

## HYPERALLERGIC

ART

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

*Radical Women* shares the work of 120 Latin American and Latina artists from 15 different countries during times of intense political and social unrest.



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Installation view, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, Brooklyn Museum, April 13-July 23, 2018 (photo by Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum)

Over the past few years, New York City's highest profile museums have begun to dedicate major exhibitions to outstanding but underrepresented Latin American women artists. In 2014, Lygia Clark was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, and 2017 saw Lygia Pape at the Met Breuer and Carmen Herrera at the Whitney Museum of American Art. This gradual development has exploded into the groundbreaking exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, now on view at the Brooklyn Museum. Curated by Cecilia Fajardo-Hill

and Andrea Giunta, the show originated at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles as part of the Getty-sponsored initiative, Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA and includes 120 Latin American and Latina artists from 15 different countries. (Fajardo-Hill and Giunta explain that in this context they use the term "Latina" rather than "Latinx," as the latter was not in use during the time frame of the exhibition.)

Even these impressive numbers, however, cannot do justice to the work that went into this eight-year project. While some of the artists on view, such as Clark, Ana Mendieta, and Marta Minujin, have become familiar names, many others have not been exhibited since the historical moment on which this exhibition focuses. A crucial period in the development of contemporary art from Latin America, the 1960s, '70s, and early '80s were times of intense political and social unrest. Backed by the United States, violent dictatorships overthrew left-wing activists to take control in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Faced with increasing censorship, many artists working under these restrictive conditions sought new artistic methods to enact resistance, turning to photography, performance, video, and conceptual art. Women — as well as minority groups — experienced particularly extreme forms of social oppression. Placing their highly politicized bodies at the center of their work, female artists denounced both the violence they personally experienced, and the atrocities inflicted on people around them.

Unsurprisingly, Fajardo-Hill and Giunta faced opposition themselves for staging an exhibition devoted entirely to women. Many responded to their project with the claim that the current attention given to women artists is just a trend. This, of course, was before the #MeToo movement began its rise — the initial allegations appeared during the first month of the exhibition in Los Angeles.



Installation view, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, Brooklyn Museum (photo by Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum)

An ambitious exhibition of this scale risks condensing an entire continent into one narrative. The broad survey of Latin American art was a common curatorial approach of the late 1980s and early '90s, when the field was only beginning to gain recognition in the United States. While this brought significant attention to art from the region, several exhibitions — such as *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920-1987* organized by the Indianapolis Museum of Art — presented a singular image of the continent. This, however, is not the case

with *Radical Women*. Fajardo-Hill and Giunta have brought together extremely varied works while simultaneously revealing 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-portrait, social places, feminisms, resistance and fear, mapping the body, the erotic, the power of words, body landscape, and performing the body — the exhibition includes numerous works that could move seamlessly between any of these themes. However, there is one section, feminisms, that is reserved only for artists who explicitly considered themselves to be feminists at that time. In fact, many of the artists in the exhibition rejected the term outright. The Brooklyn Museum has therefore made a deceptive comparison with Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" (1974-1979), a seminal work of US feminist art that is permanently installed in the center of the exhibition's first gallery. While important figures such as Judith Baca in the United States and Mónica Mayer in Mexico knew of Chicago, many of the artists represented in *Radical Women* had never heard of her. The proximity of "The Dinner Party" risks misleadingly placing Chicago at the center of these artists' radical production.



Installation view, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, Brooklyn Museum (photo by Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum)

Despite the undeniably rebellious nature of the women included in the exhibition, each artist confronted a distinct socio-political situation. In Mexico, the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre — in which hundreds of students were murdered — marked the most visible act of state-led violence during what is known as the Mexican Dirty War. At the same time, populist initiatives pushed for women's rights, confronting issues such as motherhood, education, and femicide. In the Southern Cone,

Argentines faced their own injustices: first with the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía in the late '60s and later under a violent military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 during which tens of thousands of citizens were disappeared. The children of *los desaparecidos* — as they are known in Spanish — were frequently taken from their mothers and given to new families, a policy that sounds alarmingly familiar in the United States today. While the most salient themes in *Radical Women* are the oppression of women's autonomy and state-led violence, there is a broad range of tactics on view: some artists responded in explicitly political ways, even using playful methods to strategically insert themselves into the public eye, whereas others were more subtle in their meditation on the persistence of abuse.

