

## A Guggenheim Show of Latin American Art Flops in Latin America

by [Devon Van Houten Maldonado](#) on January 28, 2016



Luis Camnitzer, “A Museum is a School” (2011–present), site-specific installation at Museo Jumex, Mexico City (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, gift of the artist in honor of Simón Rodríguez on the occasion of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative; photo by Nisma Zaman, 2015 © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation)

MEXICO CITY — Lumping together groups of artists who have nothing more in common than geography is a risky curatorial proposition that often leads to mayhem. While sharing culture is fundamental to international creative exchange, this particular kind of generalizing is even more bizarre and less relevant when it takes place within the region that it seeks to highlight. [Bajo el Mismo Sol](#) (or [Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today](#)), now on view at [Museo Jumex](#), brings together many of Latin America’s most famous artists for a rare homecoming, cramming them into primitive categories chosen by Western overlords and forced down the throats of hometown viewers.

Latin America is a big place, with every imaginable kind of art spread across the region. The show demonstrates a diversity of interests and issues, but falls far short of illustrating the breadth of art taking place across Mexico, Central, and South America. Organized in collaboration with the

**Guggenheim UBS Global Map Initiative**, the exhibition gathers a complex web of contemporary artists voicing substantive ideas in many media. However, a majority of the art focuses on the same stereotypes Latin American artists have been cornered into making work about for decades: colonization, border politics, labor, social injustice, racism, corruption, poverty, etc. Another important element of the exhibition is that the 45 pieces on view were all recently acquired by the Guggenheim as part of the **initiative**, which is “aimed at bolstering access to and awareness of contemporary art from South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa.”



Installation view of ‘Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today’ at the Museo Jumex, Mexico City (courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Museo Jumex, Mexico City) (click to enlarge)

The show, according to the curators (Pablo León de la Barra of the Guggenheim UBS Global Map Initiative and “**colleagues at Museo Jumex**”), is divided into the categories of conceptualism, modernism, participation/emancipation, political activism, and the tropical. However, these categories are not given equal treatment throughout the show; politics, conceptualism, and social stratification blend together, blurring categorization, but purposefully steering the conversation surrounding contemporary art in Latin American toward the same tired political narrative. Latin American artists are lumped into readymade categories that misrepresent the complexity and depth of the region. I fear this Guggenheim initiative is reinforcing, rather than complicating, preexisting and outdated ideas about Latin America as defined by colonial conflict.

The 40 artists from 13 Latin American nations included in the show are not to blame. Many are

pioneers who have been instrumental in putting Latin America on the global contemporary art map. Almost half of them (18 of the 40) don't live in Latin America because their reach is limited within their own countries of origin. Meanwhile, a significant number of contemporary Latin American artists who make work beyond these comfortable categories were overlooked. One of the show's strengths is the inclusion of some of the region's most important women artists, including [Minerva Cuevas](#), [Regina José Galindo](#), [Amalia Pica](#), [Tania Bruguera](#), and [Beatriz Santiago Muñoz](#). Hats off to the Guggenheim for not being sexist on top of imperialist.

The artists chosen for the exhibition, for the most part, enjoy ample exposure in the United States and Europe. They therefore represent a good investment for the Guggenheim, but aren't very representative of art being made right now in Latin America. Another problematic detail: the youngest artist in the show was born in 1978 and most of the work wasn't made recently. More than a survey of Latin American art now, the show is a survey of Latin American art from around 2010, with some work from as early as the 1970s.



Installation view of Luis Camnitzer, "Art History Lesson no. 6" (2000) (courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Museo Jumex, Mexico City)

At least the show manages to be ironic. German-born and Uruguayan-raised artist [Luis Camnitzer](#)'s installation greets viewers with analog clicking sounds and flashes of warm light. Ten slide projectors are installed around the small space atop miscellaneous everyday materials — pedestals, chairs, paint buckets, and a winking stack of [Jumex juices](#). The work's title, "[Art History Lesson no. 6](#)" (2000), and the show catalogue both suggest the piece is a recreation of a lecture hall. Did professors still use slide projectors in the year 2000? According to the official description, the work "points to the fact that art history is written by those in power, and tends to exclude certain accounts (including Latin America's) from the canon around which the discipline organizes itself." It feels like



Camnitzer pulled one over on the institution, which is made to look as outdated as the slide projectors in his piece.

A video piece by **Javier Téllez** called “One Flew Over the Void (Bala Perdida),” made in 2005, seems more relevant now than ever. A parade organized by the artist culminates with a man being launched out of a canon, from Tijuana to San Diego. The conversation about migration and border politics is especially poignant today as we listen to Donald Trump or consider the refugee crisis in Europe, but it isn’t a new conversation — just what the Guggenheim was looking for from a Latino artist.



Still from Javier Téllez, “One Flew over the Void (Bala perdida)” (2005), digital color video, with sound, 11 min., 30 sec., edition 8/8 (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund; courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich)

When the show moves on to London from the Jumex, after already being shown in New York, it will provide Europeans with a false image that claims to represent a current reality, but it actually represents an outdated past. This leaves Western viewers with the impression that Latin American artists remain behind — specifically behind their European and US counterparts. Rather than highlighting exciting new ideas that are being created in Latin America, the Guggenheim is making the case for more of the same.

Border politics, environmental degradation, abuse of power, social stratification, and colonial capitalism remain relevant issues as Latin American countries aim to solidify their positions in the international pecking order. However, those conversations have evolved over the last decade and new conversations have begun. Where are post-internet, new media, and interactive design works? How about social practice? These new and relevant hybrid art practices are missing. Young artists are being told: You have to make work about how messed up your country is. They are being told they have to make Latin American art, according to guidelines enforced by outsiders through

exploitive capitalism. There is a Western expectation that contemporary Latin American artists — along with their African, Asian, and Middle Eastern peers — make work that directly and obviously deals with regional politics. It isn't that artists aren't making abstract and ephemeral works in new media, but those new artists aren't being featured as part of the emerging "scene" in Latin America, when, in fact, they are defining it.



Installation view of Amalia Pica, “ $A \cap B \cap C$ ” (2013) in ‘Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today’ at the Museo Jumex, Mexico City (courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Museo Jumex, Mexico City)

What if **MUAC** curator **Cuahtémoc Medina** mounted a show called, “Under the Same Clouds: Art from Europe Today”? How would a Latin American organize an exhibition that sums up all of Europe’s artistic complexity? That would never happen. That is the fundamental problem with this exhibition. We can’t use Latin American as a shorthand to encompass an incredible diversity of influences, languages, attitudes, and cultures. There is so much more happening here than this show represents and it’s unfair to Latin America and the rest of the world to limit and constrain the lion’s share of an entire continent to 45 works. Latin American artists are defining themselves beyond the narrow vision of institutions like the Guggenheim.

Given a different title, this exhibition would be excellent. This work was important for the development of contemporary Latin American art and it offers a rare opportunity to see works by many artists who rarely show in their region together in one place. The irony is that so much of the strongest art in the exhibition critiques the same Western elite that has made it valuable. This tension attests to the depth of the show’s roster, but also underlines the absolute and fundamental failure of the Guggenheim UBS Global Map Initiative to understand and define Latin American art.



Installation view of 'Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today' at the Museo Jumex, Mexico City (courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Museo Jumex, Mexico City)

**Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today** is on view at the **Museo Jumex** (Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra 303, Ampliación Granada, Mexico City) until February 7.

**Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative**  
**Javier Téllez**  
**Luis Camnitzer**  
**Mexico City**  
**Museo Jumex**