

Latinx Artists Are Highlighted for the First Time in a Group Show at the Whitney

In the wake of last year's Pacific Standard Time LALA, *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay* at the Whitney Museum continues Latinx art's entry into New York City's most iconic arts institutions.

by Ananda Cohen-Aponte August 28, 2018



Installation view of Ronny Quevedo in *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art* at the Whitney Museum

Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art, curated by Marcela Guerrero, along with curatorial project assistant Alana Hernandez, is an exhibition of many **firsts**. It is the **first** group show to exclusively feature Latinx emerging artists at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Guerrero is not only the Whitney's **first** Latina curator, but she is also the museum's **first** Puerto Rican curator. And it is the **first** group show on contemporary Latinx artists to feature Quechua in its title, the most widely spoken indigenous language in the Americas.

Latinx art (the “x” provides a more gender inclusive alternative to Latino or Latina/o) has navigated a complicated space within art history. Scholars and critics have struggled to situate it within art history's tendency toward rigid periodizations and nationally circumscribed categories. If Latin American art has been marginalized within the art historical canon, Latinx art has not even been recognized as a legitimate category of analysis. Consider, for instance, the rather dismissive critical reception of Smithsonian Museum's 2013 exhibition ***Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art***; **one prominent art critic** even claimed that “Latino art, today, is a meaningless category.”

A lot has changed in the past five years. We have witnessed an explosion of scholarship, exhibitions, and initiatives which have challenged this reductive characterization of Latinx art, including the founding of the US Latinx Forum (USLAF) and the establishment of the very first scholarly journal dedicated to Latin American and Latinx art history. But perhaps the single defining event that has catapulted Latinx art into the national spotlight is the recent Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, in which over 70 arts institutions across the Los Angeles area and Southern California featured exhibitions on Latin American, Latinx, and Chicana art. Riding the wave of the wildly successful exhibitions that traveled from Los Angeles to New York City in the wake of PST LA/LA — including *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas* and *Painted in Mexico, 1700-1790: Pinxit Mexici* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* at the Brooklyn Museum (with which Guerrero assisted in its Los Angeles iteration while a curatorial fellow at the Hammer Museum). *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay* continues Latinx art's entry into New York City's most iconic arts institutions.

Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay showcases the work of seven emerging Latinx artists who engage with indigenous notions of space, place, and architecture, including William Cordova, Livia Corona Benjamín, Jorge González, Guadalupe Maravilla, Claudia Peña Salinas, Ronny Quevedo, and Clarissa Tossin. All of the artists were born in Latin America, with the exception of Jorge González, who was born and lives in Puerto Rico, a US colony. Some arrived in the United States as infants and children, and others as adults. What makes them Latinx, as Guerrero pointed out during my interview with her, is that they are all artists of Latin American descent who have made the US their home. Their works range from silicone sculptures that recall classic Maya stonework to inkjet printouts of digitally manipulated 16th-century Mexican maps, demonstrating a recasting of pre-Hispanic and colonial visual models with the tools of contemporary media.

The show is visually stunning. Clarissa Tossin's 17-minute video "Chu'u Maya (Maya Blue)" from 2017 arrests the viewer with footage of performance artist Crystal Sepúlveda dancing around the exterior of Frank Lloyd Wright's Mayan Revival-style Hollyhock House, as a mesmerizing, rhythmic musical track of flutes, drums, and beating hearts set the tempo. Sepúlveda's performance blurs the boundaries between body and structure, mobility and stasis, as her billowing robes and bodily movements cast shadows on the building's façade and courtyard, transforming the structure from a backdrop into a participant. Her movements are painstakingly choreographed to mimic the gestures found in classic Maya vase painting, stone carvings, and murals. In one scene, she throws her body down the stairs, visually quoting an iconic image of a dead captive from the eighth-century murals at the Maya site of Bonampak, connoting themes of self-sacrifice and transcendence.

In another scene, Sepúlveda appears in triplicate in front of a crenellated wall, the center figure donning a loose dress, flanked by two versions of herself in a jaguar costume. Their bright blue sneakers invoke the title — "Maya blue" — which refers to the precious pigment made from mixing indigo with a special clay indigenous to Central America. Tossin's emphasis on profile views pays homage to Maya conventions of figural representation. The single frame collapses three temporal horizons: classic Maya aesthetics, early 20th-century architectural revival movements, and contemporary Latinx performance art.

Immediately following Tossin's video is the work of Ronny Quevedo. Referencing both Andean and Mesoamerican cultures, his mixed-media pieces simultaneously evoke soccer fields, gymnasium floors, and the Mesoamerican ballgame.

"Quipu" (2017), a screenprint made from printed adhesive vinyl and enamel on paper, references the ancient Andean mnemonic record-keeping devices made from knotted strings. Here, the splintered fragments of vinyl and the errant multicolored lines that break away from the central image suggest fractured histories and temporal discontinuity, wrought by legacies of colonialism.

