

Exhibition Review: *“I Paint My Reality: Surrealism in Latin America”*

NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale
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“I Paint My Reality: Surrealism in Latin America” at the NSU Art Museum in Fort Lauderdale uses the flourishing of Surrealism in Latin American from the 1930s onwards as a point of departure to bring together almost 50 paintings, drawings, photographs, and sculptures from the museum’s permanent collection, including a substantial promised gift. Throughout the display, Director and Chief Curator Bonnie Clearwater ably draws out the transformation of surrealist ideas in the Latin American context and the experience of displacement that many of the artists shared. The exhibition also continues the revisionist work of surrealist scholars and curators by foregrounding lesser-known artists and a number of women artists.

Most of the exhibition focuses on artists who were born in Latin America or worked there in the years immediately leading up to and following World War Two. In the early decades of the twentieth century, artists such as the Roberto Matta from Chile, and Joaquin Torres-García from Uruguay, traveled to Europe and connected with Surrealists and other modern artists. Then, during the rise of Fascism in the 1930s and after the outbreak of World War Two, the situation reversed, with numerous artists fleeing Europe and seeking refuge in Latin America, especially Mexico. “I Paint My Reality: Surrealism in Latin America” illustrates the firm foothold that Surrealism gained within Latin America during these years while also asserting its unique character, one that reflects the artists’ biographies and cultural backgrounds. The final third of the exhibition diverges from this historical context and attempts to follow the surrealist narrative into the present day by including works by contemporary artists of Latin American birth or heritage, many of whom

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have worked in South Florida during their careers.

The exhibition is organized into five sections: I Paint My Reality; Ideas and Artists Travel; Dreams and Symbols; Goddesses, Monsters, and Fools; and Hyperreality. These subjects are broad and porous and many of the artists and works could fit in multiple categories. The installation is loosely chronological, with works in the first sections being made by artists connected to the historical Surrealist movement and having a more recognizable surrealist aesthetic. The exhibition spans almost 100 years; the earliest work is a watercolor made in 1923 by the Argentine Xul Solar that fuses mysticism and ancient symbols with formal qualities reminiscent of Paul Klee. The most recent, from 2019, is a large drawing by Emilio Martinez, a Honduran-born, Miami-based artist who draws on dreams, feelings of dislocation, and symbols derived from indigenous cultures to create works with human-hybrid forms.

Upon entering the exhibition, visitors encounter Leonora Carrington's *Artes 110* (Arts 110, Fig. 1), which situates them in time and space. This painting was made around 1942, shortly after Carrington and her new husband, a Mexican diplomat, arrived in Mexico. The title refers to the street address of her first home in Mexico City. In the center is a self-portrait, a disembodied head with wildly flowing hair that flies through the air away from the Old World and towards the New, where a red, organic dress form waits to be occupied. The self-portrait is topped with a small horse while the head of another horse rests below, near the New World. The horse is Carrington's alter ego and represents freedom, which has particular poignancy here considering her recent confinement in a mental hospital and subsequent escape from the war in Europe and her wealthy, conservative family. *Artes 110* draws together themes that become evident throughout the entire exhibition, including loss, new beginnings, biographical and animal symbolism, and dream imagery.

There are a number of well-known artists featured in "I Paint My Reality," including Frida Kahlo, Wifredo Lam, and Wolfgang Paalen. The display's strength however is that it highlights the contributions of artists who have garnered more interest as the field continues to question its parameters and orthodoxies. Alice Rahon, who was married to Paalen and first became known as a surrealist poet in France, only started to create visual art after leaving Europe. The painting *Noche sobre la ciudad* (Night Over the City) shows her experimentation with unusual materials such as sand and her burgeoning interest in Pre-Columbian symbols and the sgraffito (scratching) technique. As one of her more abstract works, it was partially inspired by automatism and the fluidity of the unconscious mind. Rahon was recently the subject of an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, and a translation of her poems is scheduled to be published in 2021.¹ Gunther Gerzso, who was born in Mexico but spent his early years primarily in Europe and the United States before returning to the country of his birth in the 1930s, is represented in the exhibition by *Panorama* (Fig. 2), a striking painting from 1944 of a burning,



Fig. 1. Leonora Carrington, *Artes 110* (Arts 110), c. 1942, oil on canvas, 16 x 24" NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale; promised gift of Stanley and Pearl Goodman



Fig.2 Gunther Gerzso, *Panorama*, 1944, oil on canvas, 19 7/8 x 25 3/4" NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale; promised gift of Pearl and Stanley Goodman © 2021 Gunther Gerzso Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VISDA



Fig. 3 Kati Horna, *Sin título, de la serie Oda a la Necrofilia* (Untitled, from the series Ode to Necrophilia), 1962, gelatin silver print, 15 3/8 x 14 1/8". NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale; promised gift of Stanley and Pearl Goodman

apocalyptic landscape. Gerzsó is best known for his set designs and later geometric abstract paintings rather than for his works from the 1940s, like this one, that show his closeness to the surrealist group in Mexico. The exhibition label suggests that he may have been inspired by the Parícutin volcano, whose dramatic emergence in the Mexican state of Michoacán in 1943 attracted worldwide interest. *Panorama* may also refer to the ongoing devastation of World War Two and recalls certain paintings by Max Ernst and André Masson from the same time period. Like many works in the exhibition, it therefore alludes to both the particular and the universal: Gerzsó's lived reality in Mexico, his memories of his youth growing up in Switzerland, the catastrophic effects of war, and larger socio-political shifts.

