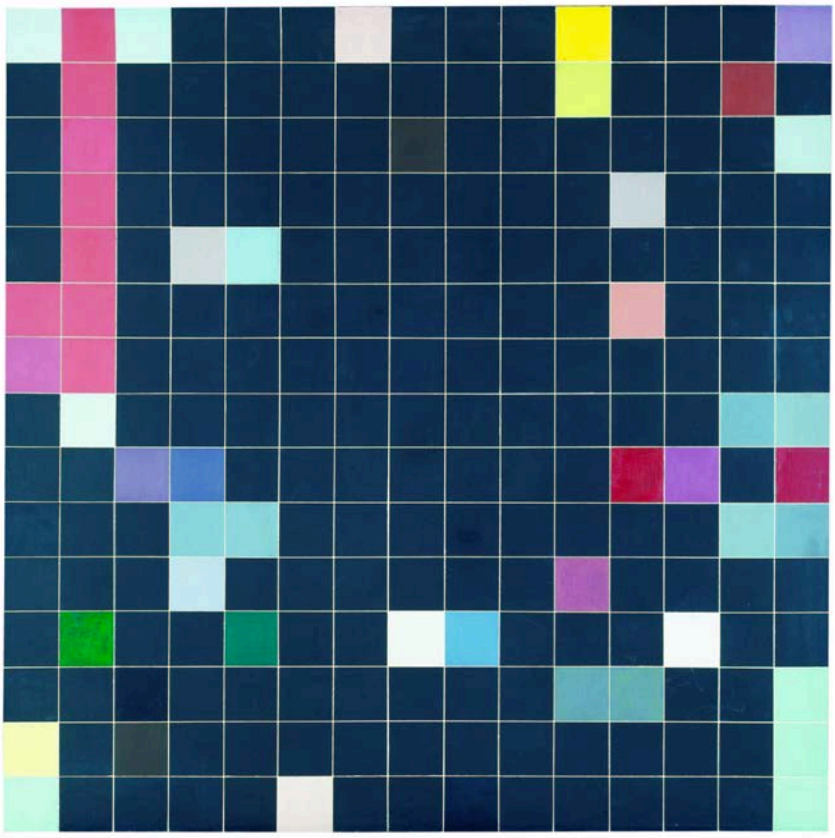
ARTnews

MOMA EXPANDS: A LOOK INSIDE REVIEWS

# New MoMA Offers ‘Pleasures and Possibilities for Learning More’: Latin American Scholar Edward J. Sullivan on the Museum’s Global Vision

BY ***Edward J. Sullivan*** POSTED **11/06/19 2:30 PM**



Antonieta Sosa’s 1965 abstraction *Visual Chess* is included in “Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift.”
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, GIFT OF PATRICIA PHELPS DE CISNEROS THROUGH THE LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN FUND IN HONOR OF ARIEL JIMÉNEZ

*Edward J. Sullivan is an art historian and deputy director of New York University's Institute of Fine Arts and professor at the College of Arts and Sciences. He is a scholar of Latin American art, with a focus on Mexican art of the 20th century, Brazilian and Caribbean art, and the region's diasporas in relation to modern and contemporary Latinx art. He recently curated the exhibition "Brazilian Modern: The Living Art of Roberto Burle Marx" at the New York Botanical Garden. Below, he considers the presence of Latin American and Latinx art in the Museum of Modern Art's new permanent collection display and the special exhibition "Sur Moderno: Journeys of Abstraction. The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection."*

[Read other *ARTnews* reviews of the new MoMA by critic Andrew Russeth, feminist art historian Maura Reilly, and former museum director Olga Viso.]

Alfred H. Barr, MoMA's founding director, first met Mexican muralist Diego Rivera in Moscow in 1927. Barr had traveled to study avant-garde painting, and Rivera was in town to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Their friendship would result in a major Rivera retrospective at MoMA in 1931 (two years after the museum's founding) and, eventually, a commitment on the part of MoMA to the arts of Latin America and the Caribbean that has waxed and waned in the decades since.

