

'Diving into Legacy Is Something We Have to Do from Time to Time'

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Frieze



RODRIGO MOURA

Fernanda Brenner It is almost a year now since you arrived in New York to take over the position of Chief Curator at El Museo del Barrio. At the time of your hiring El Museo was facing criticism for what some saw as a neglect of its original grassroots Puerto Rican community. How did you deal with such a loaded transition?

Rodrigo Moura El Museo del Barrio is one of the most fascinating institutions that I know of, so I knew the museum's legacy would have to be present in any model of curatorial programming that I came to create. Founded in 1969, the museum was instigated by the Puerto Rican community in New York City, in response to the lack of self-determination and representation they experienced in schools. Beginning as a lesson plan, and later expanding into a physical location, the concept challenged the exclusionary practices of the US cultural establishment. It is fundamental to understand that these struggles took the form of a museum. Not a museum on the historical, Eurocentric model - celebrating the accumulation of wealth or spreading a certain taste - but on the contrary, in reaction to the elitist, colonial view. El Museo shares the avant-garde vision of its founder, Raphael Montañez Ortiz: an artist and radical educator who is an important figure in postwar art in the United States. He proposed a museum that reflected indigenous and African thinking, blurred distinctions

between the fine arts and the so-called applied arts, harnessed technology and of reproduction and telematics. In this sense, it is a museum that arises from a series of questions that are still very relevant today.

At the time of my appointment, I faced criticism, naturally; I think it is legitimate for people to have questions about a person who comes from the outside. I also had a lot of support from people historically close to the museum. When I arrived, El Museo was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, which offered me a propitious opportunity to explore its mission from the perspective of its present, as well as its historical evolution in the past 50 years. Among them is the understanding that New York City was fundamental in the development of Latin American art at-large. For me, now the question of the visibility and importance of cultural production by US-based Latinx (or Latino) artists seems to be very urgent, given the wave of far-right, xenophobic feelings across the world.

I spent my first year learning and truly absorbing. I moved to East Harlem, I spoke with important artists that formed a part of the museum's history, and began to study its collection and archives. This initial exploration led me to conceive a monograph exhibitions series about the museum's early years, starting with a show examining the role of Taller Boricua, a collective artists' studio founded around the same time as El Museo that served as a focal point of the 'Nuyorican' - or New York Puerto Rican - avant-garde. This exhibition was about to open when the museum had to close due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus. I hope this work will open further conversations about the under recognized contributions of US-based Latinx artists to the art world.



'Taino', 1971, exhibition poster. Courtesy: El Museo del Barrio, New York

FB You mention the wave of far right feeling and indeed, when you left to join El Museo, your native Brazil was in the turmoil from the recent election of the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro - one of whose very first moves was to start an active dismantlement of the cultural infrastructure of the country ...

RM From a personal point of view, it has been very difficult to witness the dismantling of public institutions in Brazil from afar, in all sectors, including culture. The former Secretary of Culture's Nazi video was a disgusting and acute manifestation of this phenomenon. (In January 2020, the Culture Minister used words from a speech by Joseph Goebbels in a video announcing a new artist prize). The destruction of institutions is growing every day - it is sadly the very objective of this government's authoritarian project. The persecution of racial and gender diversity, the genocidal policy against indigenous peoples, the endorsement of the destruction of the environment: this whole agenda puts us in a terrifying setback. The climate in Brazil has only strengthened my conviction to present works at El Museo that expand the historical art cannon to be much more inclusive and diverse.



Christina Fernandez, *Self-portrait* from the series 'Bend', gelatin silver print, 41 × 51 cm. Courtesy: © the artist and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles

FB You worked as an adjunct curator of MASP (Museu de Arte de São Paulo) in the beginning of Adriano Pedrosa's directorship starting from 2014. The Brazilian museum's new phase started with a deep dive into the institution's legacy and collection in order to expand it beyond its European roots, in what could be called a 'decolonial' gesture. El Museo del Barrio is housed in the Latino community most storied neighborhood and safeguards a great deal of the artistic and craftsmanship production of Latin countries in the past 50

years. How do you plan to address the museum's multilayered legacy and iconic collection in this moment?

RM The work that Adriano Pedrosa embarked upon at MASP, in which I participated in as Adjunct Curator of Brazilian Art, has been fundamental for my work at El Museo. Diving into legacy is something that institutions have to do from time to time - either to reinforce their values or to revise them radically: or even to do both things at once, in a dialectical way. At MASP, Lina Bo Bardi's legacy was placed at the forefront of the new curatorial vision - starting with the return of the glass easels, in their Brechtian and stripped presentation of the European picture gallery. One of the fundamental notions that we worked on at MASP was that of the 'popular' - of popular culture, of popular art, of what, in the words of Bo Bardi was 'of the Black, of the Indigenous'. Lina's egalitarian, open understanding of the term 'work' - not necessarily looking for a distinction between 'artwork' and any other kind of 'work' - offers, I suggest, an alignment with El Museo. In El Museo's collection you see equal treatment of fine or beaux arts and the so-called *artesanías* or crafts, as well as between the plastic arts and the graphic arts. The breaking down of these distinctions is fundamental to the foundation of El Museo: it was exactly the vision of Puerto Rican culture that El Museo del Barrio proposed at its foundation. This was explored in an original way in the museum's early exhibition programs, such as *Arte de la Aguja* ('The Art of Needlework', 1970) which was comprised of crochet, knitting and embroidery objects, or many of the shows presented later under the program of director Marta Moreno Vega, which I plan to revisit.

