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Latino Art and the Immigrant Artist: The Case of Sandra C. Fernández

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Within the past year, two exhibitions ventured into territory that had been avoided by museums for some time: exploring, in each case, the nature of Latino art, and of Latin American art. Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art was curated by E. Carmen Ramos for the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) and presented in Washington, D.C. from October 25, 2013 to March 2, 2014. It is now touring the country, to be shown in at least five venues in the United States. Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today, curated by Pablo León de la Barra, was on view at New York’s Guggenheim Museum from June 13 to October 1, 2014, with subsequent stops in Mexico City and São Paulo. The exhibitions showcased contemporary art by artists in Latin America, and of Latin American descent living in the U.S., with SAAM featuring objects dating from mid-20th century to the 2000s, and the Guggenheim focusing on works from the late 1970s to the present. Coincidentally, both were based on collection building. The art in Our America was drawn exclusively from SAAM’s permanent collection of Latino art, over two thirds of which was acquired since 2011. Under the Same Sun brought together close to fifty art works recently purchased by the museum through the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative.

Since the early 1990s, institutions and curators had shied away from exhibitions that purported to categorize the art of Latin America and/or Latinos in the U.S. Among visual artists, the topic of classification is almost always sensitive territory, and critics and curators have significant differences of opinion in regard to defining and presenting Latin American art. Given the history of stereotyping and marginalization of Latin American and Latino cultures, creating categories risked new possibilities for othering. Nevertheless, at the heart of these recent exhibitions were transactions which guaranteed inclusion into major museum collections, and in many cases provided a financial reward to artists and/or their galleries; the exhibitions thus promised to be more than a display of tokenism, signaling instead a commitment to a broader, more inclusive vision of art beyond the mainstream Euro- and U.S.-centric narratives in the long term.

Inclusion is always a pertinent issue with exhibitions. For those attempting to define an aesthetic around the subject of identity, the question of why a particular artist or group is left out invariably comes up. In the case of the SAAM and Guggenheim exhibitions, the differences in curatorial criteria as to who could fit the category of Latin American/Latino were striking. The borders of the Guggenheim show were porous, open to artists who had any relationship with Latin America, such as the French video and installation artist, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, who has undertaken several projects in Brazil. Under the Same Sun also included Latino artists born in the United States, such as Paul Ramirez Jonas from California, Puerto Ricans Rafael Ferrer and Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, and numerous artists who reside permanently in New York. “Latin America” was in this case a loose framework under which to explore pressing issues with global resonance. In the words of the curator,

Demonstrating that Latin America cannot be reduced to a single, homogeneous entity, Under the Same Sun considers the diversity of creative responses to shared realities molded by colonial and modern history; repressive governmental politics; economic crisis; and social inequality; as well as by periods of economic development and social progress. Despite financial growth and increased stability in most of the continent over the past decade, Latin America remains divided by class and ethnic difference, and marked by political and economic upheaval. Under the Same Sun presents recent art that addresses the past and present of this subtle and complex situation, and which explores possible alternative futures.
The wall text describing Paul Ramírez Jonas' new media work, *Another Day* (2003), also gave insight into the curator's perspective. Consisting of monitors counting down to the next sunrise in ninety cities across the world, the piece was said to "visualiz[e] an expansion of our conception of geography (and, in the context of this exhibition, Latin America) beyond the politically determined borders of region and nation-state." Other works contested the idea of borders: Javier Téllez's *One Flew Over the Void (Bala Perdida)* (2005), which featured a man being shot out of a cannon from Tijuana to San Diego, and Alfredo Jaar's *Logo for America* (1987/2014), the iconic light installation in Times Square whose main image featured the map of the United States with the words "This is not America" superimposed—the piece was reprised on forty-five screens in its original setting and projected from 11:57 PM to midnight during the month of August 2014.

