BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Innovators and Iconoclasts: Six Books on Latin American Modern and Contemporary Art

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This essay reviews the following works:


In the past six years, more than ten new titles on modern and contemporary Latin American art have been published by academic presses in the United States, each of which owes a great debt to Jacqueline Barnitz (1923–2017), whose 2001 survey Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America was issued in a revised and expanded edition in 2015. Barnitz, who held the first tenure-track position in the United States dedicated to Latin American art history, at the University of Texas from 1981 until her retirement in 2007, forged a narrative of twentieth-century Latin American art that departed from the Mexico-centric historiography typically taught in classrooms in the United States long before the revisionist desire to look farther afield and to more recent art had, by the late 1990s, begun to reshape Latin Americanist scholarship in English.

Barnitz possessed a capacious and wide-ranging vantage that was formed by her experiences traveling to Buenos Aires in 1962 and working as an art critic among Latin American exiles in New York City during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when many artists, having traveled to New York on fellowships, stayed on to avoid the dictatorships in their home countries. This point of view shaped an interpretation of Latin American art that emphasizes its post-1945 manifestations and its refocusing on the region of the Southern Cone. As her book demonstrates, she also sought to bring to light the wide-ranging approaches to making objects and images that artists in Latin America naturally took—including abstract and figurative modes of representation and conceptualism—and to counter the misconception on the part of US or European readers that Latin American artists were not working within the flow of the most up-to-date trends of international contemporary art. Her book has been used to help teach the survey of Latin American art that have, during the past decade, increasingly become mainstays of art history departments in the United States. As the author of a crucial tool for structuring pedagogy around a region possessing diverse forms of modern art and disparate histories, Barnitz stitched together the numerous concerns of artists working in distinct social and cultural contexts and brought to the attention of English-speaking art history students and scholars the work of many frankly extraordinary artists.

It is thus unsurprising that Sérgio Martins, Alexander Alberro, Gina McDaniel Tarver, and Patrick Frank, in writing on, respectively, Brazilian avant-gardism, Latin American abstraction, Colombian conceptualism, and Argentinean neo-figuration, all tackle artists and topics first introduced to US readers by Barnitz. That said, they all in different ways also depart from her framework, revealing the limitations of the survey format by challenging many of the narratives and conventions of art history and by narrowing their focus to specific artistic concerns or national scenes. The historical scope of these new studies covers 1945 to 1975; the earliest episodes examined are the Madi and Concreto-Involución movements in the Rio de la Plata region, while the bulk of the texts focus on artists from Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia active at home and in Europe and the United States during the 1960s and early 1970s. Stylistically, the authors’ foci range from conceptual art, neoexpressionism and figurative painting, to hard-edged abstract painting and sculpture, Pop, and installation art and street-level interventions in myriad forms. Their contributions are substantial and far reaching: they chart entirely new narratives (Tarver) and narratives little known beyond regional scholars (Frank), reassert movements (Martins), and offer a compelling, original reading of phenomena within the region we call Latin America (Alberro). Nor is it surprising that Frank, in his new anthology of primary sources, choses texts that support the threads of avant-gardism laid out by Barnitz, although he updates both his anthology and the new edition of Barnitz’s textbook he coauthored with her by supplementing them with material that discusses artists active in the current moment, an elaboration that shifts the focus from the international to the global and, in the process, raises productive questions about the position of Latin American art and culture within these past and present fields.

Exhibitions and their catalogs have also established the groundwork for these studies. In taking a closer look at artists whose work poses challenges to conventional historical discourses, Alberro, Tarver, and Frank tackle artists whose work has been featured in revisionist exhibitions in the United States since the late 1990s. Mari Carmen Ramirez and Héctor Olea’s landmark exhibition Inverted Utopias, which appeared at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2004, presented many of the artists who play leading roles in this group of recent studies. It was first of these exhibitions that figures or implications of these books, including Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and Beatriz González, were held up as key protagonists in Latin America who were not only responding with great vigor to their local conditions but were also challenging artistic norms more broadly. These artists, who feature prominently in Alberro’s and Martins’s books, plus Colombians Antonio Caro and Bernardo Salcedo, who are central to Tarver’s study, and others were also presented as challengers to US and European tropes of conceptual art in the groundbreaking exhibition organized by Luis Camnitzer and Jane Farver in 1999, Global Conceptualism. Since the late 1990s, the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros has mounted numerous shows that brought to visibility the mid-twentieth-century art of Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina. More recently, the Getty Research Institute supported some fifty research and exhibition projects that came to fruition in the fall of 2017, which included exhibitions on modern and contemporary artists, national phenomena, and new cultural networks, such as the Chinese Caribbean diaspora, and political groups, such as feminist artists in Latin American countries and the Latino United States.


