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Arriving Late to the Party, but Dancing on All the Clichés

By HOLLAND COTTER
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Our big museums were built by businessmen, and significant changes are usually about making money. In these days of international markets and a cosmopolitan tourist flow, it pays for Western Modernist strongholds to look culturally embracing. This helps explain the Guggenheim's UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, a three-phase collecting venture that finds the museum buying and showing the kinds of work it has paid little attention to in the past.

The first of the initiative's three exhibitions, devoted to art from South and Southeast Asia, took place last year. The third, of work from the Middle East and North Africa, comes in 2015. The middle show, "Under the Same Sun: Art From Latin America Today," is on view now, tucked away in odd-shaped annex galleries on two levels. With 50 works, it's fairly small — the map initiative cannot be accused of overreaching — but it has substantial material and begins to fill in a gap created since the museum stopped taking a focused interest in Latin American art in the 1960s.

And where do you enter a conversation when you're late to the party? Almost anywhere will do, though the curator in charge of this exhibition, Pablo León de la Barra, has wisely chosen to backtrack a bit in history, to the early 1970s and a Conceptual piece from that time by the Puerto Rican-born Rafael Ferrer.

Mr. Ferrer, a New York resident for decades, and best known now as a painter, has always been a mordant critic of the art establishment's ethnic exclusions. In 1971 he created a text piece consisting of the single word Artforhum, which is both a play on the name of a mainstream magazine and a question, "Art for whom?" Plastered across a Guggenheim ramp, the same distrusting query is as pertinent now as it was back then.

A number of Latin American artists made their way north in the 1970s and '80s, some escaping political dangers at home. Paulo Bruscky, harassed by the military dictatorship in Brazil for his deft, teasing interventions into everyday life, continued his light-touch art here. In New York in 1981, and in collaboration with a fellow artist, Daniel Santiago, who remained in Brazil, he placed an advertisement in The Village Voice proposing an "air art" piece that would soak clouds in the Manhattan sky with color.

A few years earlier, the exuberant Argentine artist Marta Minujín had approached the McDonald's Corporation about bankrolling a New York project: She wanted to build a reclining model of the Statue of Liberty and grill burgers on it — using flamethrowers for heat — in Battery Park. (McDonald's said

no, with thanks.) In 1987 a proposal made to the Public Art Fund by Alfredo Jaar, from Chile, was a success. His 42-second electronic animation, “A Logo for America” — which graphically illustrates the fact that America refers to two continents, not one — appeared, billboard size, in Times Square that year and will be replayed there this August.

Another Chilean, Juan Downey (1940-93), put down permanent roots in New York but kept his sights turned southward. Over several years, he traveled to Mexico, Guatemala and Peru to videotape indigenous cultures. In 1979 he lived for seven months in the Amazon rain forest with the Yanomami people of Venezuela, filming them and encouraging them to film themselves. The resulting work, “The Circles of Fire,” is a centerpiece of the Guggenheim show.

Playing on several video monitors arranged in a circle, the basic configuration of Yanomami villages, the videos merge art and anthropology in ways both entrancing and distancing. Long before postmodern colonial studies were analyzing power imbalances between cultural observers and the cultures observed, Downey was on the case in work that tested the line between science and fiction. Young artists today, in different ways, are following his lead.

Raimond Chaves (from Bogotá) and Gilda Mantilla (from Los Angeles) have compiled an archive of invented exotic cultures by making carbon-copy drawings of documents found in ethnological libraries in Peru. Mariana Castillo Deball — born in Mexico, living in Europe — layers and elaborates history in her sculptures, which are inspired by 19th-century casts of Mayan art, now lost, made by the British anthropologist Alfred Maudslay.

Finally, Jonathas de Andrade, in a room-size installation called “Posters for the Museum of the Northeastern Man,” parodies a specific 1970s ethnographic museum in northern Brazil. The museum sorts out a racial history of the region in terms of neat, and value-laden, strains of DNA: indigenous, African and European. The photographs of contemporary men from the region in Mr. de Andrade’s “promotional” posters simultaneously confound the idea of fixed ethnic identity and reinforce “male” as a stereotype.