The 1940s counted as one of the high points in both the collecting and displaying of art from the region. Barr and his colleague Lincoln Kirstein, an early museum trustee and founder of the New York City Ballet, created a distinguished assemblage of painting and other arts from Latin America. (Kirstein's impact on MoMA was the subject of an exhibition at the museum earlier this year.) Nelson Rockefeller, another trustee, was also instrumental in bolstering MoMA's affinities with Latin American art.

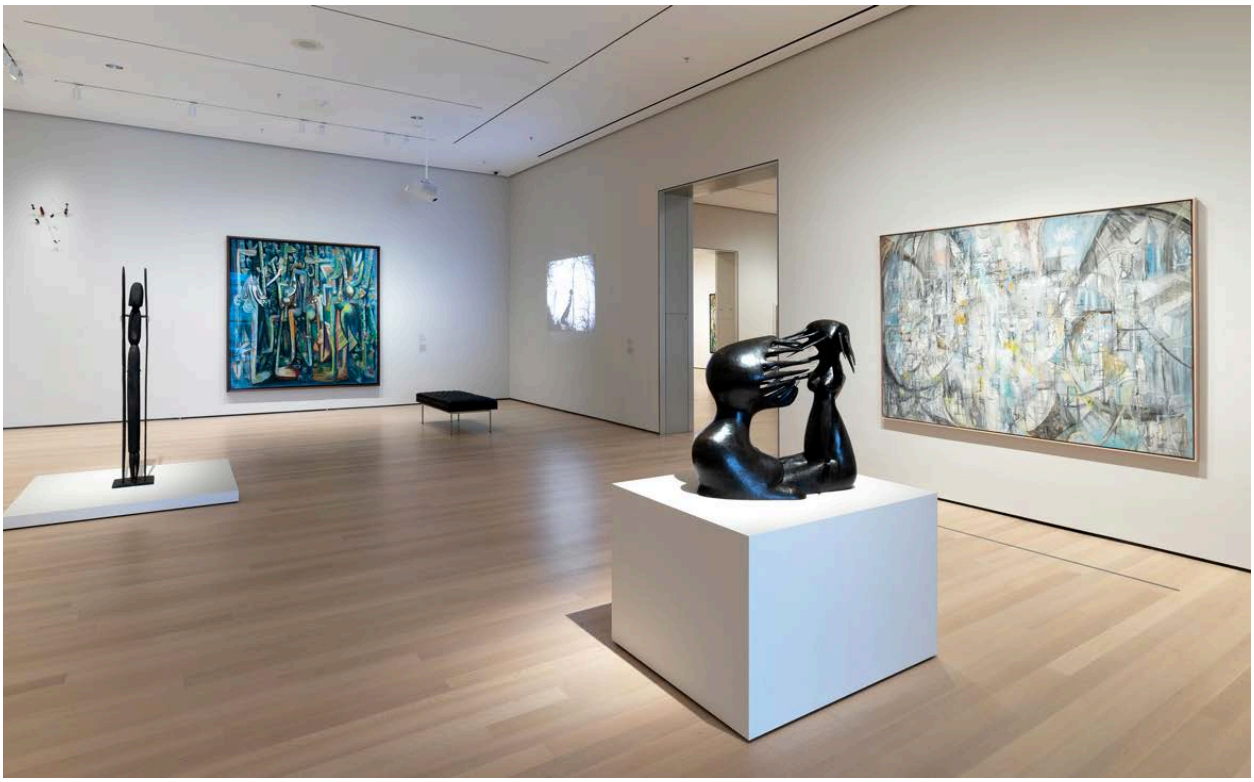
After the end of World War II, however, the museum placed a renewed emphasis on collecting European art as a way to create a lineage for what art historian Irving Sandler once called the "triumph of American painting." From that point on, Latin American holdings were mostly relegated to storage for close to 50 years, with the occasional

Mexican mural on view but very few of MoMA's Latin American treasures seeing the light of day.

