

ART REVIEW

# ‘Permission to be Global’ shines at MFA

By [Sebastian Smee](#) | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 20, 2014

Tightly packed but brilliantly set out, the first exhibition ever devoted to contemporary Latin American art at the Museum of Fine Arts warrants repeat visits. Called “Permission to Be Global/Prácticas Globales: Latin American Art From the Ella Fontanals-Cisneros Collection,” it comes to the MFA after a showing in Miami, the home of the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, where its opening last December coincided with the art fair, Art Basel Miami Beach.

The show’s title applies, you feel, as much to the host institution as to the artists it features, many of whom lead (or led) international lives and have tackled subjects at once local and globally germane. Since the opening of its Art of the Americas Wing, the MFA has been trying to expand its traditional focus on art of the Northeast and to pay more attention to the hundreds of millions of people who live and work in proximate time zones. This show represents an advance in that effort.

Some of the biggest names of Latin American art are here: Lygia Clark, Ernesto Neto, Ana Mendieta, Guillermo Kuitca, Cildo Meireles, Oscar Munoz, Leon Ferrari, and Gabriel Orozco. But so are lesser-known figures, and many of the works still have the smell of hatchlings, having been made in the past few years.

Ella Fontanals-Cisneros, the entrepreneur, philanthropist, and environmentalist behind the collection, defines “Latin American” broadly. Many of the artists in the show live, or lived, outside of their Latin American homelands. Marisol Escobar, for instance, whose sculpture “The Sunbathers” graces the passageway leading up to the show, was born in Paris to Venezuelan parents, and is most often associated with the postwar art scene in downtown Manhattan, where she has lived most of her life.

Still, her presence here is welcome: Venezuela is in her bones, and the influence of Latin American fine and folk art on her work is undeniable. More importantly, I've yet to see a Marisol sculpture I didn't like.

All together, there are 61 works in the show (including, in several cases, multiple works by the same artist), 18 fewer than in Miami. They were selected by curators Jen Mergel and Liz Munsell from the MFA and Jesus Fuenmayor from the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation.

The arrangement is particularly brilliant. To a degree unusual in group shows, each work not only stands on its own but casts the works around it in oblique and curiously tinted new lights.

Turn left as you enter the show through the Linde Family Wing entrance and you see the show's better half. The first gallery is eerily charged with suggestions of surveillance from unexpected angles. "Nocturnes (Confessional Booths)," a commanding painting by Kuitca, shows figures in a geometrical array of confessional booths spied on — and rendered diagrammatically — from above. A soft hanging sculpture by Neto, meanwhile, actually descends into our space from above (alas, it lacks the aromatic spices that enliven Neto's best work).

After three quietly sinister digital works by Magdalena Fernandez, Mendieta, and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (the latter reflects your own moving body in silhouettes constructed of words), you will come upon a dark room showing a short, mesmerizing video by Miguel Angel Rios.

Rios is Argentine, but he left his homeland in the 1970s to escape military dictatorship. He has subsequently lived in both the United States and Mexico. His three-minute film — tightly cropped and rich in intermediate grays — shows a game of trompos, or spinning tops, except that the footage is played in reverse: Instead of spinning until they lose momentum and begin to orbit wildly, crashing into one another, and falling on their sides, they lie motionless until they begin to rock gently back and forth, before miraculously standing up and spinning on slender points. Slowly, the dodgem car chaos of random collisions resolves until finally, the tops stand together, spinning harmoniously, all in the same field.

You can interpret the film however you like, or not at all. But as a metaphor for goings-on in the political arena, and in the hearts of idealists everywhere, it's pretty potent. Had Rios played the footage forward, the appropriate title might have been "Revolution" — the fallen spinning tops representing so many severed heads tumbling from guillotines. But the title is "Return," and his decision to reverse the footage suggests instead a collective uprising, a coming into accord, against the odds.

Other works in the show's first half are similarly restrained. Many suggest the influence of Brazilian Neo-Concretism, an influential movement that saw subjective states and sociopolitical subject matter reenter art after a period of severe literalism and almost scientific aloofness.

Look out, in particular, for a work consisting of two mirrors, one engraved with a short fairy tale, pregnant with meaning, by the New York-based Brazilian artist Valeska Soares, and for Ferrari's "The Cage," a coolly devastating indictment of state-sponsored violence in the artist's native Argentina. Ferrari made this rectangular box, containing a thicket of stainless steel wires, while in exile in Brazil, the year after he had received confirmation of the death of his son Ariel at the hands of the Argentine military.

The second half of the show contains work less reliant on modes of abstraction and on poetic metaphor, more on convoluted conceptual ploys. Politically, it is trenchant. But, in many cases, it also feels less than convincing.

Perhaps the best way to describe a large-scale painting by Rene Francisco and Eduardo Ponjuan in a mock-Socialist Realist style is . . . labored. It shows a heroic worker holding an enlarged three-dimensional paintbrush that extends beyond the canvas.

The humor in other works is more casually deft. Yoan Capote, from Cuba, has a two-channel video showing men applying toilet plungers to their ears. Fellow Cuban Carlos Garaicoa has two elaborate models for an official commemorative statue that consists of a raised middle finger emerging from a clenched fist. And Glenda Leon, who lives in Spain and Cuba, delights with cartoon-like drawings from her series "Ways to Save the World." (Suggestions include sprinkling vast quantities of LSD and ecstasy over the planet from helicopters.)

Less successful — either because they're conceptually over-elaborate or thumpingly obvious — were Marta Minujin's pair of photographs of a monumental effigy of an Argentine tango icon and Daniela Ortiz's engraved marble plaques sarcastically rewarding US corporations for their roles in capturing, imprisoning, and killing illegal immigrants.

But look out for a superb video projected onto a table by Colombia's Munoz: Echoing the tension between utopian aspirations and violent realities in Rios's video of spinning tops, it shows faces on photographs washed down a drain, only to reappear on photographs in a second basin, in an endless, dispiriting loop.

Life in Latin America, this show reminds us, is remarkably like life everywhere. Fraught, funny, subject to forces beyond our control, and always unfurling itself in the shadow of death.

Some situations, though — there's no getting around it — are specific to their time and place. For instance: Performances scheduled for Tuesday and Wednesday of last week by Cuban artist Lázaro Saavedra had to be postponed. The performances, in which Saavedra was to lie in an ornate casket installed in the gallery, were banned by Cuban cultural authorities in 1990.

Fourteen years later, their realization has been delayed by problems obtaining a visa for the artist. The MFA is working with both Cuban and US authorities to resolve the situation, and plans to reschedule the performances.