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Art: Argentina's Blue Plate Special

JOHN CANADAY; Special to The New York Times SEPT. 9, 1964

MINNEAPOLIS, Sept. 8 —“New Art of Argentina,” opening tomorrow at the Walker Art Center here, shows how quickly you can pull yourself up by the other fellow's bootstraps if you set your mind to it. A few years ago Buenos Aires was never thought of as anything like an art center, but now it serves up the International Blue Plate Special along with Tokyo, Madrid, Paris, New York and, for that matter, Minneapolis, where the Walker Art Center is this country's most vigorous outpost of in-art.

But the good thing about “New Art of Argentina” is that while three-quarters of the 70 works by 32 artists reflect international formulas from senescent abstract expressionism to middle-aging pop art, the remaining quarter — a high percentage —shows that in one area Argentina may be about to find the national identity its artists are looking for. A new Argentine group, the NeoFigurativists, steals the show.

The movement toward figurative art, given a halfhearted push in this country four years ago, has never managed to get anywhere much against the tide and its energies seem to have been absorbed by pop as a figurative art of sorts. But the Argentine Neo -Figurativists work with a strength and conviction that seem to come less from the negative American attitude of “let's not be abstract any longer” than from an inner need for expression that can be satisfied only by the figure.

Four of these men were represented in this year's Guggenheim International Award exhibition — Rómulo Macció, Ernesto Deira, Jorge de la Vega and Luis Felipe Noé. They share a somber or violent mood that one might have expected to develop in contemporary Mexican art in Orozco's descendants, if the Mexican Renaissance had not so inexplicably pooped out. The fifth member of the group, Antonio Seguí, who has yet to have an exhibition in the United States, seems to me the strongest of the group as represented in the Minneapolis selection.

Jorge Romero Brest, of the Buenos Aires Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (co-sponsor of the exhibition) happily recognizes the neorealists as so “courageous when it comes to the freeing or unblocking process” necessary in Argentine art that they must inherit the leadership of artists who have been busy doing the unblocking by swinging into the international orbit. “Argentina,” in the remainder of the show, remains a geographical designation rather than an indication of any significantly national expression.

The idea seems to have been that a national identity can develop only when the artists feel free to work as they please, and that in Argentina this freedom had to be represented first by falling in line elsewhere—a sound enough idea when you see how Spanish artists have succeeded in

The “Phase Group” as represented by Martha Peluffo, Rogelio Polesello and Osvaldo Borda are not much more than abstract expressionist tagenders. The giant size and slithery texture of their paintings suggest that they were done by a race of giants addicted to finger painting, a pleasant but undemanding pastime. Victor Chab, also listed as a Phase artist, is contrarily a fine technician and imaginative artist whose carefully designed patterns merge into eerie forms like those of giant insects or monsters.

A group designated by Mr. Brest as “so-called Abstract” now leads the Argentine field, but only Clorindo Testa, among the six in the show, lives in Argentina. The others divided between Paris and New York, are Mario Pucciarelli, Kazuya Sakai, Miguel Ocampo, Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro. No objection can be made to any of them, but only Mr. Fernández-Muro, already well known in New York, comes through as a strong individual stylist. His embossed paintings, like fine leather work, now include impressions made from cast-iron objects (man-hole covers?) in an unexpected reflection of pop's interest in the commonplace.

The pop-derived section is a bag that might have been described as mixed a year ago but must now be called Our Standard Selection. Delia Sara Cancela proves that one Rauschenberg is enough, and her work must be dismissed as trivial derivative play. Delia Puzzovia's plaster semifigure stretched out on a kind of busted go-cart is called “A Load of Serious Smiles,” indicating its serio-comic nature. Marta Minujin (pop seems to be a woman's exercise in Argentina) burned her last exhibition in public, not from disgust but to emphasize the expendable nature of her art, a saving attitude toward the rather James Malloryish con

The gentlemen in the section, Carlos Squirru, Rubén Santantonin and Antonio Berni are sounder craftsmen, but one cannot get over the feeling that they are so close to the originators they follow that to accept them is to settle for the second-hand.

The “Geometrists” Eduardo A. Mac-Entyre and Miguel Angel Vidal work with compass and ruler to make interlocking skeletons of attractive precision, and Carlos Silva's concretions of colored dots impinge on the new optical and kinetic art, which is represented by Argentina's “Paris Group.” Her Julio le Parc's “Continual Light,” where heat-animated aluminum strips throw changing shadows on a silver ground, is the purely visual dazzler of the show, a beautiful object. Hugo R. Demarco's “Spatial Dynamics” plays rotating mirrors behind a screen in colored plexiglas to great ornamental effect.

All of this, in spite of reservations, makes for a very good show of contemporary art, representing nearly everything except hardedge abstraction. The sculpture section is weak mostly because the pieces are so few and so small. But Libero Badii, with a large bronze cylinder and a large bronze globe scored, broken and patterned most expertly, has an air not too familiar. The other sculptors are Noemi Gerstein, Ennio Iommi, Gyula Kosice, Alicia Penalba and Marino De Teana. The ink drawings of Victor Magariños were not on view when I saw the show.

Jan van der Marck, curator of the Walker Art Center, and Suzanne Foley, associate curator, combined forces with Mr. Brest in organizing the exhibition. After closing on Oct. 11, “New Art of Argentina” will travel to the Akron Art Institute, the Atlanta Art Association and the University of Texas Art Museum, with perhaps some additional bookings later on. It is one of many recent shows, and shows scheduled for this year, that are beginning to reduce New York's importance as the originating center for worthwhile exhibitions.

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