Things began to change in 1993 with a major survey—"Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century," curated by Waldo Rasmussen—and later, in the early 2000s, with the arrival of Venezuelan collector and philanthropist Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, a board member and founder of MoMA's Latin American and Caribbean Fund. Her 2016 gift of more than 100 modern and contemporary works heralded a definitive change in the way MoMA treated art from south of the U.S. border.

Another critical part of the effort was the establishment in 2006 of an endowed Latin American art curatorship (with support from collector Estrellita Brodsky) that is currently held by Beverly Adams, who joined MoMA from the Blanton Museum in Austin, Texas in September. With developments of the kind, it seemed reasonable in the run-up to MoMA's reopening to expect that in the "new" and expanded museum's reconsidered displays of its collection, Latin American art would play a crucial role.

Many people visiting MoMA's galleries on the fifth floor, which focuses on the 1880s to the 1940s, are there to see Frida Kahlo, whose *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) is presented in a room shared by Joan Miró, Roberto Matta, and other Surrealist artists from the Spanish-speaking world. Several recent acquisitions are also on view, including a pair brought into the collection in the past two years: Remedios Varo's *The Juggler* (*The Magician*), from 1956, and Leonora Carrington's 1953 *And Then We Saw the Minotaur*.



Installation view of the “Out of War” gallery at the new MoMA, where Maria Martins’s bronze sculpture *The Impossible, III* (foreground) dominates the space, which also includes paintings by Wifredo Lam (*The Jungle*, 1943, left) and Roberto Matta (*Here Sir Fire, Eat!*, 1942, right).
ROBERT GERHARDT/©2019 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

On the fourth floor covering the 1940s to the ’70s, one of the most gratifying new juxtapositions contrasts Matta’s *Here Sir Fire, Eat!* (1942) with Wifredo Lam’s most famous picture, *The Jungle* (1943), in a gallery titled “Out of War.” But what dominates the same space is a rarely seen 1946 bronze sculpture by Brazilian artist Maria Martins: *The Impossible, III,* an intriguing confrontation between two creatures with spiky heads and tentacles seemingly locked in a battle suggesting brutal violence and post-WWII anxiety.

Martins was a well-known figure in U.S. art circles in the ’40s. She had a solo show at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and, in 1943, exhibited alongside Piet Mondrian at New York’s Valentine Gallery, a hotbed of early 20th-century modernism. Most of her pieces in the latter show sold—while none of Mondrian’s did—and she bought her Dutch counterpart’s now-renowned *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, which she donated anonymously to MoMA.

