

KAREN WILKIN

At the Galleries

A special treat this past winter was “Horacio Torres: Eight Nudes, 1971–1975” at Cecilia de Torres Ltd., in Soho. Torres (1924–1976), the son of the modernist artist Joaquín Torres-García, was born in Italy, raised in Paris and Montevideo, and educated at the celebrated Taller Torres-García, founded by his father after his return to his native Uruguay. The monumental, sensual nudes on view were all painted after Torres’s move to New York in 1969, when abstraction, minimalism, and Pop Art dominated. It’s worth noting that Clement Greenberg, known as a champion of radical abstraction, encouraged Torres to pursue the nudes, in defiance of what serious, ambitious artists were supposed to be exploring. The paintings’ declaration of a seamless connection to the art of the past—their obvious homage to Titian and the Italian Renaissance—further separates them from the prevailing norms of the period. Even the body type recalls the ample forms of the Venetian sixteenth century, yet there is nothing regressive or nostalgic about these bold, declarative images, with their assured drawing and vigorous paint-handling. While the point of departure was the time-honored nude reclining on drapery, Torres often transformed tradition by audacious placement of the figure and unexpected cropping. At times he seems as interested in the possibilities of suggesting fabric with an energetic touch as he was in conjuring up flesh; the roiling dark expanse that occupies most of *Nude torso on White & Blue cloth* (1975) is as dramatic as an ocean view by Gustave Courbet. The modest *Pillow & Sheets* (c. 1974) turns masses of domestic linen into a rock face, without losing a sense of the softness of the cloth.

The most arresting of the eight nudes—seven in the gallery and one in the back room, if you asked—were those in which heads and extremities were cropped by the boundaries of the canvas. The fragmented figures were like antique sculptures reduced by the passage of time. That we saw only a haunch and part of an extended leg, pushed to the upper part of *Nude torso on White & Blue cloth*, not only made the swelling buttock even more eloquent, but also forced us to note the economical, essentially abstract arrangement of blue, flesh, white, and grey-brown planes. The nude in the lush *Torso with Brown drapery and Green background* (1974) has been cropped to an expressive torso whose limbs enter into a dialogue with the drapery and the boundaries of the canvas. The image is so concise and voluptuous that it makes the heads and other details of the uncropped figures seem a little superfluous. Sometimes, though, placement makes the figure as unexpected as cropping does, as in the elegant *Reclining nude on White & Blue cloths* (1975), with its reverberation of Renaissance Danaë welcoming Zeus as a shower of gold. A swirl of white drapery propels her into the corner of the painting, like a breaking wave, as she reaches upward, against the horizontal of the upper edge.

The exhibition is something of a departure for the gallery, which specializes in Latin American constructivism and geometric abstraction, including many artists associated with the Taller Torres-García. Despite his ancestry and his training at the Taller, Torres' sumptuous nudes are about as far from geometric abstraction as you can get. He is something of a cult figure in some circles, a true artist's artist, but his work is rarely on view. We must be grateful to Cecilia de Torres Ltd. for the opportunity to see such a representative selection of these impressive, stubbornly original paintings.



Horacio Torres, *Nude torso on White & Blue cloth*, 1975. Oil on canvas. 49¾ x 64 inches (126.3 x 162.5 cm).
Courtesy of Cecilia de Torres, Ltd., New York.

Horacio Torres, *Pillow & sheets*, c.1974. Oil on canvas. 28 x 37¼ inches (71 x 95 cm).
Courtesy of Cecilia de Torres, Ltd., New York.

Horacio Torres, *Seated nude with Green background*, 1974. Oil on canvas. 64 x 74 inches (163 x 188 cm).
Courtesy of Cecilia de Torres, Ltd., New York.

Horacio Torres, *Reclining nude on White & Blue cloths*, 1975. Oil on canvas. 50 x 62 inches (127 x 157.4 cm).
Courtesy of Cecilia de Torres, Ltd., New York.