*Our America*, by contrast, had clearly delineated boundaries corresponding to the map of the (continental) United States. In the words of the curator, "*Our America* urges that we not only affirm Latino art as American art, but that we ask and answer how and to what effect it is part of that national category." Furthermore, the exhibition defined Latino art as encompassing "the art of Mexican Americans/Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and more recent arrivals such as Dominicans." The only other background represented was Salvadoran, through the D.C.-based artist, Muriel Hasburn. Puerto Rican artists who were included tended to have strong ties with the mainland, and most were based there altogether. The curator was also emphatic about how the category of Latino differed from Latin American: "Unlike Latin American sojourners, Latino artists have a long-standing presence in the U.S. Whether residence or citizenship is chosen or imposed, Latino artists are inextricably tied to this national space." This bold assertion raised the question of at what point does one of these so-called sojourners become a Latino. By now, such New York-based artists as Jaar, Luis Camnitzer, and Iván Navarro, all of them represented in *Under the Same Sun*, are deeply rooted in the U.S., as are numerous South-and-Central American artists whose countries of origin precluded them from consideration in the SAAM show. Similarly, at what point does a Cuban artist become Cuban-American? *Our America* included work by artists born in Miami as well as María Magdalena Campos-Pons, a more recent arrival, who was educated in Cuba and is part of the narrative of Cuban art in a way that no U.S.-born Cuban-American could ever be. Though the SAAM promoted the idea of understanding Latino art through its most representative communities, Campos-Pons is not associated with such Cuban strongholds as Miami or New Jersey, having moved to Boston from Havana in 1989. Furthermore, with only four national traditions (Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Dominican Republic) and a token Salvadoran to acknowledge the diaspora in Washington, D.C., the SAAM closed its borders to artists not deemed "Latin American" or those who are not from a specific national background. By now, almost every Latin American nationality has a significant presence in the U.S., and marginalizing some backgrounds to elevate others is to engage in a similar process of differentiation which Latino artists have been protesting in relation to mainstream American culture. Ultimately, this is not a productive model.

The work of the Ecuadorian-American, artist Sandra C. Fernández, is a case in point. Born in Queens but raised in Quito, she returned to the U.S. in her twenties as a political exile, a victim of persecution who had lost close friends to government-sponsored violence during the presidency of León Febres Cordero (1984-88), when "arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial executions, torture, sexual violence, and forced disappearances were not isolated or sporadic events, but committed under a systematic and institutionalized state policy." Her early painting, *USA Again* (1988, Fig. 1), denounces American intervention in Latin America and around the world. It depicts a tank covered with an American flag against a
pink and blue background of abstract painterly forms resembling clouds. The pastel colors, satirically referencing those of the flag, belie the darker message, reinforced by the names of countries where the U.S. has intervened: El Salvador, Nicaragua, Vietnam, among others. A critical attitude towards the U.S. is a common aspect of Latin American and Latino art. Under the Same Sun presented a takeaway poster by Carlos Motta detailing U.S. interventions in Latin America since 1946. Jaar’s 2014 version of Logo for America was characterized in a headline by The Guardian’s website as “Anti-American art to take over NYC’s Times Square Every Night in August.” Our America also included works by artists who have leveled strong criticisms against the U.S., such as Enrique Chagoya, Miguel Luciano, and Malaquías Montoya, but it tended to shy away from potentially controversial (read “Anti-American”) subject matter, choosing instead to represent these artists through more neutral imagery.

Fernández’s early work allied her with both Latin American and Latino conceptions of art, though she would not have been eligible for inclusion in Our America. Mistrust of the United States is, however, not only a common theme in works by artists with Latin American backgrounds, it is built into the very concept of Latin America. The term arose in the nineteenth century in part from the need to differentiate the newly independent Spanish colonies from the U.S.: Latin America as opposed to Anglo America. Mistrust of the United States is, however, not only a common theme in works by artists with Latin American backgrounds, it is built into the very concept of Latin America. The term arose in the nineteenth century in part from the need to differentiate the newly independent Spanish colonies from the U.S.: Latin America as opposed to Anglo America. One of the most significant commentaries on Latin American identity is the Cuban thinker José Martí’s 1891 essay, “Our America,” which gave the SAAM exhibition its title. Martí uses “American” in a Pan-American sense; he avoids the term “Latin” but “Our America” is for him an entity distinct from North America. His America is located south of the U.S. border, spanning from the “Rio Grande to the Straits of Magellan.” Another of the ironies of the SAAM exhibition is the reference to this oppositional text—advocating for a Latin American identity outside of the borders of the United States—to characterize an exhibition that seeks to limit Latino art to the confines of North America as Martí understood it.