At the center of the room sits a globe made from a rubber soccer ball, speaking to the globalization of soccer as well as the ancient Mesoamerican cultures that provided the material basis for this sport: the Olmecs (ca. 1200–400 BC) were the **first** creators of the rubber ball, made from mixing the sap of the rubber tree with juice from the morning glory plant. Quevedo's exhibition space is designed as a conceptual **cancha** (field), with the rubber globe as the axis mundi. The predominance of blue-colored works on the left and yellow and gold-hued works on the right suggests the passing of days, transforming the **cancha** into a kind of cosmogram that layers cyclical and linear space/time; it posits profound interconnections between the circular movements engendered by sport and the expansive pathways forged by the artist's personal migration story from Ecuador to the Bronx.

Perhaps the star of the show is Guadalupe Maravilla (formerly Irvin Morazán), whose maps, as Guerrero puts it, form part of an “epic history that we have to tell [to] everyone, our kids, and the next generation.” Maravilla collaborated with undocumented immigrants for his cartographic interventions; his collaborators draw onto his digital manipulations of the **Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca** (ca. 1550), a colonial Mexican manuscript that combines Nahuatl pictorial writing with European conventions of the historical annal. Maravilla's **Requiem for my border crossing** series isolates and rearranges glyphs and motifs from the **Historia** to create new narratives of migration.



Ronny Quevedo, “Quipu” (2017), screenprint, printed adhesive vinyl, and enamel on paper

The collaborative aspect involves a Salvadoran game called *Tripa Chuca*, in which participants connect pairs of matching numbers distributed across the page without crossing over any of the previously drawn lines. The result is a series of bold contour drawings that exhibit a surprising visual harmony with the Nahuatl pictorial elements. The maps, in their frenetic, jagged lines, superimposed over footprints, place glyphs, and treacherous swirls of fast-moving water, suggest the perilous journeys of the undocumented, **particularly in the aftermath of Prevention Through Deterrence** in the 1990s, which weaponized the natural landscape against migrants, leading to an untold numbers of deaths.

Maravilla's choice of manuscripts is particularly relevant: the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* is also a manuscript about migration; it tells the story of the Tolteca-Chichimeca's exodus from their homeland of Tollan before founding the altepetl (city-state) of Cuauhtinchan, which was subsequently usurped by the Aztecs in the 15th century. The manuscript itself was produced decades after the conquest, when the people of Cuauhtinchan were once again displaced, this time under Spanish colonial rule. It is poignant that the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* was never finished. As art historian Dana Leibsohn notes, "it is difficult to assess whether the annalists concluded the work, or whether they anticipated a continuation that a shortage of energy, resources, or perhaps unforeseen circumstances prevented. Clearly the clock ran out." Maravilla's remixed, re-contextualized maps reset the clock and continue the narrative, reminding the viewer that the story of hemispheric migration and displacement stretches back for millennia, and that colonialism is an ongoing project that exists in new permutations in the 21st century.

All of the artists in the show engage in some way with indigeneity, whether through visual quotation of pre-Hispanic and colonial artworks, the use of indigenous spatial concepts and built environments, as in Jorge González's installation "Ayacavo Guarocoel" (2018), or through their materiality — for instance, William Cordova's use of Peruvian cacao as a painting medium. The issue becomes fraught, however, when we consider the artists' varying degrees of connection to native heritage or identity — not all of the artists in the show self-identify as indigenous, but the majority identify as mixed, or of some native ancestry.

Are these artists, then, merely engaging in an act of cultural appropriation? Or can we read this as an act of cultural reclamation? I raised these questions with Guerrero, who contends that questions of blood quantum and tribal affiliation don't easily map onto a Latin American or diasporic context. Latin America's 500-year history of mestizaje complicates the question, and, as Guerrero points out, exhibitions like this can help engender much-needed conversations about hemispheric indigeneity. Furthermore, Latinx indigeneity becomes even more difficult to define when we consider the traumas of migration and deterritorialization that are such a central component of the Latin American diaspora in the United States. Indeed, when we speak of the Central American migrant crisis, we are also speaking of an indigenous migrant crisis. This is attested to by the fact that one of the most pressing needs within migrant advocacy groups are skilled interpreters who can speak not Spanish, but Nahuatl, Zapotec, Mam, K'iche', Mixtec, and other indigenous languages.

Perhaps another way of framing this work is in the artists' collective search for an alternative canon, crisscrossing the hemisphere in search of artistic and conceptual models from which to craft their work. It is in Guerrero's insistence on showcasing the work of specifically Latinx artists that we can see the fruits of this approach, whether in an Ecuadorian-American artist who integrates both Mesoamerican and Andean cultural references in his work, or a Brazilian woman who reclaims an early 20th-century Maya revival aesthetic promulgated primarily by white male architects. Grounded in a US context but looking across the Americas, the artists of Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay push the boundaries in extraordinarily imaginative ways of how to define homeland, migration, space, and place.

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