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ART REVIEW

Expanding the Scope of 'Latin American Art'

Eight not-to-be-missed shows offer scores of creators and local art traditions from New York, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, Mexico and South America.



By Holland Cotter

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You don't need to know anything about art to be stopped in your tracks by what's on the walls of El Museo del Barrio these days: the fantastic ballpoint pen drawings by Consuelo (Chelo) González Amézcua (1903-1975), a Mexican immigrant to Texas; the stupefyingly intricate collages of Felipe Jesus Consalvos, who was born in Havana and died in Philadelphia, where in 1983 his life's work was found in a garage sale; and the pictographic paintings of Puerto Rican-born Eloy Blanco (1933-1984), who came to New York City to study art and learned from fellow Latinos about the Indigenous Taino culture of his homeland — a culture he ended up making the wellspring of his work.

This season has brought a bounty of historical shows of Latin American and Latino art, two cultural categories that are closely related without being interchangeable. Latin American is generally understood to designate art originating in the southern hemisphere of the Americas. Latino (with its Latina and Latinx cognates) refers to work by artists of Latin American descent working in the United States. But both terms are spacious and mutable.

El Museo del Barrio

The two meet in a pair of exhibitions at El Museo del Barrio. The larger, "Popular Painters and Other Visionaries," spotlights work by 35 artists — González Amézcua, Consalvos and Blanco among them — born in the first half of the 20th century. Most are from Latin America; and many are self-taught, which means that much of the work doesn't adhere to the mainstream market definition of "Latin American art" as work influenced, and elevated, by an association with elite European modernism.

Organized by El Museo curators Rodrigo Moura and Susanna V. Temkin, the show offers a counterargument from the start, with a display of three banners, glinting with sequins, and embroidered with mystical symbols. They were made by Antoine Oleyant (1955-1992), a Vodou priest from Haiti, and represent a distinctive local art tradition, one with clear Afro-Atlantic sources.

Other pieces, many culled from El Museo's permanent collection, support the case for an expanded view of Latin American art, one that incorporates 1950s paintings of Yoruba myths by Rafael Borjes de Oliveira, a Brazilian policeman and Candomblé devotee, along with Asilia Guillén's stitch-fine depictions of scenes from Nicaraguan history; but also the work of Latinx artists like Consalvos and Blanco, who were born in Latin America but spent their creative years in the United States.

Taller Boricua

In 1969, another volunteer grassroots start-up, Taller Boricua, also called the Puerto Rican Workshop, set up shop in a public school classroom. It's still in operation and maintains a modest gallery in the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center at 106th Street and Lexington Avenue, where a founder, the artist Marcos Dimas, has installed a not-to-be-missed show.

It's titled "Temporal Chronology," and that's exactly what it is: a year-by-year timeline of the Workshop's history mapped out on the gallery walls in hundreds of pieces of printed ephemera: exhibition posters, letters, protest signs, newspaper clips. The wraparound archive also doubles as a half-century document of unbroken community activism, which persists even as the community changes. And it's a personal record of Dimas's career as artist-worker and political witness. (What's on the walls has been stored in his apartment.) The city should honor him with a medal, and give Taller Boricua an extra shot of funding.

Americas Society

Dimas's name gets a mention in an ambitious group exhibition called "This Must Be the Place: Latin American Artists in New York, 1965-1975" at Americas Society.

The narrative here is of artists from South and Central America coming to New York City, a newly hot international cultural center, some to explore career opportunities, others to escape political repression. Most didn't think of themselves on arrival particularly as "Latin American," never mind "Latino." And while the show acknowledges the longtime presence of Latino artists in the city, there seems to have little interchange between them and the newcomers.

Race and class played a role in this, and differing senses of investment in the city. To Latino artists it was both home and battleground. To Latin American transplants it was a stage where a politics of aesthetics was playing out in new avant-garde styles and forms: Minimalism, Conceptualism, video and performance. And what extraordinary artists the experiments brought to New York: temporarily, Hélio Oiticica from Brazil, Marta Minujín from Argentina, Zilia Sánchez Dominguez from Cuba; permanently, Luis Camnitzer from Uruguay, Juan Downey from Chile, Freddy Rodríguez from the Dominican Republic.

They are among some 40 artists and collectives in the show, organized by the Americas Society curator Aimé Iglesias Lukin, with Mariana Fernández, Tie Jojima and Natalia Viera Salgado — which comes in two parts, one through this Saturday, Dec. 18, the other, with different work by the same artists, opening Jan. 22.

The Galleries

Work by Latin American artists who produced art in the United States can also be found in galleries. A small show called "José Antonio Fernández-Muro: Geometry in Transfer" at the **Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)**, on the Upper East Side, surveys work from the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the Argentine artist moved, with his wife, the painter Sarah Grilo, to New York from Buenos Aires. In South America he was associated with an ethereal and utopian strain of geometric abstraction. In New York, the quietist impulse hit a bump: paintings were based on rubbings he made of Manhattan

sewer grates and manhole covers. The show, organized by Megan Kincaid, an instructor at New York University, gives us both before and after work, equally beautiful.