Another extraordinary thing I wanted to revisit is the early formation and promotion of El Museo's image, which was shaped primarily by the images of photographer Hiram Maristany, who was also one of the museum directors; and the indigenous Taíno visual culture, which was illustrated by Nuyorican and diasporic designers and artists who created the museum's original posters. I am also planning a survey exhibition of self-taught artists from the Caribbean, Central America, South America and the Diaspora. Entitled *Popular Painters*, the show aims to highlight the important contributions of these artists to modern art, which have historically been erased from history. During this closure, we are discussing the possibility of the exhibition making its initial debut in an online format.



'El Arte de la Aguja', 1971, exhibition poster. Courtesy: El Museo del Barrio, New York

FB Turning to another online exhibition: you and your colleagues from El Museo, Patrick Charpenel and Susanna V. Temkin, will organize the *Dialogos* section of Frieze New York this year, showing established and emerging Latino/Latinx and Latin American artists? How will the section reflect the museum's curatorial mission? And how do you think that an art fair context can resonate the work of these artists?

RM The concept of the section is inspired by El Museo's approach to programs, which is to serve as a platform for dialogues between art from Latin America and art produced by US-based Latinx artists. The fair, as a conceptual space, is extremely interesting because it allows us to challenge several pre-conceived ideas, in a short period of time and for a wide audience. On the one hand, there is the view that one of the art market's largest blind spots is the lack of representation of US-based Latinx artists. On the other hand, there is an understanding that art from Latin America has been completely absorbed by the art world mainstream. I happen to think that both these positions are limited and monolithic. Through *Dialogos*, El Museo aims to facilitate conversations about these limited visions and, I hope, go beyond them. In its second year, *Dialogos* will include the painted portraits of artist David Antonio Cruz that tell queer and trans stories of the Latinx diaspora, with a very accurate color sensitivity, very specific. Mexican-American photographer Christina Fernandez explores female and immigrant identities from her own biography, with compelling visual tales. Argentine artist Adriana Bustos creates complex, dissident, multifaceted visions of the world. There is a lyric from a 1980s song by Caetano Veloso,

'Quero ir a Cuba ('I want to go to Cuba'), which refers to the island as 'Yoruba like Bahia', displaying the syncretic relationship that exists between Bahia and the Caribbean through Africa's Yoruba culture. With its Afro-Caribbean Puerto Rican roots, for me, El Museo del Barrio is also 'Yoruba like Bahia'. In this context, we are delighted to feature the works of the Bahian-Yoruba artist Mestre Didi a part of *Dialogos*.

All of these artists and their works presented in conversation with the mission of El Museo del Barrio will serve as an opportunity to highlight these perspectives outside the Museum's physical limits. To accompany *Dialogos* and embracing this digital peak, we are presenting a series of remote studio visits with the participating artists, and other related virtual programming.



Adriana Bustos, *Historia de las cocas medicinales*, 2019, acrylic paint, graphite and silver leaf on canvas, 1.9 × 1.9 m. Courtesy: the artist and Nora Fisch, Buenos Aires

FB I believe that institutions like El Museo have a fundamental role in establishing meaningful connections between the area - vast and heterogeneous after all - conventionally called 'Latin America'. Among their most important tasks is to imagine how Latin American and Latinx art history will be written from now on. How do you think a museum can contribute to that: not only in the US, but within its own community?

RM Since its beginnings, the participation of contemporary artists has made the museum a living and dynamic institution. Currently, we are embarking upon an ambitious reboot of one El Museo's most essential programs, a survey exhibition of US-based Latinx artists. Previously presented as 'S-Files' between 1999 and 2013, this much esteemed series focused on emerging Latin American artists based in New York City, and was instrumental in providing these artists much needed visibility. During this reconceiving period, the curatorial

team (myself, New York-based artist Elia Alba and El Museo Curator Susanna V. Temkin) are reviewing the research parameters and expanding its scope to be inclusive of US-based Latinx artists from across the nation and multi-generational in nature. The term 'Latinx' itself presupposes intersectional and non-monolithic identities - including African, indigenous, mestizo, queerness, non-binary identities – and this will be emphasized in the selection of artists. It is not a question of accepting or refuting a terminology, but of putting it into discussion for its relevance today. The format of the exhibition allows for a more elastic regularity: renewing research parameters, bringing new curatorial voices, and changing territorial focus, and formats. The important thing is to keep experimenting.

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