3 In spring 2017, some hundred works from this collection were given to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where they now form the core of the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Research Institute for the Study of Art from Latin America.
With great tenacity and enormous insight, Albero, Martins, Frank, and Tarver all—in one way or another—enhance our understanding of how artists mediate the divide between art and life, how they respond to political events, and how they attempt to enact a politics of their own. While they take approaches that draw in different measures from social history of art, psychoanalytic theory, art criticism, and formal and semiotic analysis, each chapter’s specific historical analyses, together bringing beautiful nuance to chapters of Latin American art history that have long merited such sustained, scholarly attention.

Alexander Albero, whose account begins in Buenos Aires in the year 1945 and ends in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1960s, emphasizes reversals in his study of the invention of a participatory mode of abstract art, Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconceived Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art. Although he rounds out the chronological scope of his study in 1967, when Hélio Oiticica was making the samba capes in Rio he called Parangolés, he concentrates on questions that were raised by artists and critics during the 1950s, when the geometric abstraction painting and sculpture to which artists had fully committed themselves was in crisis. In Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela became subject to a process of critical examination that eventually led artists to make works that required an unprecedented degree of active participation. A central question for Albero is how the avant-garde dealt with the central issues of power that spoke to the push-pull involved in critical inquiry. Because he provides such rich accounts of artists’ work leading up to their ‘discoveries,’ Soto’s serial paintings, Oiticica’s monochromes, Clark’s Coconuts and Counter-Reliefs are analyzed in this book with heretofore unseem subtlety.

Albero strikes new ground by rigorously examining a phenomenon that has been much applauded by historians and curators during the past decade but has received sustained analysis only in either monographic or country-specific studies or catalogue essays, with the notable exception of Mónica Amor’s Theories of the Nonobject: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, 1944–1969 (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016). Among the many revelations Albero brings to this material is a theoretical analysis that eschews the false perception that artists such as Clark and Soto were engaging in another form of what Michael Fried, referring to the work of US-based minimalists during the 1960s, called “theatricality.” Instead, Alberro argues that such a perception is based on a false perception that artists such as Riley and Soto were engaged in another form of what Michael Fried, referring to the work of US-based minimalists during the 1960s, called “theatricality.” Instead, Alberro argues that such a perception is based on a false perception of the DEPENDENCE of power that spoke to the push-pull involved in critical inquiry. Because he provides such rich accounts of artists’ work leading up to their ‘discoveries,’ Soto’s serial paintings, Oiticica’s monochromes, Clark’s Coconuts and Counter-Reliefs are analyzed in this book with heretofore unseem subtlety.

Martins examines different avant-garde strategies in five chapters, each of which explores avant-garde episodes and assemblies on a group of texts or artworks. In chapter 1 he surveys the poet Ferreira Gullar’s influential “Theory of the Non-Object” by reading it against and alongside the texts of Haroldo de Campos and Mário Pedrosa as well as the sculpture Amílcar de Castro made during the 1950s and early 1960s, arguing for the importance of questions of absence and imminence during this formative period. In chapter 2 he reexamines Oiticica’s relationship with the concrete art movement that the artist claimed to have abandoned, instead arguing that Oiticica sought to intensify the contradictions of a “constructive avant-garde.” Chapter 3 examines a circle of artists during the 1960s who were experimenting with portraiture in modes that engaged with conceptualism, including Antonio Díaz, Carlos Vergara, and Rubens Gerchman. Chapter 4 focuses on Chilean writers and artist’s argumentation with the late 1960s and 1970s, emphasizing the unreliable and yet forceful psychological invitation of the artwork to describe the advances of artistic discovery, instead structuring his story around a series of more complex and conceptualist analyses, by drilling down on specific episodes and works, they all bring beautiful nuance to chapters of Latin American art history that have long merited such sustained, scholarly attention.

