

Is there such thing as contemporary Latin American art?

Words:
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Omar Barquet. El nacimiento, 2016, 30 x 31.5 x 2 in. Fragments of seashell, oyster shell and wood, pigeon feather, gold pin and wood splinters.



The term Latin America generally refers to territories in the Americas where Romance languages such as Spanish, Portuguese or French prevail. However, the term is sometimes used more broadly to refer to all the Americas south of the United States, thus including the Anglophone Caribbean, Belize or the Dutch Caribbean. Whichever way we look at Latin America, one thing is for sure: it is a highly complex term and not without controversy. All the more, it is important to reflect upon our understanding of contemporary Latin American art and how it relates to the concepts of borders, territories and identity.

Andrea Hinteregger De Mayo, who has twenty years of experience in the art market, currently holds the position of Director of Latin America at the gallery Mai36 in Zurich, Switzerland. She is also the founder and director of Artrepco, an independent consulting firm at the interface between culture and art. Hinteregger De Mayo's knowledge of Latin American cultures and markets, the characteristics of intercultural exchanges and the promotion of opportunities between Latin America and Switzerland are included in her area of expertise. We talked to her in order to understand if there is such thing as contemporary Latin American art.

so on." That experience led her to raise even more questions, revolving around the dimensions of culture and ways of thinking that define territories. She ended up asking herself how she should use the term Latin America as a means for defusing utopias or to generally refer to a certain geographical territory in the Americas. "Contemporary art for me is always the mirror of the society in which we currently live. So, in Latin America, you have a full diversity of cultures, traditions and heritages—this being the result of a combination of Indigenous, African and European ancestors and of creolization. Take the artist Lina Bo Bardi as an example: drawing from modernism and from her own European background, she has created a distinct Brazilian utopia by researching folk art, African Brazilian heritage and local nature. In that sense, at least for me, contemporary art is always a mirror and it doesn't matter where it is from," she says.

About territories, borders and identity

Territories and borders—especially when emphasizing on the aspects of perception and heritage of place—are closely linked to our own understanding of identity, but as soon as you flip the sentence, things become more complicated: "Is our own understanding of identity closely linked to territories and borders?", Hinteregger De Mayo asks. "In my personal case, for sure not! I have a Brazilian father and an Austrian mother. I have always been a foreigner, regardless of where I was." Thus, she has identified more time-bound rather than space-bound aspects such as experiences, memories and tragic moments as constituting for someone's own identity. Art, for her, possesses a unique potential to transport such experiences, memories and moments, and move people regardless of their local heritage. "It moved me, for example, when I first saw Jose Alejandro Restrepo's artworks, who comes from Colombia," she says. In his work *Musa Paradisiaca*, which is the botanical name for the banana, "nature enters into a grotesque synthesis with technology. The paradisiacal conditions of a Garden of Eden, as Colombia embodies it in all its natural splendour and diversity from a Western point of view, collide harshly with social reality: the endless history of oppression and violence that can be seen in the banana cultures, expressed in television recordings of massacres committed in recent decades," as described by Hans Michel Herzog. Two years ago, Hinteregger De Mayo visited Ciudad Juarez at the border to the U.S.—one of the most dangerous cities in the world. There, she met Oscar Gardea Duarte, a young artist who tries to define territories and borders by giving an insight into his daily life and into his artistic thoughts. "Such memories," she states "have shaped and defined me. Those are the moments when your own personal horizon grows." So, do we need the tag Latin American art? "Yes, we do," Hinteregger De Mayo says, "but only to simplify the territory's complex history and culture for the people who haven't had the chance to experience Latin America themselves—and that's the majority. In that sense, the term is extremely helpful to mediate between the artists and a wide audience."

Connecting the dots between contemporary Latin American Art and the Swiss art market

In 2016, Hinteregger De Mayo curated the show *Everyday Alchemy* by nine Latin American artists at the Galerie Von Bartha in Basel. Between 2009 and 2015, Hinteregger De Mayo was a director and cofounder of the Gallery Christinger De Mayo in Zurich, a well-established platform for artists from Latin America and Europe with the aim to build bridges between the two continents. Furthermore, she has curated numerous art shows in Switzerland, the UK, Mexico and Brazil and has served as a guest lecturer at the University of Zurich for Art Market Studies since 2012, supervising various master theses, of which two were about Latin America. Despite of her vast experiences and her high level of expertise, she claims that there are not many connections between contemporary Latin American art and the Swiss art market. "But only at first sight," she adds. "If we only look at Swiss art collectors, then there is really not a lot in common since they are not very much into buying art from Latin America." However, Hinteregger De Mayo has found that, actually, there are many interesting touchpoints with regards to culture, politics and economics. "We just need to find a way to interconnect them in the art market, as well," she explains. The artist Adan Vallecillo, for example, investigated the connections between Honduras and Switzerland. In the Mayan culture, cacao had multiple uses and great symbolism. Now, hundreds of years later, cacao trees keep growing in Honduras and the beans have been exported to chocolate manufacturers all over the world—the Sprüngli family being among one of the first buyers. They started building their chocolate empire in 1845 when the family opened its first confectionery shop in Zurich. Today, Lindt & Sprüngli AG has gained a global reach, and even Swiss chocolate has become a world-renowned brand itself. "So, there are actually a lot of bridges and connections that could be interesting for Swiss collectors, you just have to look for them carefully enough," Hinteregger De Mayo states.