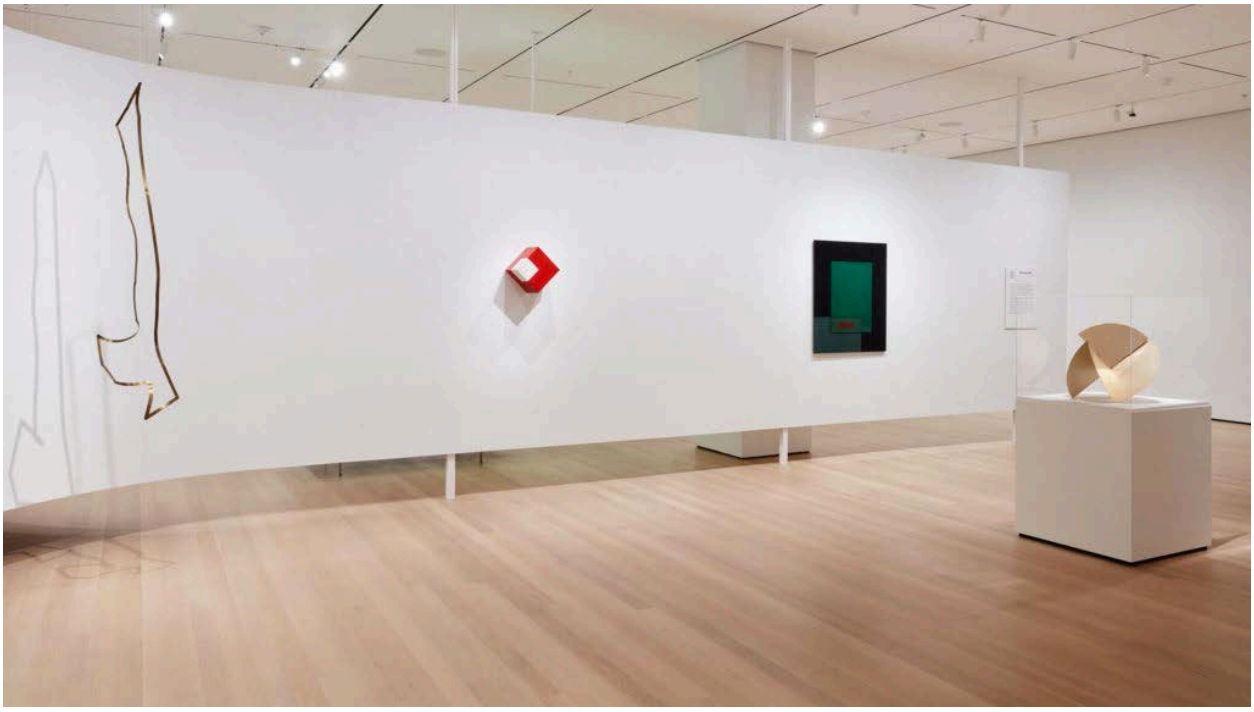
Installation view of the 2019 special exhibition “Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift,” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which pairs Piet Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43), left, with Jesús Rafael Soto’s 1956 *Doble transparencia (Double Transparency)*.
HEIDI BOHNENKAMP/©2019 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The Mondrian is on view two floors down among other longtime holdings mixed with newer gifts in “Sur Moderno: Journeys of Abstraction. The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection,” a special exhibition that considers the 2016 Cisneros donation with the aid of other works in the collection. The international language of Constructivism is taken up there by artists from various backgrounds: Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg (both Dutch), Joaquín Torres-García (Uruguay), and Antonieta Sosa, who was born in the U.S. but whose career developed in Venezuela. The inclusion of her splendid geometric painting *Visual Chess* (1965) amply shows how notions of Constructivism were extended and gained new, vital life beyond Europe.

Since its beginning in the ’70s, the Cisneros Collection has been a legendary repository of artistic expressions in painting, sculpture, and design with a focus on Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and the Cisneros family’s native Venezuela. For much of the past

half century, though, curators and scholars of the region have dealt with each country's distinct arts scenes as wholly independent, eliding any connections that could easily be made.

The exhibition's curatorial team—Inés Katzenstein, the head of the MoMA's newly established Cisneros Research Institute; María Amalia García, a guest curator from the University of San Martín in Buenos Aires; and Karen Grimson, a curatorial assistant in MoMA's drawings and prints department—has made the unorthodox decision to decouple the collection from geographical and chronological categories. This might sound like a simple gesture, but this material has historically been divided into staid classifications for so long that the pleasures and possibilities for learning more about art we thought we knew quite well are nothing less than extraordinary.