Also on the Upper East Side, **Henrique Faria Gallery**, which specializes in Latin American art, is showing work by the Swiss-born Venezuelan photographer Luis Molina-Pantin, who calls himself “an urban archaeologist.” On visits to New York from 2001 to 2006, he photographed (with a hidden camera) the back room offices of big-deal Chelsea galleries, sterile, high-ceilinged, art-free spaces that suggest mortuaries. During the same decade, disguised as a real estate agent, he was shooting Disneyesque drug-baron mansions in Colombia, one a miniature version of the Taj Mahal. In the show, it’s hard to decide which version of power architecture is weirder.

And a few blocks away, at **Hunter College’s Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Gallery**, “Life as Activity: David Lamelas” is celebrating the career of the veteran Argentina-born conceptualist, focusing on two of his films. The longer one, “The Desert People,” is a rough and interesting pseudo-documentary about researching Native American life, made in 1974 in Los Angeles. “The Invention of Dr. Morel” was made in Europe in 2000. It’s polished and spooky and has a hologram — a kind of proto-NFT? — for a heroine. The exhibition was developed by students in a Hunter graduate seminar led by Harper Montgomery, a professor, with the artist participating via Zoom.

Hunter College is home to the invaluable Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños). And the **Hunter East Harlem Gallery** at 119th Street and Third Avenue has given significant exposure to Latino art, as it is doing now with “Lina Puerta: Migration, Nature, and the Feminine,” a compact midcareer survey of sculpture by an artist raised in Colombia and created during her time as an East Harlem resident. Puerta’s assemblages, with their fake tropical greenery, faux fur, lace, rhinestones and sexualized forms, represent the exoticism that some Latin American Conceptualists were rejecting, but that has, in Puerta’s hands, a critical politics (eco-feminist, anti-colonialist) of its own. As conceived by Klaudia Ofwona Draber and Arden Sherman (the gallery’s director), the show is too much, and proud.

A final strong exhibition is far downtown at South Street Seaport, in a new gallery named **Calderón**. Its debut show features two New York painters, Shellyne Rodriguez and Danielle De Jesus, who focus on the different Latino worlds they’ve been part of.

De Jesus spent her childhood in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and paints memory-portraits of people there. Many lived and died in poverty, or were pushed out of their homes as real estate values rose. Rodriguez grew up in the Soundview section of the Bronx. Her color pencil drawings are portraits too, but they’re not sad; they’re sassy. And in compositions based on vintage hip-hop fliers, figures are surrounded by words: song lyrics, advertising slogans, Bronx street names, quotes from Frantz Fanon. This is a world that may partly exist in the past, but it’s jumpily noisy, and still alive.

Latino/Latina/Latinx continues to defy easy definition, but attempts to do so keep coming, the latest being the Winter 2021 “**Latinx**” issue of **Aperture magazine**, guest-edited by Pilar Tompkins Rivas. In 17 essays it circles and probes the subject from many angles. What comes through in the end is not consensus but a kind of wild richness. Why try to pin down, and narrow, a concept that has, after all, always contained multitudes?

Where to See Latin American and Latino Artists

Popular Painters and Other Visionaries, and the historical photo show **En Foco: The New York Puerto Rican Experience, 1973—74**. Through Feb. 27, El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 105th Street, Manhattan, (212) 831-7272; elmuseo.org,

This Must Be the Place: Latin American Artists in New York, 1965—1975

Part 1 through Dec. 18; Part 2, Jan. 19 through May 14; Americas Society, 680 Park Avenue at 68th Street, Manhattan, (212) 249-8950; as-coa.org.

Temporal Chronology

Taller Boricua Gallery, 1680 Lexington Avenue at 106th Street, (212) 831-4333; tallerboricua.org.

Lina Puerta: Migration, Nature, and the Feminine

Through Feb. 5, Hunter East Harlem Gallery, 2180 Third Avenue at 119th Street, Manhattan; (212) 396 7819; huntereastharlemgallery.org

Life as Activity: David Lamelas

Through Dec. 18, Hunter College Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Gallery, 132 East 68th Street, Manhattan, leubsdorfgallery.org.

José Antonio Fernández-Muro: Geometry in Transfer

Through Feb. 12, ISLAA (Institute for Studies on Latin American Art), 50 East 78th Street, Manhattan, www.islaa.org.

Luis Molina-Pantin: Everything Must Go

Through Feb. 12, Henrique Faria, 35 E. 67th St., Manhattan, (212) 517-4609; henriquefaria.com.

Danielle De Jesus and Shellyne Rodriguez: Siempre En La Calle

Through Jan. 29, Calderón, 106 South Street, Manhattan, (929) 624-2878; calderon-ny.com.

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