Mónica Mayer's 1987 "Madre por un día," a collaboration with Maris Bustamante, shows the power of humor and collaboration. In this work, the two artists invited a television host to wear a pregnancy belly and crowned him "mother for a day." Mayer and Bustamante undertook this project as the feminist art collective Polvo de Gallina Negra. It was part of their long-term, multidisciplinary project (MADRES), which was

conceived of when both women became pregnant and wanted to find a way to unite their dual roles as mother and artist. Using a form of culture jamming, Mayer and Bustamante disrupted gendered stereotypes about motherhood and pregnancy.



Margarita Paksa, "Silencio II" (Silence II) (1967/2010) (photo by the author for HyperIntergo)

Not all the artists represented in the exhibition confront the subject of women's rights, and few are so explicit in their critique. Argentine artist Margarita Paksa's "Silencio II" (Silence II) (1967/2010), a small, minimal box made of plexiglass and large screws is one of the least obviously political pieces in the exhibition. However, Paksa was involved with various activist groups in Argentina during Onganía's regime, taking part in the collective Tucumán Arde in 1968. In "Silencio II," Paksa does not verbalize her perspective; instead, the terror of the small box is subtly expressed, depicting oppression as something we see every day but that goes unnoticed.

The understated nature of Paksa's work is juxtaposed with Nelbia Romero's visceral installation "Sal-si-puedes" (Get out if you can) from 1983. In this piece, the Uruguayan artist critiques the terror of the dictatorship through historical narrative. The title refers to the 1831 massacre of the indigenous Charrúa people, but placed in a contemporary context, the entire installation was a veiled reference to the brutal dictatorship that held power in Uruguay from 1973 to 1985. Composed of an immense labyrinth, the installation disoriented viewers by presenting them with horrifying and startling scenes of live dancers, pre-recorded jungle sounds, and dismembered plastic mannequins.



Installation view, Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985, Brooklyn Museum (photo by the author for HyperIntergo)

One of the difficulties of curating a show of this scale is that inevitably certain groups will lack representation. While the exhibition is impressively thorough, one could imagine an even more expansive project that included indigenous or trans-women artists. However, in their selection of work, the co-curators have successfully managed to bring attention to the plights of such groups, demonstrating that many of the artists on view were involved with numerous causes and part of an expanded network of political action. For example, in the 1970s and early 1980s, Swiss-born, Brazilian artist

Claudia Andujar lived with the Yanomami, an indigenous group in the Amazon, to advocate for the delimitation of their territory and create a vaccination campaign to establish better health standards in the community. This long-term, socially engaged project resulted in the *Marcados* series (1981-1983), which features photographs of each immunized Yanomami member, as well as their health charts. Additionally, Chilean photographer Paz Errázuriz and Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide both photographed subjects from transvestite communities, the former in a brothel and the latter in the southern Mexican region of Juchitán. Their photographs communicate a clear empathy with the subject, depicting them as individuals rather than stereotypes. Nevertheless, a productive next step for an exhibition of women artists in Latin America would be to examine the role of indigenous and trans-women as artists, rather than as subjects.



Paz Errázuriz, "Emelija" (1982), from the series *La memoria de Adán* (Adam's apple) (1980-90), gelatin silver print, 15 9/16 x 23 1/2 in. (image courtesy the artist and Galería AFA, Santiago, © Paz Errázuriz)

*Radical Women* is just the starting point for future research. One of the many successes of this far-reaching survey is that it presents each country, each theme, and each artist as its own, distinctly rich area of study. It refuses to universalize Latin American identity, instead meditating on the importance of action in the face of adversity, whatever that may be for the individual.

Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985 continues at the Brooklyn Museum (200 Eastern Pkwy, Prospect Heights, Brooklyn) through July 22.