



REVIEW - 23 MAY 2018

Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985

At Museo Jumex, Mexico City, a dense survey of work disrupting oppressive power dynamics in formerly colonized regions

BY LAYLA FASSA

In his 1965 treatise on Brazilian cinema, filmmaker Glauber Rocha observed: 'Our originality is our hunger, and our greatest misery is that the hunger is felt but not intellectually understood.' Rocha's manifesto appears at the entrance to 'Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985', a densely packed exhibition at Museo Jumex, curated by Julieta González. The works in this show share a 'decolonial' stance, by which they seek to disrupt oppressive power dynamics in the formerly colonized region. A sufficient cultural appetite for change, Rocha believed, would birth a new, more liberatory aesthetic to be embraced by Latin American filmmakers and artists: 'Only a culture of hunger, by undermining and destroying its own structures, can qualitatively surpass itself.'



Elda Carrato, *La Hora de los Pueblos* (The People's Hour), 1975, acrylic on linen. Courtesy: Henrique Faria Fine Art, New York/Buenos Aires

Archival photographs and videos documenting the rapid construction of metropolises such as Mexico City and Brasilia line a narrow hallway near the show's entrance. Photojournalist Juan Guzmán's monumental photograph of the construction of Mexico City's Torre Latinoamericana, *Estructura de la Torre Latinoamericana Ciudad de México* (Construction of the Torre Latinoamericana Mexico City, 1952), shows the mid-century skyscraper dwarfing its neighbours in size and style, a totem along Mexico's uneven path towards modernization. In an adjacent gallery, meanwhile, a chorus of excitable, screeching parrots greet visitors in Hélio Oiticica's installation *Tropicália, Penetráveis PN 2 'A pureza é um mito' e PN3 'Imagético'* (Tropicália, Penetráveis PN2 'Purity Is a Myth' and PN3 'Imagetic') (1966–67), flanked by playful works by Lygia Pape and Eugenio Espinoza. Despite its setting of sand, palm trees, birds and cheerful colours, the installation's penetrable structures – two claustrophobic, flimsily constructed, wooden enclosures – directly reference the favelas (slums) of Rio de Janeiro, surrounding visitors with the provisional qualities of this fraught social context. On a nearby

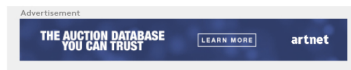
wall, a quote by Brazilian philosopher Mário Pedrosa aptly states: 'Ultramodernisms and their progress, usually shaped by the American template, are fundamentally tied to our favelas and shanty towns.'



Juan Guzmán, Torre Latinoamericana structure, Mexico City, 1952, black and white photograph. Courtesy: Fundación Televisa/Juan Guzmán Foundation

Other works on display engage directly with the body politic. 'Reforma Agraria' (Agrarian Reform, 1968-73), a series of graphic posters by Peruvian artist Jesús Ruiz Durand that were made to drum up support for the titular movement, recall the work of Roy Lichtenstein. Embracing the language of pop art, Durand drew over photographs of agricultural workers and transformed them into punchy, accessible images reminiscent of product advertisements. The Argentine artist collective Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC) employed a multitude of disciplines to irreverently depict the state of art and culture in Latin America. Occupying an entire wall, the 25 images comprising *Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano* (Towards a Profile of Latin-American Art, 1972) humorously employ graphic-design tropes to evoke advertisements and textbook diagrams as a form of critique. One image, by CAyC co-founder Antonio Berni, mimics a language-school advertisement and proclaims the economic importance of speaking English. A vampiric salesman bares his fangs, accompanied by a speech bubble: 'I love my Argentina – and you?'

Interventions in public space became an invaluable tactic for protesting repressive political regimes across Latin America. Photographic documentation of Alfredo Jaar's *Intervenciones urbanas* (Urban Interventions, 1981), from his 'Estudios sobre la felicidad' series (Studies in Happiness, 1979-81), captures billboards mounted around Santiago printed with the question: '¿Es usted feliz?' (Are you happy?) The question seems sanguine but was really a call to action in response to the brutal dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (in office from 1973-90). The artist's three-year project manifested in seven distinct stages. Jaar also interviewed Chileans about their well-being, disseminated surveys and captured portraits of happiness (and unhappiness), documenting and presenting his findings until his exile for political dissidence in 1981.



<<https://www.artnet.com/price-database/>>



'Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960-1985', installation view, 2018, Museo Jumex, Mexico City. Courtesy: Museo Jumex, Mexico City, photograph: Abigail Enzaldo and Emilio Garcia

Cartography is another recurring theme within the show: many works appropriate this pivotal tool of colonization in order to resist its rationalization of geography. Here, maps appear skewed, collaged and reconfigured, cut and burned. Anna Bella Geiger's *Variáveis* (Variables) (1976/2010), for instance – four small linen patches, each screen-printed with a distorted map of the world – are rimmed with wispy, red embroidery that is tangled around each landmass. The Middle East, bulbous and bloated, is inscribed, in English, with 'The world of oil' as it hangs off the edge of Asia. In the lower left-hand corner, a map depicts Africa and India as deflated, almost imperceptible forms. Below North America, a diminutive appendage grows. The caption reads: 'Desenvolvido y subdesenvolvido' (Developed and underdeveloped). Despite its frank condemnation of the world as it is, the work does not invite pessimism; as Geiger reminds us, we must first understand structures of oppression before we can devise a way to overcome them.

'Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960-1985' -<https://www.fundacionjumex.org/en/exposiciones/98-memorias-del-subdesarrollo-el-giro-decolonial-en-el-arte-de-america-latina-1960-1985> runs at Museo Jumex, Mexico City until 9 September 2018.

Main image: Thomaz Farkas, Populares sobre cobertura do palácio do Congresso Nacional no dia da inauguração de Brasília, Distrito Federal, (People on the esplanade of the National Congress on inauguration day of Brasília, Federal District), 1960, inkjet print with mineral pigments on 100% cotton paper. Courtesy: © the artist/ Instituto Moreira Salles

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