That international and political modes of art, whether geometric abstraction and street-level performance or Pop and installation art, coexist in perpetual tension within one artists’ practice or even a single artwork is a given in Gina McDaniel Tarver’s groundbreaking study. In The New Iconoclasts: From Art of a New Reality to Conceptual Art in Colombia, 1961–1975, she tells the story of how a lively group of artists rose to national prominence championed by critics and institutions seeking to usher in a new cultural era. Less known to US and European readers than the Brazilians and Argentinians examined by Albero and Martins, her protagonists are also the creators of conceptual art, theorists of critical abstraction. They are unconnected to the dominant avant-garde in the United States and Colombia. Their work is shown in US museums over the past five years, others who were central to the development of the experimental art scene described, such as Bernardo Saldello and Antonio Caro, are little known to US and European readers. Nor have these outstanding artists’ activities been properly embedded in critical and institutional histories, as Tarver does. She charts a compelling narrative that ably copes with the complexity of a community of critics, artists, and museum directors who valued internationalism and strove to build institutions for contemporary art in the midst of political conflict and social instability. Her title conveys both the dynamism of her topic and the ambition of her approach: by labeling her subjects “iconoclasts” she is confessing artistic historical and art historical narratives of US-based avant-garde practices in a context of political history that is often ignored in the United States and Europe, and those who have already digested sweeping, celebratory narratives of such figures as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark and are looking for unorthodox readings of their works and to meet new characters. Toward the end, Martins sets out to show how the Brazilian avant-gardes reveal the inadequacies of the theory of the avant-garde as posited by the German theorist Peter Bürger. By taking a different approach, each of which frames avant-garde episodes and assemblies on a group of texts or artworks. In chapter 1 he surveys the poet Ferreira Gullar’s influential “Theory of the Non-Object” by reading it against and alongside the texts of Haroldo de Campos and Mário Pedrosa as well as the sculpture Amílcar de Castro made during the 1950s and early 1960s, arguing for the importance of questions of absence and imminence during this formative period. In chapter 2 he reexamines Oiticica’s relationship with the concrete art movement that the artist claimed to have abandoned, instead arguing that Oiticica sought to intensify the contradictions of a “constructive avant-garde.” Chapter 3 examines a circle of artists during the 1960s who were experimenting with portraiture in modes that engaged with conceptualism, including Antonio Díaz, Carlos Vergara, and Rubens Gerchman. Chapter 4 focuses on Chilean writers and artist’s argumentation with the late 1960s and 1970s, emphasizing the unreliable and yet forceful psychological invitation of the artwork to describe the advances of artistic discovery, instead structuring his story around a series of more complex and conceptualist analyses, by drilling down on specific episodes and works, they all bring beautiful nuance to chapters of Latin American art history that have long merited such sustained, scholarly attention.

When writing against the grain of a Brazilian art history that easily coheres around already accepted theories of avant-gardism in the United States and Europe, Martins also counters coherent conceptions of Brazilianism or even military dictatorship. Chronological disjunctions, failures and partial successes of avant-garde experimentation, and the unreliable and yet forceful psychological invitation of the artwork to describe the advances of artistic discovery, instead structuring his story around a series of more complex and conceptualist analyses, by drilling down on specific episodes and works, they all bring beautiful nuance to chapters of Latin American art history that have long merited such sustained, scholarly attention.