Latin America itself has long been viewed, from the outside, through clichés, and artists are clever at shooting them down. Tropical wilderness? In a piece called “Walk,” by the Cuban artist Wilfredo Prieto, untamed nature is a single tropical plant to be trundled around in a wheelbarrow. Postcard-perfect Eden? In a travelogue-style video, Mario García Torres speculates as to why the revered Mexican landscape painter Gerardo Murillo (1875-1964), who signed his work Dr. Atl, made the area around Guadalajara look so romantically lush. Was he, perhaps, trying to lure foreign investors to the area? (The Guggenheim once considered building a Guadalajara franchise.)

Lush implies fertile, which can translate as primitive, and the Brazilian artist Erika Verzutti packs all these associations into sculptures made from cast-bronze guavas and bananas. Sort of figurative, sort of abstract, her work is like European Modernism that’s been tickled, taffy-pulled and generally messed around with, as is true of a lot of other work here.

Damián Ortega constructs crisp, classic modular sculpture entirely from tortillas. Carlos Amorales both bows to and amplifies Alexander Calder in a percussive mobile made from metal cymbals. The dozens of geometrically cut sheets of colored plastic in an installation by Amalia Pica are ostensibly a study in

Modernist harmony. But, scheduled to be rearranged and reshuffled during the course of the show, they seem to be as much about randomness as about order.

Interrupted order carries political implications, and in nearly every work in this show, there's a critical pulse beating, sometimes hard. Carlos Motta's takeaway printed poster titled "Brief History of U.S. Interventions in Latin America Since 1946" delivers exactly what it promises and makes for brutal reading. In a video of a 2009 performance in Havana, Tania Bruguera flouts government censorship by inviting people to stand at a podium and, for one minute, say what they want. If, however, speakers exceed the minute limit, she calls on a pair of uniformed "soldiers" to yank them away from the mike. Ms. Bruguera has a gift for combining risk and absurdity. So does Javier Téllez, in a video titled "One Flew Over the Void (Bala Perdida)." Shot on the Tijuana side of the Mexican-United States border, the film captures a staged carnival that doubles as an immigrant protest and culminates with a stuntman's being shot from a cannon over the border wall.

Most of the cast is made up of patients from a local psychiatric hospital. Mr. Téllez's parents were both psychiatrists; as a child in Venezuela, he visited hospitals with them. And people with mental or physical handicaps appear often in his films. Some viewers have a problem with this, and the very evident disabilities put you on the alert for exploitation. This ethical tension can make the videos hard to watch, but it's also part of what makes them effective — moving and troubling — because it won't let you relax.

Unrelaxed is an accurate description of the show as a whole, which, though visually low key, has lots of movement, real and potential. In an installation called "Art History Lesson No. 6," by Luis Camnitzer, 10 self-run slide projectors flash empty rectangles of light onto the galleries' walls, as if waiting for images to materialize. A sculpture by Iván Navarro, "Homeless Lamp, the Juice Sucker," in the shape of a shopping cart made from white fluorescent tubing, generates a blinding glow. But it was meant to be mobile. When it was new in 2005, the artist, like a homeless Diogenes, pushed it through the streets of Chelsea, searching, mostly in vain, for public sources of electrical power.

Most restless of all is the definition of "Latin American art." It would require a very much larger show than this one to begin to gauge its permutations. And larger, of course, is the goal. Whether Mr. de la Barra will stay on after the exhibition finishes its run is uncertain; technically, he was hired just for this project, but maybe this could change.

What shouldn't change is the curatorial energy, however low key, that's been set in motion. Yes, our big museums are embracing a wider world late, and for dubious reasons. But late is better than never. And in enlightened hands, wrong reasons can be made right.

"Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative Under the Same Sun: Art From Latin America Today" runs through Oct. 1 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; 212-423-3500, guggenheim.org.