"I Paint My Reality" is refreshing in that it subtly foregrounds the contributions of women artists within a broader context. Many surrealist women who left Europe came into their own in Latin America, away from the culture and traditions in which they were raised. Indeed, Carrington, Rahon, Kati Horna, Bridget Bate Tichenor, and Remedios Varos all arrived in Mexico as young adults and chose to remain there for the rest of their lives. The physical distance from many of the originators of Surrealism, such as André Breton and Ernst, and the movement's well-documented misogyny, likely bolstered their distinctive explorations. Horna's photograph *Sin título, de la serie Oda a la Necrofilia* (Untitled, from the series Ode to Necrophilia, Fig. 3), foregrounds the friendships and working relationships that developed among these women, which must have been heightened by shared experience. The photograph is part of a series that explores the fetishistic fascination

with death while also evoking mourning and memory. An enigmatic female figure, modelled by Leonora Carrington, poses shrouded in black. She stands between a bed with a death mask placed on a pillow and a nightstand strewn with the detritus of everyday life, including a lit candle that signifies the fragility of existence, a concept that the artist understood well. Horna, who was Jewish, was forced to flee Berlin in 1933 when the Nazis came to power and between 1937 and 1939 she documented the Spanish Civil War before escaping World War Two and the Holocaust.

The title of the exhibition reveals how inextricably the works are bound with the artists' biographies. This thread becomes more obvious in the last part of the display, which incorporates contemporary Latin American artists who have ties, deliberate or not, to the aesthetics, themes, or political underpinnings of Surrealism. Many of the contemporary works are by South Florida artists, particularly Cubans, in the NSU Art Museum collection. This is a niche area whose connection to Latin American Surrealism could easily feel forced or contrived, yet for the most part it does not. Many of the contemporary artists experienced exile and loss as children and young adults that has informed their work even more obviously than that of the historical Surrealists and often results in a distinct impression of mourning and rootlessness. Some, like Ana Mendieta and Ricardo Viera, came to the United States as children in the early 1960s through Operation Peter Pan, which brought over 14,000 unaccompanied minors aged 6-18 to the United States after parents began to fear the Fidel Castro's government would terminate their parental rights. In Viera's *Sin título. De la serie Isla en mi mente* (Untitled. From the series The island on My Mind), a map of Cuba is overlaid with script, abstract scribbles, and dark dots, obscuring the form of his island birthplace. Gilberto Ruiz arrived in Miami on the Mariel boatlift in 1980, which he called both the best thing and the most terrible thing that ever happened to him.² In Cuba, he had been told that his work was counter to the country's revolutionary principles, which brings to mind the earlier destructive cultural policies of the Nazi regime. Ruiz's *Like Frogs and Planes* (Como sapos y aviones) is a disquieting image of planes falling towards the earth while large frogs leap to meet them. Part of his *The Sky is Falling* series, it conjures those moments or events that mark both a terrifying break from the past and an exciting new beginning.

Many of the contemporary pieces use archaic, indigenous, or mythical symbolism, which historical Surrealists in Latin America found fascinating as well. The contemporary practice is often pointed towards personal exploration of the artist's roots or psyche. Mendieta's photographs document her rock carvings based on the female deities of the native Taino people of Cuba who were decimated during Spanish colonization. These images reflect her career-long meditations on powerful femininity and the personal cost of her displacement from her country of birth and family. *A la deriva* (Adrift) by José Bedia uses calligraphy and signs inspired by the art and culture of West Africa, which is the basis for much Cuban heritage and the artist's own spiritual beliefs. The earth red color and line drawings of an ox and

human head evoke cave paintings and stone carvings.

Some of the works on display seem only tangentially related to the exhibition concept, such as Hector Ragni's geometric watercolor of a train and Tomás Sánchez's painting of trash on a beach. In addition, a number of viewers may have benefited from a Spanish translation of the excellent and informative labels (translation is a project more museums will take on in upcoming years to address the changing demographics of their audiences). Overall, however, Clearwater has provided the viewer with a cogent, exciting display that begs for further research, while also allowing the viewer to gain a greater appreciation for the NSU Art Museum collection. "I Paint My Reality: Surrealism in Latin America" is an exhibition that provides insight into the development of Surrealism in Latin America, its reverberations across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and its continuing relevance in the museum's region.

1 Tere Arcq, *Alice Rabon: Poetic Inventions* (Miami, FL: Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, 2019). Alice Paalen Rahon, *Shapeshifter*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New York Review of Books, forthcoming 2021).

2 Fabiola Santiago, "Flowing from Mariel," *The Miami Herald* (April 17, 2005): <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/mariel/flowing.htm>. Accessed January 4, 2021.