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## Review/Art; A Multi-National Approach to Characterizing the Americas

By HOLLAND COTTER

Although "Ante America" ("Regarding America"), at the Queens Museum of Art, is billed as a show of Latin American art, it could easily be subtitled "contemporary art from a few countries in the Southern Hemisphere, sort of." Artists from Colombia, Cuba and Mexico account for more than half of the 27 participants, while, somewhat mysteriously, artists from Haiti, Jamaica and North America who are not of Hispanic descent are also represented.

Eccentricities of distribution matter little, however, given the strength and variety of the work on view. The artists range in age from 30 to 76 and offer a wide spectrum of media and styles, from the photographed site-pieces of the Cuban-born Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), to the surrealist images of the Mexican painter Francisco Toledo, to the politically pointed video installation by the Chilean artist Jose Antonio Hernandez-Diez. While an interest in polemic runs through the show, it is the sense of a deep but conflicted spirituality that distinguishes the work in "Ante America" from much contemporary art being made in New York.

The political range of the art chosen by the curators, Gerardo Mosquera, Carolina Ponce de Leon and Rachel Weiss, is itself unusually diverse and speaks as much about the political realities of the Americas today as about a colonialist past. That past is, in fact, directly addressed only in Alfredo Jaar's "Undiscovered Land," which juxtaposes a quotation from Columbus's shipboard journal about seeking riches in the New World with recent photographs of laborers in Brazilian gold mines.

Other artists focus on specific contemporary politics. Luis Camnitzer, for instance, presents a chilling display of raw electrical wires and extracted teeth to evoke the torture of political prisoners by the Government of Uruguay. Luis Cruz Azaceta titles his mural-size figure of a bound and screaming man "Latin American Victims of Dictators, Oppression and Murder." And Carlos Rodriguez Cardenas's cartoonlike paintings attack the propaganda machine of a repressive Cuban Government, which, the show's catalogue states, has persuaded many of the country's artists to opt for self-imposed exile.

Of particular interest in "Ante America" is the connection drawn between politics and religion. Enrique Chagoya's charcoal drawing of a pre-Columbian fertility goddess wearing a plumed Victorian hat suggests ways in which other cultures have tried to domesticate and diminish the spiritual impulses of ancient Mexico. Amalia Mesa-Bains's altar dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Aztec goddess Tonantzin is, by contrast, a homage to analogous religious figures that together demonstrate the continuity of old beliefs and provide political symbols for the Chicano movement in America today.

The sense of the spiritual as an active cultural ingredient may well be the most important single difference between much of the art of the third world and the so-called post-modern work being produced in New York and Europe at present. Certain art in "Ante America," for example, emerges almost directly from religious practice. Andre Pierre, a Voudun priest from Haiti, paints portraits of deities, and Everaldo Brown, a Rastafarian, creates fantastic musical instruments and hallucinatory paintings based on Afro-Christian religions of Jamaica. Both artists have a strong enough personal style to carry the energy of their ritual-based religious art over into work that, like that seen at the Queens Museum, is intended for a secular Western market.

This transition is by no means easy to achieve and can be especially tricky, at least to a Western viewer, when Western-trained artists appropriate non-Western motifs. Mendieta was steeped in the feminist art of the 70's before she began to infuse her work with elements of ancient Caribbean ritual. In her case, the balance of old and new worked, and the photographed form of her body, woven from twigs, remains lovely 20 years after its making. When the Cuban artist Jose Bedia introduces archaic images into a modernist vocabulary in a wall drawing, however, the results are unconvincing: one sees the illustration of cultural fusion rather than the embodiment of it. How to effect this fusion will remain the great task of multiculturalism in the years ahead.

"Ante America" includes several examples of quiet, hard-to-categorize work well worth a look. They include Jose Antonio Suarez's small, amuletlike watercolors, Marina Gutierrez's self-portrait hung with painted tin objects and Arturo Duclos's cryptic escutcheons painted on a sheet of corrugated roofing.

But the most stirring images in the show are by the Cuban artist Juan Francisco Elso, who died in 1988 at the age of 32 and worked in several media. Included here are two large paper pieces: one, "The Face of God," is a skull sprouting branches from its empty eyes; the other, "The Creative Hand," a hand pierced with wounds. Most memorable, though, is the carved wooden figure of the great revolutionary poet Jose Marti, his body covered with caked mud, his hand carrying a machete, his head inset with glass eyes. Titled "For America," the figure is a haunting cross between a Christian santos, an African power figure and a Western realist sculpture. It sums up in a stroke the merging of cultures, and of political and spiritual ideals, that makes the best work in this wide-reaching show so challenging and exciting.

"Ante America" ("Regarding America") remains at the Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Flushing, through Sept. 26.