

Latin American art has its day in the sun As US curators look south, collectors begin to take note

By Gareth Harris and Julia Halperin. From Art Basel Miami Beach daily edition

Published online: 06 December 2014

Published for the Art Basel Miami Beach edition 06-07 December 2014, cover article



The Cecilia De Torres gallery (S10) is showing a selection of works from the workshop founded by the Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García. Photo: © Vanessa Ruiz

Art Basel in Miami Beach launched in 2002 with an eye firmly on the Latin American market, branding itself as the gateway to South America. Collectors from Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina have since flocked to the fair but beyond Miami, the market for Latin American art has been a slow burn in the US and Europe, with few artists selling for more than \$1m at auction.

Underrated, but on the rise

“Latin American artists are definitely underrated; for countries below Mexico, it’s very hard,” says Mora Bacal of the Buenos Aires-based gallery Ruth Benzacar (B23). But Modern and contemporary Latin American art is having its place in the sun if the results of last month’s New York auctions are any indication. At Sotheby’s and Christie’s, records were set for more than 20 artists, including Fernando Botero (Colombia) and Remedios Varo (Spain/Mexico).

Crucially, the collector base appears to be expanding outside national borders: two of the top ten lots at Christie’s Latin

American sale —a 1989 painting by Botero and a 1944 painting by Wifredo Lam—were bought by private Russian collectors.

But the field is not just growing on the commercial front. Museums and curators outside South America have recognised the gap in their programmes and are working to remedy this. “Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection”, seen this year at London’s Royal Academy of Arts, showed that Abstract art and sculpture made in Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay and Argentina, from the 1930s to the 1970s, was as sophisticated as European avant-garde works.

A show at London’s Whitechapel Gallery, which opens in January, charts the evolution of geometric abstraction from Russia to North and South America. In 2017, the J. Paul Getty Trust is due to launch “Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles and Latin America”, with more than 46 exhibitions and events across California. “This will be a defining event,” says the New York-based Venezuelan dealer Henrique Faria (B9).

The pivotal exhibition “Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today”, part of the Guggenheim UBS Map Global Art Initiative, will travel to the Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM) in São Paulo (April-June 2015), and the Museo Jumex in Mexico City autumn next year.

Unsurprisingly, artists who are the focus of shows are finding success at the fair. New York’s Cecilia De Torres gallery (S10) sold works by artists from the workshop founded in 1943 by the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García, including *Wood Construction*, 1962, by Francisco Matto (\$225,000). We understand that New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) will present a show on the workshop next autumn.

Meanwhile, James Cohan (E8) sold prints by Beatriz Milhazes, whose first US retrospective is at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (until 11 January), for between \$15,000 and \$150,000. Alison Jacques Gallery (E3) sold collages (priced \$200,000 to \$300,000) by the late Brazilian artist Lygia Clark.

Economies reflect their market

There is, however, still volatility in this area as dealers say that economies reflect their respective markets, so Brazil’s art market is strong while Argentina’s is weak. A South American dealer, who preferred to remain anonymous, says that “there is still not enough scholarly discourse,” adding that “the auctions are market driven by *nouveau riche* Brazilians”.

“Art Basel Miami Beach is especially strong in Latin American art,” says the critic Jason Farago. “For all the chaos of the fair, the obscenity of the money and the marketing, there is still one excellent reason to come: it offers a critical opportunity to see art from off the US-Western Europe axis.”