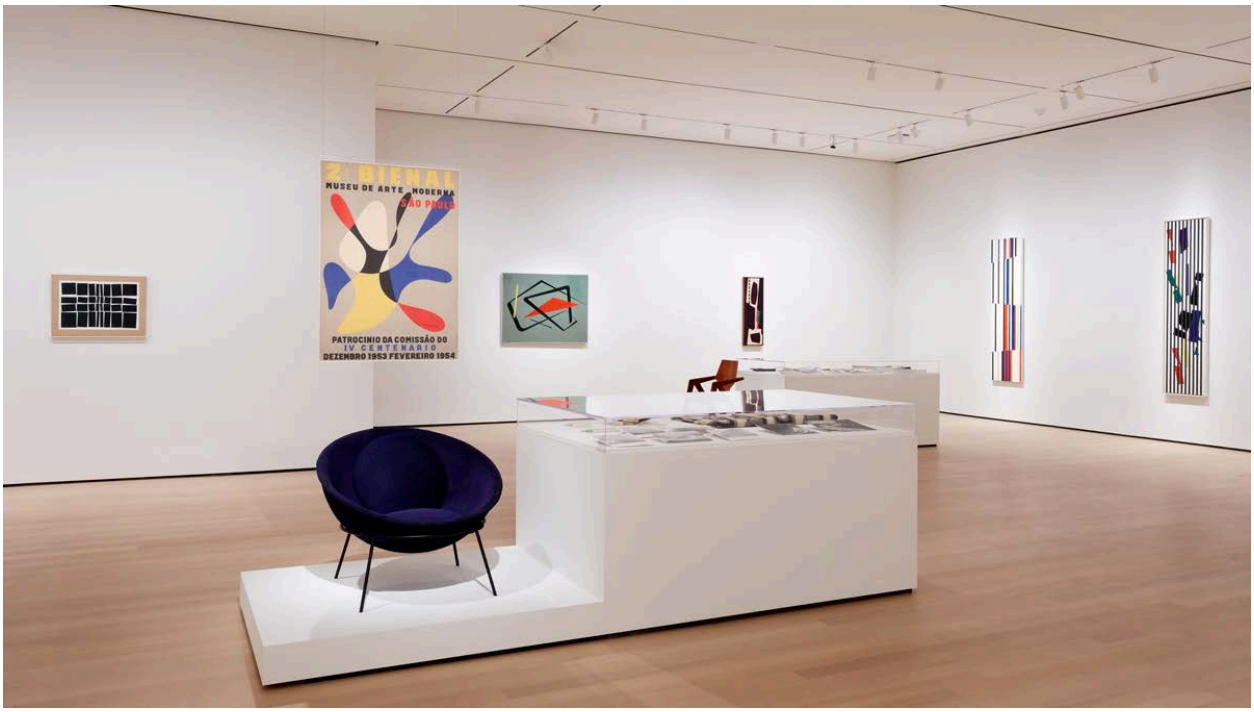


Installation view of the 2019 special exhibition "Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift," at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where the Cisneros collection has never looked better. HEIDI BOHNENKAMP/©2019 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The curators reveal the subtleties of complex two- and three-dimensional artworks by dividing them into such categories as "Cuts and Folds," "Unsteady Optics," "A Revolution of Limits," and "A Modern Worldview," and the groupings make sense to the

visitor who takes time to absorb the refinements that the works themselves reward. It is especially compelling to see how art from Latin America looks fully cohesive as one distinctive part of a global whole.

The Cisneros Collection has traveled extensively over the past decade—to São Paulo, Madrid, London, and Los Angeles, to name just a few—but it has never looked better than it does in its arresting installation at MoMA. Unlike the traditional "white cube" displays that have characterized the museum (and many others like it), the curators emphasize the specifically sensual characteristics of much of the art on view by presenting it against a series of undulating walls that call to mind such elements as Oscar Niemeyer's signature forms in Brasilia, Roberto Burle Marx's gardens in Brazil and Venezuela, and the performative nature of artwork by Lygia Pape, Lygia Clark, or Hélio Oiticica.




Installation view of the 2019 special exhibition "Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift," at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
HEIDI BOHNENKAMP/©2019 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

