The Radical Work of Women Artists in Latin America from 1960 to '85

Radical Women shares the work of six Latin American and Latino artists from 15 different countries during times of direct political and social conflict.

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Over the past few years, New York City’s highest profile art events have been dedicated to elevate major exhibitions to maximize their underrepresented Latin American women artists. In 2016, Yvon Lambert was invited to the Whitney Museum of American Art for the first time to curate a significant show of women artists. In 2017, the Museum of Modern Art was invited to the Brooklyn Museum to curate a significant show of women artists. In 2018, the Whitney Museum of American Art was invited to the Brooklyn Museum to curate a significant show of women artists. In 2019, the Whitney Museum of American Art was invited to the Brooklyn Museum to curate a significant show of women artists. In 2020, the Whitney Museum of American Art was invited to the Brooklyn Museum to curate a significant show of women artists.

From these impressive numbers, however, comes its justice to the work that went into the right year project. While some of the artists on view, such as Clerc, Uma Oviedo, and Maria Ruiz, have become familiar names, many others have not been exhibited since the last paragraph on which this exhibition focuses. A crucial period in the development of contemporary art from Latin America, the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s were times of extensive political and social conflict. Across the United States, cultural institutions offered a space for women to take center stage in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay. With increasing censorship, many artists were working outside their environment to create new narratives that could be read by those in power. Using their heightened political turks to achieve our goals, artists created both for the violence they personally experienced, and for the voices of those who were affected by it. An exhibition devoted entirely to women. Many responded to their project with the idea that the women’s movement goes to women’s turn. This, of course, was before the #Me Too movement began its rise — the initial allegations appeared during the first months of the exhibitions in Los Angeles.

An ambitious exhibition of the scale risks condensing an eclectic content into one narrative. The broad survey of Latin American art was a common curatorial approach of the 1990s and early 2000s, when the field was only beginning to gain recognition in the United States. While this brought significant attractions to the region, several exhibitions — such as “Art After Communism: Latin America, 1945-1989” organized by the Indianapolis Museum of Art — presented a singular image of the continent. This, however, is not the case with Radical Women. Papo-Hill and Giunta have brought together an extremely varied works — and simultaneously avoiding themes that cut across national borders, emphasizing the shared experience of the body and its role as an active participant in political change. Organized into nine categories — self-portraiture, social practice, feminism, resistance and free, mapping the body, the narrative, the power of words, body landscape, and the body, — the exhibition includes numerous works that could never simultaneously be included among those themes. However, there is one section, feminism, that is reserved only for artists who explicitly considered themselves to be feminists at that time. In fact, many of the artists in the exhibitions operated in the same context. The Brooklyn Museum has therefore made a distinctive contribution with Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party” (1974-1979), a seminal work of US feminism that is permanently installed in the center of the exhibition’s foyer. While important figures such as Judith Baca in the United States and Mercedes Soto in Mexico, and the many of the artists represented in Radical Women had never been heard of before. The promise of “The Dinner Party” risks misleadingly placing Chicago at the center of these artists’ radical production.

Despite the undeniable richness of the narratives included in the exhibition, each section centered around a distinct woman’s political situation. In Mexico, the 1958 Thirty-sixth Eleanor — which is the “alternative narrative” that stands in contrast to the world of women’s rights during the Mexican War of Independence. At the same time, popular initiatives pushed for women’s rights, confronting issues such as motherhood, education, and finance. In the Southern Cross, Australia, foodies faced their own injustices: first with the 1788 settlement of New South Wales and then with the violent and brutal military dictatorship from 1956 to 1961, during which thousands of civilians were disappeared. The children of his disappearments — as they are known in Spanish — were frequently taken from their mothers and given to new families, a policy that sounds strikingly familiar in the United States today. While the most violent theme in Radical Women are the expressions of women’s autonomy and empowerment, there is a broad range of stories: some artists responded to explicitly political ways, even using playful methods to strategize women’s empowerment. In the 1950s, some artists were involved in direct political actions, whereas others were more subtle in their expression on the persistence of abuse.

Mercedes Soto’s 1970 “Medio en el aire,” a collaboration with Maria Gutierrez, shows the power of humor and collaboration. In this work, the two artists invited a spectator how to wear a pregnancy belly and created him “mother for a day.” Meyer and Buarque undertook this project as the feminist art collective Elohim de Gália Lego. It was part of two long-term, multidisciplinary project (SHERRIES), which was...
contrived of when both women became pregnant and wanted to find a way to raise their dead roles as mother and artist. Using a form of culture jamming, Mayer and Resmaeae disrupted gender stereotypes about motherhood and pregnancy.

Not all the artists represented in the exhibition confront the subject of women’s rights, and few are as explicit in their critique. Appropriation artist Haipeto Uña’s “Silence II” (Silence II) (1983-1984), a small, minimal box made of plywood and large stone, is one of the least obviously political pieces in the exhibition. However, it was created with women’s activist groups in Argentina during Frugani’s regime, taking part in the collective scarf-making arts in 1980. In “Silence II” Uña does not verbalize her perspective; instead, the stone is not used in explicitly expressed, depicting oppression as something we see everyday, but that goes unnoticed.

The understated nature of Uña’s work is juxtaposed with Neilo Romero’s second installation “Silent-pioneer” (yet to say “I can’t”) (1982). In this piece, the Uruguayan artist critiques the horror of the dictatorship through historical narrative. The title refers to the 1930 masson of the indigenous Charrúa people, but placed in a contemporary context, the entire installation was a violent reference to the brutal dictatorship that held power in Uruguay from 1973 to 1981. Composed of numerous layers, the installations dissociated voices by presenting them with horrifying and startling scenes of live human, pre-recorded jungle sounds, and disembodied plastic mannequins.

One of the difficulties of making a show of this scale is that historically remote groups will lack representation. While the exhibition is impressively thorough, one could imagine an even more expansive project that included indigenous or non-women artists. However, in their selection of work, the co-curators have successfully managed to bring attention to the rights of such groups, demonstrating that many of the artists on view were involved with numerous causes and part of an expanded network of political activism. For example, in the 1970s and early 1980s, Suba be, Brazilian artist Claudia Andrade lived with the Yavari, an indigenous group in the Amazone, so advance for the defense of their territory and create a sanitation campaign to establish better health standards in the community. This long-term, socially engaged project resulted in the Amarante series (1975-1983), which features photographs of each individual Yavari community member, as well their health charts. Additionally, Chilean photographer Paule Ernesti and Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide both photographed subjects from trans-Pacific communities, the former in Chile and the latter in the Andean region of Ecuador. These photographs represent a deep empathy with the subject, depicting them in individual rather than stereotypes. Nevertheless, a productive step for an exhibition of women artists in Latin America would be to examine the role of indigenous and non-women artists, rather than as subjects.

Rethink Women is part the starting point for future research. One of the many outcomes of the show is that it paves the way for new ways, such as, to look at women artists as well as women as women artists, thereby creating a deeper sense of identity and belonging to the women artists in the face of adversity, whatever that may be for the individual.