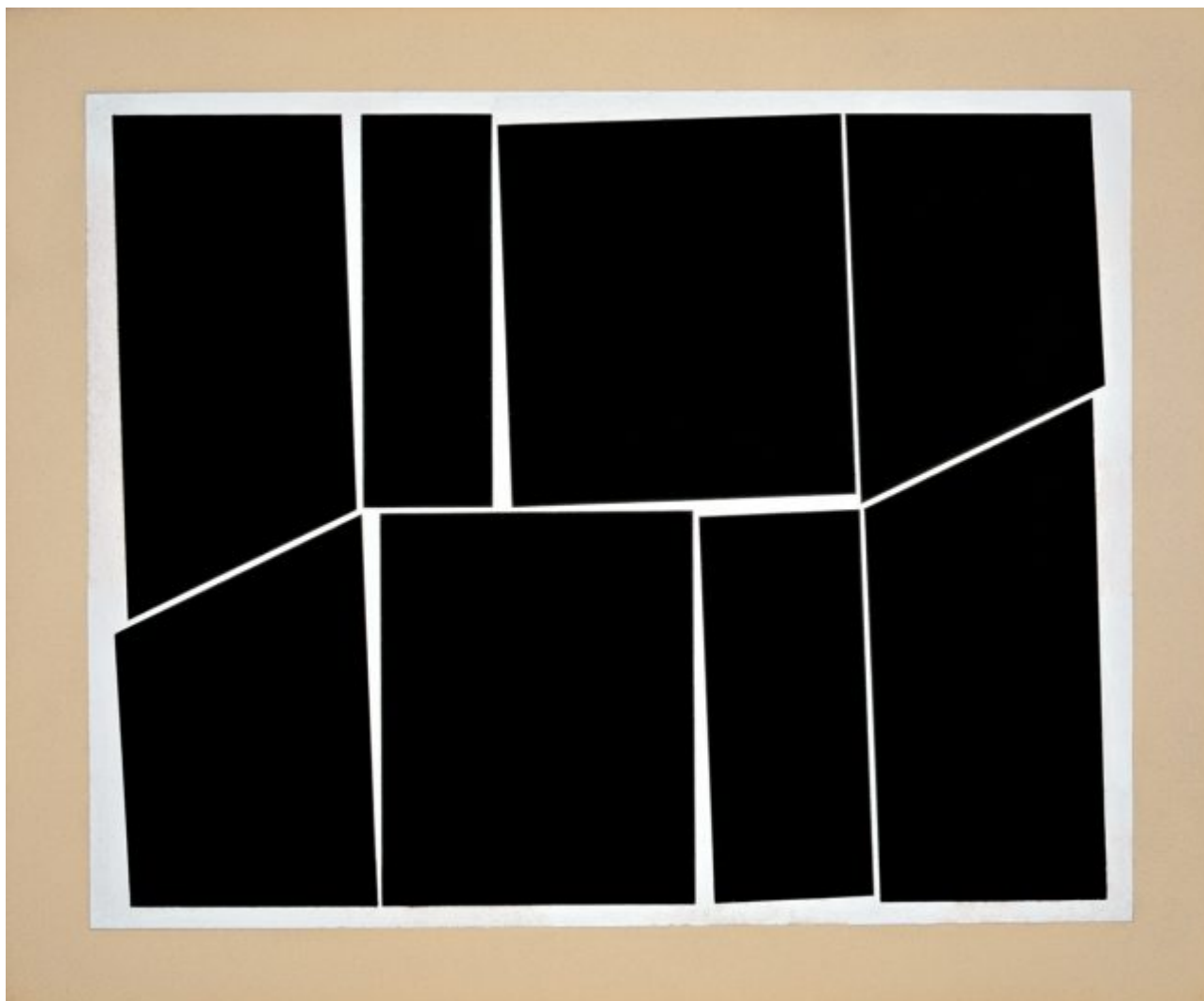
There is a big difference between the domestic and international markets. “The local market is so strong that prices are incredibly high for Brazilian artists whose work is seen as important locally, but who are virtually unheard-of in the United

States or Europe,” Pérez-Barreiro says. “This is often difficult for non-local collectors to understand.”

Brazilian collectors have “actively collected the work of great Brazilian artists since the inception of the work”, Schwartzman says, adding that these “are healthy, long-standing markets of substantial price that might be surprising to some Americans who aren’t familiar with the work”.

The prices might be surprising to Americans unfamiliar with the work

Artists such as Lygia Clark, Mira Schendel, Hélio Oiticica and Alfredo Volpi are expensive locally. “Major works sell well in excess of \$1m for many of these artists, and go up to \$4m for certain works, because there has been a healthy, continuous trade in their work,” he says. “Even through periods in which the Brazilian economy has been greatly challenged, prices haven’t really gone down. There is a long-term commitment by the core collectors within the country, of whom there are many. This art has been collected deeply and well.”



Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema* (1958). Courtesy Projecto Hélio Oiticica. Photo credit: César Oiticica Filho

The US and European public prices are not on a par. For example, the auction record for Lygia Clark is \$2.25m for *Contra Relevo (Objeto N. 7)* (1959) (est. \$600,000-\$800,000) which was set at Phillips New York in May 2013, while a new record for a work by Mira Schendel was set at \$1.5m in May at Sotheby’s New York for *Untitled, from the series Droguinhas (Little Nothings)* (1966) (est. \$1.2m-\$1.8m). Meanwhile, for Hélio Oiticica, the auction record is \$362,500 for *Metaesquema (Dois Brancos)* (1958) (est. \$80,000-\$120,000) set at Christie’s New York in November 2010, and the record for a work by Alfredo Volpi was set at Christie’s New York in November 2011, when \$842,500 was paid for *Bandeirinhas Estruturadas* (around 1966) (est. \$250,000-\$350,000).

“A core issue for the art market in general—its lack of transparency and asymmetry in pricing—is multiplied to the X factor for Latin American art,” Pérez-Barreiro says. “Most of the work is not traded publicly but rather through a network of dealers and advisors, which makes it impossible to track comparables and incredibly difficult to establish a pricing structure.”

While the international market has come a long way, the past 20 years have been about “growth and acceptance—it’s not been a meteor”, Sabbatino says. “The market for great artists from these countries is still undervalued.”

Unless you were willing to get on a plane, you wouldn’t have access to the work

Certain barriers have been steadily eroding, thanks largely to international art fairs and the increasing focus of museums and the market on Modernism beyond Europe and America. “For a long time, unless you were willing to get on a plane to Lima or São Paulo, you wouldn’t have access to the work,” Pérez-Barreiro says. “If you wanted a work by Oiticica, you needed to navigate through a series of intensely complicated processes in Brazil. Art fairs have made that process much easier in that they created a retail option for these artists and the galleries that represent them.”

A complete sea change has occurred in terms of visibility and representation and yet there remains a depth and diversity of material to be explored and embraced by North American and European museums and markets. There are many underappreciated artists—and entire movements—beyond the most well known. Pérez-Barreiro hopes that over the course of the next five to ten years, a greater “number of diverse periods within Latin American art history will go through the same process of acceptance and celebration that has occurred with modern geometric abstraction”.

Zelevansky believes that the focus might broaden geographically: “While cultures and countries are always going in and out of favor, we will continue to look at Latin America, with a focus on countries such as Chile and Peru.”

The enormous effort put into PST will generate new, unknown outcomes, Sabbatino says. “PST is a fantastic way to show a great many important artists, and with the Getty’s support it will have a lasting effect. Scholarship and catalogues are essential in setting out the history of this art and making sure that it is integrated into the history already written. Great art speaks across time and culture.”