* Cohn, Brazilian Art under Dictatorship, and Shtronberg, Art Systems, bring to light different aspects of the politics of making art under the Brazilian dictatorship.
Patrick Frank’s book Painting in a State of Exception: New Figuración in Argentina, 1960–1965 differs from Albero’s, Martín’s, and Tarver’s because he focuses on a group of artists whose mode of figurative painting has garnered almost no attention from museums or curators in the United States and Europe. Although the revised edition of Barnitz’s book, which Frank coauthored, dedicates seven pages to the Nueva or Otra Figuración group, the only recent exhibition in the United States to have featured their work was Inverted Utopias.14 The four artists who formed the group—Jorge de la Vega, Luis Felipe Noé, Rómulo Macció, and Ernesto Deira—will garner the attention that they deserve thanks both to Frank’s study and to the fact that scholars in the United States, Europe, and Latin America are reassessing figurative painting. As Frank rightly emphasizes with the phrase “State of exception,” which he borrows from the historian Carl Schmitt, who used it to describe the suspension of constitutional rights that occurred in Nazi Germany, de la Vega, Macció, and Deira were working within an Argentine in which civil rights were curtailed and military power expanded. Frank’s study attests to the historical importance of this work; by focusing on this brief period when they were working and showing together he displays the rich and varied vocabulary of forms they used it to describe the suspension of constitutional rights that occurred in Nazi Germany, de la Vega, Macció, and Deira were working within an Argentine in which civil rights were curtailed and military power expanded. Frank’s study attests to the historical importance of this work; by focusing on this brief period when they were working and showing together he displays the rich and varied vocabulary of forms they

Frank also takes a light, deliberate hand in revising and elaborating on Barnitz’s Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America that has been produced since 2001. Areas of the book that have been substantively improved with better photography. Finally, a new chapter on contemporary art ends the revised edition. Written by Frank, it includes artists that allow him to build on themes established in the book’s revised edition. Frank continues to trace both the international and local reception of the four artists’ work, including that of Noé’s book Antiestética (anti-aesthetic), in which he rages against the myths of the expressionist painter.

Throughout his book, Frank presents a narrative that vividly contextualizes de la Vega, Noé, Macció, and Deira within the political and social specificity of Argentina during the mid-1960s, when, on the heels of Perón’s fall, the country was struggling with incipient military strongmen. He draws from sources that include the unpublished papers of Noé, clippings and archives from the inimitable collection of the Fundación Espigas in Buenos Aires, and secondary literature that includes Argentine scholarship on the Nueva Figuración group and historical accounts of the period. That the artists were wisely utilizing the political climate of rebellion within the parameters of figurative painting is made clear, and scholars would be wise to consider figuración and the more easily digestible conceptual practices of the 1960s as enmeshed in common social struggles. The 2014 exhibition at Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City, Desafío a la estabilidad: Procesos artísticos en México, 1952–1967, contextualized the similarly

The exhibition Cantos paralelos: Visual Rhythm in Contemporary Art was organized by Mari Carmen Ramirez and mounted at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin, in 1999 and included de la Vega.

1 The artists first called themselves the Otra Figuración (Other Figuración) group, but critics rechristened them Nueva Figuración (New Figuración), which is the moniker Frank uses.

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shaped by US-Eurocentric canons upheld as a global model that is not only primed for export to countries subject to colonialism but is also thoughtlessly accepted as an undifferentiated unifying force in the age of global biennials and art fairs. As the Argentine-born, Mexico-based theoretician Néstor García Canclini has observed, in the current age, globalization is most frequently a force of inequality that continues economic and political relations established under colonialism. It is no small accomplishment, then, that Alberro’s, Martin’s, Frank’s, and Tarver’s scholarly monographs all bring to light the historical complexity with which artists in Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia navigated scenes that were shaped, as art worlds have long been, by the interplay of local and global forces. In the process, they show the continued importance of tethering the study of the art of Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia, among other nations, to the idea of Latin America, suggesting that, despite the problems that come with this fraught term, it does the vital work of bringing to bear the opposition and mobility that are vital to understanding cultural production in the region.

**Author Information**
Harper Montgomery teaches in the Art and Art History Department at Hunter College in New York City. She has written for *The Art Bulletin*, *Art Journal*, and *The Brooklyn Rail* and has organized exhibitions on art of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century, and the present for the galleries of Hunter College. Her book *The Mobility of Modernism: Art and Criticism in 1920s Latin America* was published last year by University of Texas Press and won the Arvey Foundation Book Award for distinguished scholarship on Latin American art. Her current research concerns the ascent of artesanía within contemporary art spaces in Latin America during the 1970s.

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1. For evidence of these issues see the conversations in Art and Globalization, edited by James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).