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'Representation does matter': the rise of Latin American art in museums

In a number of new exhibitions, increased visibility for Latin American artists continues to challenge the status quo

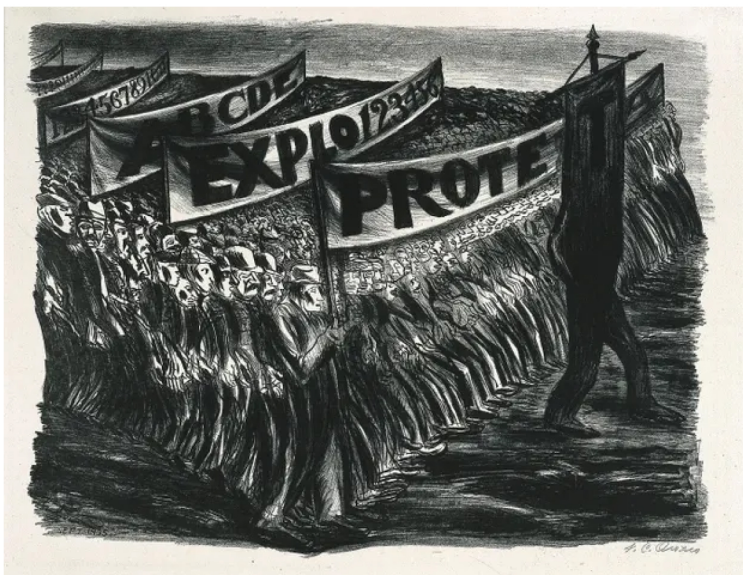
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Latin American artists haven't always been allowed into centre stage. Pushed to the sidelines of mainstream art history, artists like Zilia Sánchez were overlooked from the New York art scene in the 1960s, while Latinx artists have only recently gained attention from blockbuster museums.

But Latin American art is finally taking over museums across the US, celebrating culture from south of the border. From fiberglass replicas of Aztec sculptures to photos of Mexico in the 1960s, a growing number of museums around the country are showing their support for contemporary artists from Latin America - especially with solo shows of Latin women artists. Here are some exhibitions featuring some of Latin America's finest talents to catch this season, from group to solo shows from Los Angeles to New York.

Words/Matter at the Blanton Museum, Austin



Jose Clemente Orozco - Manifestación. Photograph: Courtesy of Blanton Museum of Art and The University of Texas

Until 26 May, Words/Matter at the Blanton Museum of Art, at the University of Texas in Austin, showcases over 150 Latin American artworks from the 1930s on. They all incorporate language in some form or another. There's concrete poetry by Brazilian writer Augusto de Campos and Spanish writer Julio Plaza alongside political prints created by Chilean, Latinx, and Chicax artists. There will also be an artist book by Argentinian writer Leandro Katz from 1971, which explores the meanings behind the Ñ character. The museum has been collecting Latin American art since 1963 and just added 119 Spanish and Portuguese artworks to its collection.

Beverly Adams, the Latin American art curator, said: "This exhibition gave us the opportunity to examine a strength of the Blanton collection - Latin American and Latinx visual artists exploring language in their work.

"They do so by inventing new alphabets, engaging with prose and poetry, pioneering conceptual practices and producing art that is socially empowering. This exhibition highlights how artists use language to communicate personal, poetic and political messages, many of which speak to past and present cultural circumstances."

Latin Reel, Shorts at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York



Verde, directed by Victoria Rivera. Photograph: Courtesy of the director

On 28 February, the annual film series returns to the New York museum with new works by or about Latin Americans. With a special focus on South American directors, the program showcases narrative shorts that explore gender fluidity, youth culture and sexuality.

The program includes Verde, a short directed by Colombian film-maker Victoria Rivera, a coming-of-age story about a young girl's life, and Lui, a short film directed by Denise Kelm about a gender-fluid circus teacher.

"It's important to make visible the great films, that for multiple reasons, do not get screened at cultural institutions nor film events," said the program's curator, Jesus Hernandez. "Representation does matter and if people and institutions in the position of power are not willing to find a balance and space for all of these diverse voices, then it's harder for everyone to see the complete picture."

Mariana Castillo Deball at the New Museum, New York



Mariana Castillo Deball - No Solid Form Can Contain You. Photograph: Epw Studio

Until 14 April, Mexican artist Mariana Castillo Deball is showing sculptures and installations that fuse Mesoamerican iconography with a contemporary twist. Finding Oneself Outside features a survey of works that dig deep and dig out ancient artefacts, from stone sculptures to symbols found in 16th century notebooks, to use them as inspiration for sculptures. Each piece is a question of collective, personal and political history for the viewer to decode.

The most stunning piece in the show is a pastel green fiberglass cast of the Coatlicue statue, one of the most famous Aztec sculptures from the 15th century - created by an unidentified Mexican artist - which is knocked on its side to show its hollow interior.

Graciela Iturbide's Mexico at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Graciela Iturbide - Pájaros en el poste. Photograph: Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Until 12 May, catch the pioneering Mexican photographer's showcase of photos through the eyes of one local in Graciela Iturbide's Mexico. From indigenous groups in Mexico, like the Juchitán to the Seri and the Mixteca, 120 photographs walk us through intimate snapshots of Frida Kahlo's personal belongings found in her Casa Azul bathroom 50 years after her death (some of these items are also on view at Kahlo's retrospective on at the Brooklyn Museum). The photos, taken from the 1950s onward, also showcase Mexico as a country in transition - from political upheaval to religious control. There's also a close-up of Mexico's cultural heritage, featuring photos of everything from rare cacti to goat slaughtering rituals in Oaxaca.

Beatriz Cortez at Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles



Beatriz Cortez at Craft Contemporary. Photograph: Gina Clyne Photography

Until 12 May, Craft Contemporary (formerly the Craft & Folk Art Museum) in Los Angeles is showcasing El Salvador-born, Los Angeles-based artist Beatriz Cortez's latest works in Trinidad / Joy Station. The sculptures here offer a look at what life could be like with communal living. There are steel geodesic structures (a la Buckminster Fuller) made from car parts alongside food gardens and beds in cages, referencing the refugee children held at the border.

"As an institution in LA, it's important to reflect the larger community. We would be neglecting the community if we didn't acknowledge and recognize the work of Latin and Latinx artists," said Craft Contemporary exhibitions curator Holly Jerger. "Given the history of the art establishment in the US, showing anyone outside the traditional white western male canon is a political act, one could argue, to a certain degree."

"At the same time, we want to be a relevant institution to the community we live in by showing artists outside of that traditional establishment canon."