For Fernández, as for many immigrants, the move to the U.S. was an experience of estrangement and alienation. Building Identity Away from Home I (1992, Fig. 2) speaks to her early feelings of dislocation and the need to build community in new surroundings. The print features a disjointed composition with repeating disembodied faces of two subjects in different colors, sizes, and planes of color, patterns, and words interspersed around, including the phrase miembro de la comunidad latina (member of the Latino community) and racial epithets in Spanish. Written in disparate fonts, the words along with the other elements create a visual dissonance that questions the very idea of community. By employing words in Spanish, Fernández reveals the racism that exists among Latinos. One of the words is “cholo,” used in the Andes to refer to a person of indigenous background. Latino artists have characteristically turned language with derogatory connotations into self-affirmations, such as the California painter John Valadez, whose Cholo (1978) features a portrait of an urban youth dressed in a plaid shirt and khakis against a blank background with words describing his clothing as well as the word “cholo” in large capital letters, with a pronunciation guide below. Both artists betray an awareness of the inclination to classify people that
exist both in the U.S. political consciousness and also in visual imagery from the Americas and the Western colonial tradition more generally. Indeed, throughout her work, Fernández uses human subjects to ponder the ethics of representation, especially as it relates to race, class, and privilege. Her recent mixed-media work *CAUTION: Dreamers in/on Sight* (2013; See cover) superimposes portraits of undocumented minors over a map and juxtaposes it to a warning sign from the desert depicting a migrant family crossing through. The stark silhouette of a man and woman running with the girl being violently dragged by her arm—a dysfunctional family of sorts—stands in stark contrast to Fernández’s sensitive depictions of Latino youths, silkscreened in shades of blue and arranged in a cohesive unit. Drawing the viewer’s sympathy, she successfully humanizes a group of anonymous minors who have been victims of circumstances beyond their control.

Since Fernández’s move to Austin, Texas in 2005, the issue of the border and illegal migration has taken particular urgency in her work. The youths depicted in *CAUTION: Dreamers in/on Sight* are students from the University of Texas at Austin, where she is a faculty member. They are beneficiaries of the Texas DREAM Act, which prevents deportation for undocumented young adults who arrived as minors. In *We the … Gente* (2014; Fig. 3) she juxtaposes a silkscreened photograph of a Latino family, with the father in a fainter color to signify his absence, to the U.S. Constitution against a desert backdrop. The message of the image is direct; the family has been torn apart by deportation, the father’s fate now uncertain. “S.B. 1070” in a “no” symbol refers to the harsh law passed in Arizona which made it mandatory for all immigrants to carry documentation to verify their legal status. As protest art, both this and *CAUTION* align with the social realism of the Mexican muralists, Chicano graphics, and other figurative art forms made for activist ends. In Latin American art, a long history exists both of engaged art and of debating the efficacy of images in effecting social change, a tendency which has been discredited by critics advocating pure aesthetics. There is a marked difference within Fernández’s own trajectory between her more critical reading of the Latino community in *Building Identity Away from Home I*
and the recent works having to do with migration and deportation. Her portrayal of community has become much more cohesive, placing great hope in the image to rally Latinos and sympathizers to a common cause. At the same time, Fernández experiments with other forms of representation around the issue of the border in such works as *Mojándose* (*Crossing II*) from the series *Borders* (2015; Fig. 4). The print uses textured planes and jagged lines in purple and green to evoke the territory of the United States and Mexico separated by the Rio Grande. It ponders the efficacy of abstraction to communicate meaning and elicit empathy.

