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Why Are We Not Paying Attention to Latin American Art?



Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa, Mimesis

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While Latin American contemporary art has become increasingly popular in other parts of the world, it does not seem to have tickled our fancy in Asia. Given the region's cultural history and the distinct emotiveness in its art, it might be time for us to sit up and pay attention.

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Interest in Latin American art has increased significantly across North America and Europe during the past decade. According to industry observers, Art Basel Miami Beach, which commenced in late 2002, was one of the leading factors in expanding awareness and interest in Latin American art among international art collectors.

Graeme Briggs, an Australian collector who has been focusing on Latin American art since the early 2000s, shared with CoBo Social via email that throughout the past decade many Latin American galleries have been exhibiting at international art fairs such as The Armory Show, Frieze London, and Art Basel. Also, at the last Art Basel Miami Beach in December 2019, "more than 20% of the participating galleries represented Latin American artists."



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Art-Basel-Miami-2019-NOVA-section-booth-N01-Pablo-Accinelli-Mariela-Scafati-e1586169824861.jpg>)

Installation view of Latin American artists Pablo Accinelli and Mariela Scafati's work at NOVA section of Art Basel Miami 2019. Image courtesy of Art Basel Miami.

"The FOCUS section of ARCO Madrid (the main contemporary art fair in the city) over the past six years has featured artists from a specific Latin American country. Major museums, such as the Tate Modern, now have defined programmes to acquire Latin American artworks," he added.

Most recently, at the beginning of March 2020, famed Miami art collector Jorge Pérez announced the donation of a dozen works by Latin American artists and Latino artists from the United States, such as Jorge E. Eielson of Peru, Eugenio Dittborn of Chile, and Juan Carlos Alom of Cuba, to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, the national museum of modern art in Spain. According to his

spokesperson

(<https://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/visual-arts/article240860146.html>), this move is part of the collector's plans to create closer links between the European and Latin American art worlds. Latin America's leading art fair, Zona Maco in Mexico City, also saw strong sales (<https://news.artnet.com/market/zona-maco-mexico-fair-1771575>) in February this year.

Nonetheless, there is an apparent lack of appreciation and understanding of Latin American art on our side of the pond.

"I have found that there is little or no interest in Latin American art in Southeast Asia and Asia, apart from 'trophy works' by Fernando Botero. The recent Singapore Art Week did not feature any contemporary Latin American artists, and the (cancelled) Art Basel Hong Kong art fair lists have a very small representation of Latin American artists," Briggs said.



(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2016_NYR_12167_0043_000fernando_botero_a_family-e1586169992375.jpg)

Fernando Botero, A Family, 1997, oil on canvas, 163.8 x 187.3 cm.
Image courtesy of Marlborough Gallery.

Given the strength and vivacity of the artwork produced in the region, as well as the contrasting yet parallel cultural histories between parts of Asia and Latin America, it would make sense to pay attention to Latin American art.

Latin America consists

(<https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-countries-in-Latin-America-2061416>) of the entire continent of South America, in addition to Mexico, Central America, and the islands of the Caribbean. While the people of this region experienced conquest, colonisation, and independence from Spain and

Portugal throughout the 15th to early 19th centuries, each country has their own distinctive history—not dissimilar to Southeast Asia.

Argentinian art collector Benedicta Badia Nordenstahl, who works closely with the art scenes in various cities across the world including Chicago and Singapore, spoke to CoBo Social about the connections between the two regions. “Both South America and Southeast Asia share a specific tension in their identity construction with their colonial pasts, but also with today’s social inequality, dictatorial regimes, high levels of precarity, the perpetuation of perverse exploitation infrastructures, diasporas, discrimination, corruption and of course their current role in the world’s geopolitical game,” she said.

Nordenstahl also highlighted the quality and distinctiveness of Latin American art: “It is art that is very attractive and has maintained authenticity. Its complexity baffles the ones that approach it with the Eurocentric measuring tape. It generates curiosity and astonishment, against all ‘logic.’ It is art that is risky, contradictory, raw, incisive and disruptive.”

The description is especially befitting to Guatemalan artist Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa’s body of work. The artist

(<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/naufus-ramirez-figueroa>), who has shown at the Tate Modern, London; the Gwangju Biennale, South Korea; and the Biennale de Lyon, France, among

various other international institutions, is known for creating performances that use his own body in all its socially unacceptable, fleshy glory, with an assortment of physical materials and elements to articulate the experience of his own displacement during and following the Guatemalan Civil War of 1960–1996.

One of Ramírez-Figueroa's most evocative works is *Mimesis of Mimesis* (2016), presented within the ornate rooms of the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam. He lay asleep on a makeshift mattress comprised of different materials, his body entirely nude save for coils of string wound across his flesh. The performance was accompanied by a presentation of the video works of two other performances, *Illusion of Matter* (2015) and *Life in His Mouth, Death Cradles Her Arm* (2016), as part of a larger series by the artist.



(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Naufus-Ramírez-Figueroa-NRF_014-Mimesis-of-Mimesis-2016.png)

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa, *Mimesis of Mimesis*, 2016, performance for video. Image courtesy of the artist.

On the other hand, queer serigraphist, painter, and professor Mariela Scafati's art is colourful, quirky, and filled with character. The Argentina-based artist uses two dimensional paintings to create three dimensional entities through the use of old clothing, furniture, and rope. The fabrics form the shape of paintings, dragging along the floor and wall, moving up furniture, and hanging from the ceiling. Colour is used to distinguish objects and resemble bodily form. There are many layers to unfold in Scafati's work, physically and conceptually. Even museums such as the Guggenheim Museum, New York and the Latin American Museum of Art, Argentina collect (<https://frieze.com/fair-programme/mariela-scafati>) her art.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Body-sobre-mesita-2015.-Mariela-Scafati.-Courtesy-of-the-artist-jpg.jpg>)

Mariela Scafati, *Body Sobre Mesita*, 2015, painting, 70.0 x 50.0 x 90.0 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Then there is Colombian artist Carlos Motta. One of his more interesting works is *Shapes of Freedom* (2012–13), an installation that portrays a chronological compilation of the history of the pink triangle as the main emblem of the homosexual rights movement in Europe and the United States. Like the rest of his oeuvre, this comes across as a highly emotive work.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CARLO'S-MOTTA'S-THE-SHAPE-OF-FREEDOM-2013-AN-INTERVENTION-ON-THE-FAÇADE-OF-THE-SALA-DE-ARTE-PUBLICO-SIQUEIROS.-courtesy-of-guggenheim-e1586169703104.jpg>)

Carlos Motta, *The Shape Of Freedom*, 2013, an intervention on the façade of The Sala De Arte Publico Siqueiros. Image courtesy Of Guggenheim.

These are just three of many contemporary Latin American artists who imbue their art with a sensitivity and boldness that effectively creates new and diverse artistic languages, specific to each country in the region while drawing connections and inciting resonance across continents and cultures. This kind of visual and emotional experience is reason enough to pay attention to Latin American art, even all the way here in Asia.

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