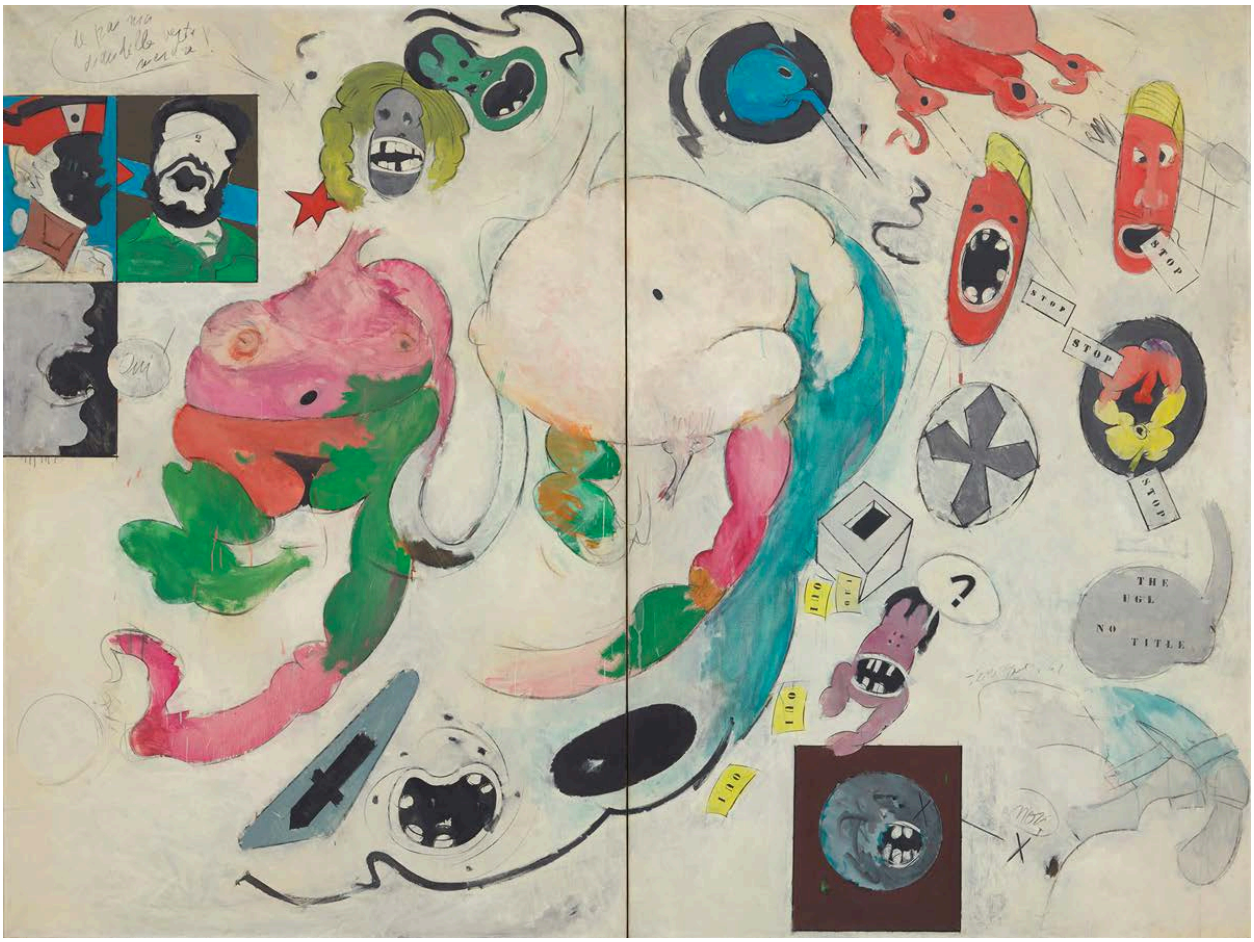
Virtually all of the big names of geometric abstraction and kinetic art are present. Torres-García, often considered the founding father of Constructivism in South

America, is represented with several works including the superb 1938 *Construction in White and Black*. A number of the irregularly shaped canvases on view by Argentinean artists, like Juan Melé and Raúl Lozza, were created in the ’40s—years before American painters such as Ed Clark and Frank Stella employed them in the decade after.

A connecting thread emphasized by certain selections in the MoMA show is that of landmark exhibitions of the mid-20th century, primarily the first few São Paulo Biennials. The first, in 1951, included a major sculptural piece by Max Bill, the Swiss artist who made an impact in Europe but had an immense influence on the surging forms and spatial experiments by a generation of artists throughout Latin America, including both Lygias (Clark and Pape) and the Hungarian-born Argentinean sculptor Gyula Kosice.