The series *Borders*, with its fluid lines, abstract elements, juxtapositions of text and images, and experimentation in diverse techniques, is more characteristic of Fernández's work as a visual artist. Over the course of her career, she has relied on the gendered practice of sewing as a surrogate for drawing. Typically considered the first stage of the artistic process, drawing presupposes a sense of freedom. When a line is made by a needle and thread instead of a pencil, it becomes constrained and also takes on a different set of connotations. Instead of the liberty that the wandering line embodies, stitches suggest something being mended and they also indicate the perforation of a surface. In *Mojándose* (*Crossing II*), lines resembling scribbles are juxtaposed with old-fashioned handwriting in Spanish of intaglio pressed on the paper, as well as to pages from two different books—one in English and the other in Spanish—upon which are stitched different colored threads. What at first glance resembles gestural abstraction turns out instead to be a densely layered image that evokes a map, a body of water, different moments in the colonial past, and the scrawls of a child. Another work from the series is somewhat more direct in its message, while still relying further on abstraction than the more overtly activist pieces discussed above. Titled *and all that was found were a watch and a keychain next to his bones*, it contrasts representations of fragments of bones against a sky blue background to actual objects—a watch face and a key hanging from a ring—pressed on the surface. One of Fernández’s most recent work, *Migrations, Dreams, and Dreaming* (2014; Fig. 5) combines abstraction and representation within a large-scale installation. From branches drawing the contours of the Rio Grande hang plastic rosaries; below them a line of sand echoes the outline of the river. Around the room are portraits of Latino youths—“dreamers”—printed over the pages of a 17th-century British book titled *Trials, Crimes, and Misdemeanors* and intertwined in thread and other collaged elements. Both their young faces and the rosaries hanging in the middle of the room convey the artist’s hope for a better future.

Migration and the border are quintessential U.S.-Latino issues. Jaar’s *Logo for America* reinforces Martí’s call for Pan-American unity which in this case does include the U.S.—the final image in his animated sequence is the word “AMERICA” with a map of North and South America replacing the “R.” This is the conception of Latin America promoted by the Guggenheim exhibition, and this expansive definition is probably more productive for artists in the long run, giving them greater license and possibilities for integration within global networks. The reality for Latino artists, however, is that the border exists and despite its being penetrated on a daily basis, this barrier creates a separation that is almost a chasm between North and South. For artists of Latin American descent in the U.S., there is a keen awareness of this divide, a constant topic in American news and politics, and Latino art often responds to the particularities of life north of the border, just as art of any national tradition in Latin America reacts to its immediate context. Delilah Montoya, featured in *Our America*, creates large-scale photographs of the desert in the tradition of American landscape painting. These barren scenes contain almost imperceptible references to border crossers, through abandoned objects or jugs of water left for them by humanitarian groups. Chicano art especially is rife with iconography relating to the border, and Fernández shares an affinity with this important strand of Latino art.
She is also a Latin American, as, in my view, are all Latino artists in the United States. As part of a Latin American diaspora, U.S.-Latino artists would benefit greatly from an expansive definition such as that proposed by the Guggenheim that considers the U.S. as another country in Latin America. Latin Americans, and by extension U.S. Latinos, come from such heterogeneous backgrounds that it is impossible to confine them to particular categories or locales. Serious scholarship in Latino art has tended to be monographic in nature, and a coherent narrative of U.S.-Latino art has yet to be created and may not be possible or even desirable. In the meantime, though, artists like Sandra C. Fernández demonstrate that limiting the definition of Latino art to artists from specific national backgrounds risks negating the very idea of community that led to its establishment in the first place.

ENDNOTES

1 The critical debates around this issue are compiled in Mari Carmen Ramírez, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, and Héctor Olea, eds., Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino? (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, International Center for the Arts of the Americas, 2012).
2 She is French and does not spell Gonzalez with an accent.
5 Ramos, Our America, 36.
6 Ramos, Our America, 63.
9 For more extensive discussion of this topic, see Ramírez, Ybarra-Frausto, and Olea, eds., Resisting Categories, 50-335.
10 José Martí, “Our America,” reprinted in Ramírez, Ybarra-Frausto, and Olea, eds., Resisting Categories, 217.
13 The series “A Ver: Revisioning Art History” published by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center publishes monographs on individual U.S.-Latino artists. The recently published Ilan Stavans and Jorge J. E. Garcia, eds., Thirteen Ways of Looking at Latino Art (Durham: Duke UP, 2014) is a collection of essays with each chapter corresponding to a particular artist.