As the current Director Latin America at the Galerie *Mai36*, Hinteregger De Mayo likes to take her time in order to carefully choose artists. "I have to constantly ask myself: Is the artist ready to be aligned with the likes of a John Baldessari or a Lawrence Weiner? Is there a dialogue? Could the audience of *Mai36* be interested in this particular position?" she says. In Jorge Méndez Blake from Guadalajara, for example, Hinteregger De Mayo found a perfect match for the gallery. He had his first exhibition in Zurich in 2019.

← Adán Vallecillo. *Strike, Fruit labels and images of the strike*, 80 cm, 2014. 1954 is an important date in Central America as it was the year of the emblematic workers' strike against the injustices committed by the transnational banana companies in Honduras. The same ones that planned and executed a coup d'état against the democratic government of the Guatemalan president of Swiss origin Jacobo Arbenz.

↓ Adán Vallecillo. *Annatto and cocoa pigments*, 60 x 82 cm, 2014. This paint is composed of two ingredients used to make a drink popularly known in Mesoamerica as *Tiste*. It also has ceremonial uses. Chocobananagame exhibition, Christinger De Mayo gallery, Zurich.



About the complexity and diversity of contemporary art in Latin America

For her recently published book *Nuances of Latin American Art*, Hinteregger De Mayo has looked at the cultural diversity that prevails in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Honduras, Mexico and Peru. She presents her findings through the analysis of sixteen expositions by forty-four different artists that have taken place in various Latin American countries between 2010 and 2016. "When I asked artists if they felt like Latin American artists, they all denied that such a category even existed," she remembers. Throughout her journeys for the book, Hinteregger De Mayo thought deeply about the concepts of dividing and connecting that are vital to address the question of what makes territories. First, she realized that to understand a territory such as a country, it is crucial to know its different dimensions. On a physical-political dimension, for example, it entails questions such as: What is a border? What happens within them? How do borders influence its territory on other dimensions? Argentina, for example, has suffered many internal political events throughout its history, such as the military coup in 1976 to depose Martínez de Perón. The regime lasted until 1983, when the military government collapsed. This experience has marked the people in Argentina, leaving behind a common historical scar. "In 2010, when I travelled by bus from Buenos Aires to Salta for 27 hours, I noticed that we were passing by the same candidate election campaign poster over and over again. I started to think about how such a uniform way of campaigning can have a strong influence on the people and their culture. Who are they influenced by? Who are their philosophers, their writers? What films do they watch? And



A new outlook: About “brazilianization” and the coronavirus pandemic.

The German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, introduced the term *Brasilianisierung* (Eng.: *brazilianization*) into modern sociology in the 1990s. He referred to a shift of Western societies, particularly of the labor world, towards current Southern societies. He predicted that, in the 21st century, there would be an ever-increasing income gap, undeclared work and short-term contracting in North-Western Europe, all of which would lead to insecurities, plurality and confusion. Therefore, *brazilianization* would ultimately lead to an inversion of the role model function traditionally assigned to North-Western countries. “We are on the brink of big changes,” Hinteregger De Mayo says. “Already before the pandemic, we could observe how populism prevailed in a lot of different countries, seemingly functioning as an absolute answer to all of “our” fears.” Many developments preceded populism, paving the way for its success—globalization—an accelerated digitalization of our everyday lives, a widening gap between the rich and the former middle classes, and so on. “It reminds me of the Brazilian-Swiss artists duo Mauricio Diaz and Walter Riedweg and their video installation *Funk Staden*,” Hinteregger De Mayo tells. “They took the book *Wahrhaftige Historia* by Hans Staden as the basis for their work. Hans Staden, who came from northern Hesse, Germany, was shipwrecked in the 16th century during a voyage to America and was captured by the Tupinamba tribe, who assimilated their enemies in order to acquire their abilities. Staden, however, managed to escape and wrote his richly illustrated travelogue, which shaped the image of the primitive savages in South America. The video installation includes pages and images from the book, showing them over and over again. The story is transferred to the funk-culture of the favelas—the celebrating Brazilians play the savages who are maneaters, drawing from the aforementioned creolization.” Hinteregger De Mayo takes a short break to think, then she adds, “I don’t think that the creolization has happened enough in the West. So, in short, I believe art, poetry, philosophy and music will play a more important role than ever. How do we capitalize it? This will be the challenge for the next few months and years to come after the pandemic crisis.”

Monika Bravo. Bild-Objekt #6, 2016. Silk fabric, pigment, paper, tape, acrylic, mylar, wood, canvas, mirror, ribbon, aluminium, 60 x 152 x 76 cm