As is true of the new MoMA installations in general, “Sur Moderno” pays special attention to women artists of the movements surveyed. Some of them (Clark, Pape, Mira Schendel, Gego) have virtually become household names in the past few years, and they are paired with others whose contributions are yet to be fully explored. For that and more, “Sur Moderno” is a distinguished next chapter in the unfolding story of abstraction in Latin America for which we have the perspicacity of the Cisneros Collection’s founders to thank.

Back in the permanent collection galleries, one is given the evocative if somewhat kitschy title “From Soup Cans to Flying Saucers.” Along with Pop’s towering figures like Andy Warhol and Richard Hamilton, there’s Paris-based Haitian artist Hervé Télémaque, heir to the expressive qualities of his fellow Haitians from the 1940s (such as Hector Hyppolite, whose *Congo Queen* is displayed upstairs alongside other self-taught artists from the Caribbean and elsewhere). Télémaque also played a major role in the Narrative Figuration movement of ’60s-era Paris through which artists, like their Pop peers, mined the iconography of everyday commercial life for their imagery.




Hervé Télémaque's two-panel oil painting *No Title (The Ugly American)*, 1962/64, is on view in a gallery titled "From Soup Cans to Flying Saucers" about Pop art at the new MoMA.
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

[*Read other* ARTnews *reviews of the new MoMA by critic Andrew Russeth, feminist art historian Maura Reilly, and former museum director Olga Viso.*]

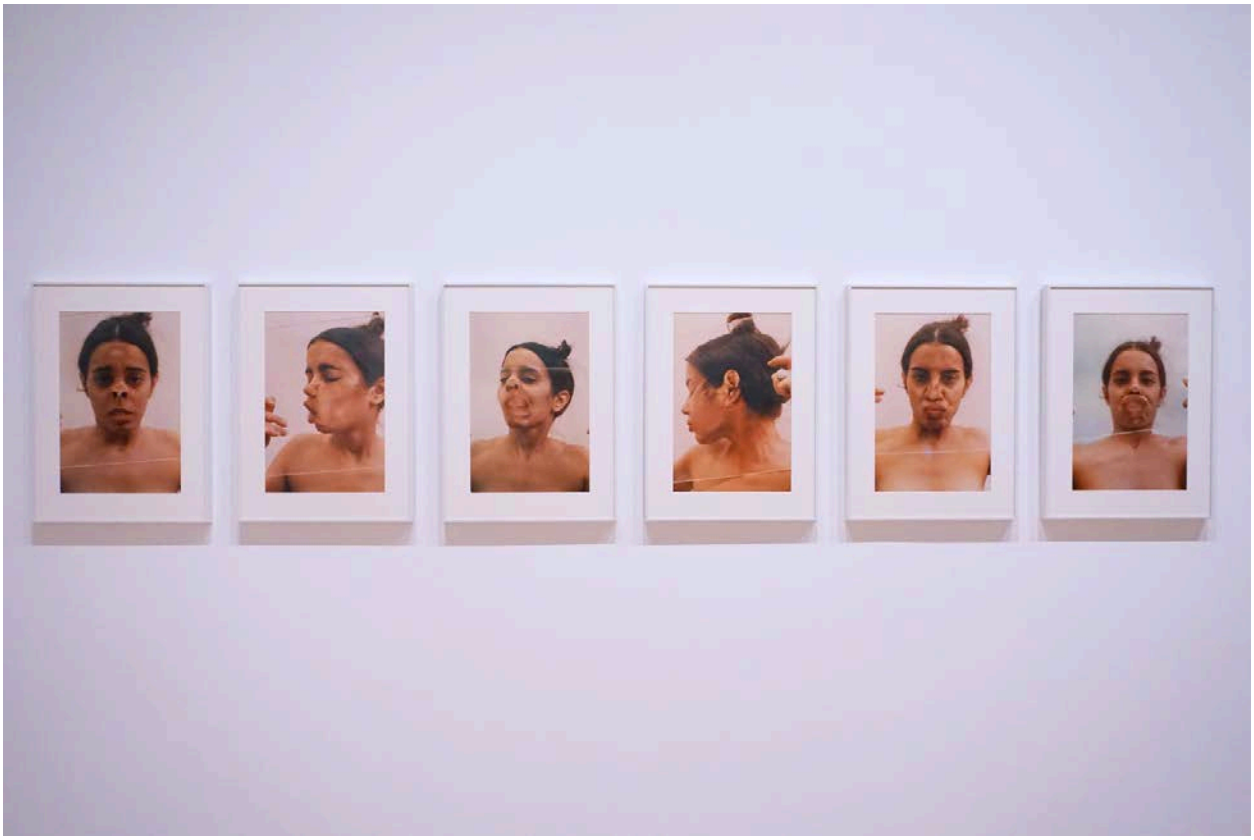
The photographic displays throughout MoMA are replete with the work of prominent and lesser-known Latin American artists in gratifyingly large numbers. Miguel Rio Branco (Brazil) and Graciela Iturbide (Mexico) have their own walls, while Horacio Coppola (Argentina), Alberto Greco (Argentina), Graciela Carnevale (Argentina), and Gertrudes Altschul (Brazil) are also present. A generous spread of Ana Mendieta's six chromogenic 1972 color prints *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints-Face)* is also inspiring to see.

