

ON VIEW

‘Under the Same Sun: Art From Latin America Today’ at the Guggenheim

BY MAIKA POLLACK | 6/18 8:05AM



‘A ∩ B ∩ C’ (2013) by Amalia Pica. (Photo by Daniela Uribe, courtesy the artist, Marc Foxx Gallery and Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo)

The Guggenheim’s exhibition of works recently acquired from Latin American artists is of great interest, not solely because of the art it puts on view, but also because of the various ways in which that art’s politics rub up against the ambitions of global art museums like the Guggenheim and large corporations like the show’s sponsor.

On display are works by 40 artists from some 15 countries in Latin America, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. A similar show at the Guggenheim last year covered acquisitions of art from South and South-East Asia; the next installation, in 2015, will encompass art from the Middle East and North Africa.

The works are spread out over four galleries on two interior floors of the museum, and are loosely grouped according to a number of capacious, non-mutually-exclusive sections (“Conceptualism and its Legacies,” “Tropicologies,” “Modernism and its Failures”), effecting a Biennial-like, zeitgeist-divining feel.

On view are several very good works by established artists, like Juan Downey’s “Circle of Fires,” 1979, a 2-channel video in which the Chilean-American artist takes video footage of the Yanomami people living in South America. Alfredo Jaar’s Public Art Fund piece has an electronic billboard in Times Square scroll text reading “This is not America” and “This is not the American Flag” (the work suggests that American identity is not monolithically North American). Marta Minujín’s drawings propose to cover a replica Statue of Liberty in hamburgers, which would be given out as meals for the homeless; she puts on display her letter to McDonalds asking the company to donate the burgers (the company declines). Luis



Alfredo Jaar, ‘A Logo for America,’ 1987. (Courtesy the artist)

Camnitzer’s room of slide projectors cycling through blank slides makes the point that art history is written by those in power, as does Rafael Ferrer’s stenciled query “Artforhum,” in which the title of the ubiquitous art-world periodical is written to suggest the phrase “art for whom?”

There is also strong work by younger and mid-career artists. Amalia Pica contributes the installation that steals the show, a room in which performers manipulate large, colorful, semi-translucent geometric shapes. The piece points to an incident during the 1970s in which Argentina banned the use of Venn diagrams in public schools, citing the potentially subversive collaborative action they might engender. Carlos Motta’s “Brief History of U.S. Intervention in Latin America Since 1946” is a free handout listing a half-century of incidents in which the United States funded right-wing military coups against the Guatemalan government, kept a Haitian dictator in power, trained Salvadorian death squads and made attempts to dislodge Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, among other acts of political intervention in Latin America. Other works question the role of Del Monte Foods in Mexico, or the denigration of the native coco plant in Bolivia.

In short, much of the art here—chosen by curator Pablo León de la Barra—is deeply invested in issues of social justice, the operation of global capital and critiques of the history of colonialism and American economic and political imperialism in Latin America. But what this show means changes depending on whom you are talking to. For example, here’s a statement included in the press packet from Jürg Zeltner, CEO of UBS Wealth Management (the show’s sponsor): “With this collaboration we align a global, cultural perspective with our experience in the emerging markets.” What happens when critiques of colonialism, capitalism and corporate globalization enter a global museum sponsored by a multi-national corporate bank that sees these regions as part of emerging capital markets? The Guggenheim presents these worldviews together as though they pose no paradox. Rather than link the exhibition’s artwork to current or ongoing political struggles, the suggestion is that the regions these artists conceive of as zones of active protest are already homogenized “emerging markets”—compliant sites of production and consumption.

It makes sense that a museum with global aspirations like the Guggenheim is collecting and presenting contemporary art from a multiplicity of cultures from around the world. In that regard, this show, which will travel to São Paulo, Brazil and then to Mexico City’s Museo Jumex, represents a strong effort and the works a set of very smart choices. But there is some friction generated by ignoring the overwhelmingly political content of these works, or “investing in” these artworks without taking their critiques of capital seriously. These new acquisitions present an opportunity to rethink what a “global” museum can be. Is it possible for museums that aspire to be multi-national brands funded by private global capital to operate in a way that does not co-opt or neutralize radical artworks? The tension between this show’s content and how the works are being asked to function is a telling and potentially productive one.

(Through Oct. 1, 2014)