

REVIEWS Sept. 26, 2017

Teresa Burga

New York at Sculpture Center

by Eric Sutphin



For Teresa Burga's first solo museum presentation in the United States, curator Ruba Katrib selected works from several series dating from 1968 to today that foregrounded the Peruvian artist's career-long preoccupation with divisions of labor and authorship. When Burga was a young woman, her distaste for state-approved regional expressionism led her to develop her own brand of Conceptualism, through which she began to interrogate notions of the artist's hand. This interest is hinted at in the show's title works: a series of nine roughly one-foot-tall, hand-shaped steel sculptures made between 2015 and 2017 and named "Mano Mal Dibujada," which translates to "poorly drawn hand."

Born in 1935 in Iquitos, Peru, Burga received her formal art training in Lima. Her attraction to Conceptual art led her to become a founding member of Grupo Arte Nuevo, a Peruvian avant-garde movement that lasted from 1966 until 1968. That year, as a Fulbright scholar, Burga left Peru to study at the Art Institute of Chicago, where she developed her mature Pop-Conceptual practice. She started to move away from painting and to produce experimental works including installations, research-based projects, and Happenings.

At this time, Burga embarked on a series of modular painted plywood sculptures titled "Prismas," in which she combined her interests in systems of labor and serial forms of art. She began the works by creating schematic diagrams of the sculptures in 1:10 scale, including the imagery that would appear on their surfaces. She then sent the drawings to local fabricators to produce the works. Seven clusters of the squat, polygonal "Prismas" (one grouping was from 1968 and the others from 2013) were arranged on a low platform at the center of the main gallery. The images on their surfaces depict children, household objects, and abstract forms in a style that recalls Matisse's late cutouts and 1960s commercial graphic design. The sculptures register alternately as artworks and as commercially produced objects (toys, food packages, street signs) and appear haunted by an unrealized promise of utility.

Burga returned to Lima in 1971, when Peru was under General Juan Velasco Alvarado's military rule. After his government collapsed, the country fell into a twenty-year period of civil unrest spurred by a failing economy and crumbling infrastructure. On the rear wall of the main gallery hung three small pen-and-ink drawings derived from Peruvian newspaper photographs that allude to this troubled past. Among them was *Escombros Totales* (Total Debris, 2013), in which Burga portrays a decaying building facade in a colorful, pointillist style. In this series, Burga uses appropriation as another device to distance herself from her subject matter, but the resulting works fall short of conveying any sociopolitical message.

Without a more complete presentation of Burga's output, it was difficult to fully understand her status as a radical artist. The exhibition would have benefited from the inclusion of some of her scientific studies from the '70s and '80s. For a 1980-81 work titled *Perfil de la mujer peruana* (Profile of the Peruvian Woman), for example, she collaborated with psychotherapist Marie-France Cathelat to create a multimedia installation and publication based on data collected from surveys and research about the lives of Peruvian women. Ephemera from or documentation of such projects would have illustrated Burga's critiques and investigations of femininity and the role of women in Peru. Instead, the exhibition allowed whimsy to eclipse the artist's probing nature.