In a room titled “Print, Fold, Send” about art movements that manipulate various forms of circulation—mail, Xerox, email, internet—are two sets of six linocuts by Beatriz González, *Zócalo de la comedia* (Plinth of Comedy), 1983, at top, and *Zócalo de la tragedia* (Plinth of Tragedy), 1983, at bottom.
MAXIMILÍANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

Equally abundant are works of Conceptual art, mail art, and art defined in part by its political engagement or archival context. In a gallery titled “Print, Fold, Send,” the presence of a splendid mail-art work by Eugenio Dittborn (*Survivors*, 1982) and two complementary projects about political depredations in Colombia in the ’80s by Beatriz González (*Plinth of Comedy* and *Plinth of Tragedy*, both 1983) provide wonderful foils for the large vitrine of videos and ephemera by Conceptualists including Eduardo Kac, Clemente Padín, Regina Silveira, Teresa Jardim, Ulíses Carrión, and more. Many of these pieces are gathered from MoMA’s splendid library.

Although this new hang of MoMA is positive in many ways, there are certainly gaps in the Latin American and Caribbean selections. Most glaring is the lack of Latinx artists—those of Latin American descent who have spent the majority of their lives in the U.S.

Other than two works by Mendieta, a clock piece by longtime art-world favorite Felix Gonzalez-Torres is the only other Latinx artist given prominent placement.



A room titled “Idea Art” looks at the experiments of Conceptual art during the 1970s. Here, Ana Mendieta’s 1972 *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints—face)*.
MAXIMILÍANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

The generation of Latinx artists that came to maturity in New York, L.A., Chicago, El Paso, Phoenix, and elsewhere are nowhere to be found, with the notable omission of Judith F. Baca, Patssi Valdez, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Luis Jimenez, Juan Sanchez, Pepón Osorio, Carmen Lomas Garza, the collective ASCO, and so many others deserving of serious consideration. Some of them are represented in MoMA’s collection by works on paper, but the museum owns few works by them in other media. And when those paper works are displayed—as with a portfolio of screenprints by Daniel Joseph Martinez hidden near an elevator—they can be easy to miss.

The Whitney has been engaged in the mission of exploring the important contributions of these artists, having hired Marcela Guerrero as assistant curator in 2017 to build up the Latinx component of the museum. In several recent symposia at its New York headquarters, the Ford Foundation has stressed the necessity for diversity and inclusion, specifically in museum settings, by looking more carefully at Latinx artists of all generations. Now it's time—with so many other shows of improvement in different aspects of the museum all around—for MoMA to pay more attention.