

ABSTRACTION_{IN}ACTION

Contemporary Abstraction in Latin America

Cecilia Fajardo-Hill

Since the mid-1990s and especially in the new millennium, artists all over Latin America are working in abstraction in experimental, innovative and highly original ways. This renewed interest in abstraction in Latin America responds to multiple and specific reasons, but abstract art is being explored all over the world today, responding to different rationales.

As the political and social contexts of production for new forms of abstraction are ever more complex and also more international, how can abstract art—an art form devoid of a recognizable subject—be a dynamic contemporary arena for exploring forms of visuality that may dialogue and explore today's issues, particularly in Latin America? Even though there is a generalized acceptance in thinking that abstract art is non-representational, there is no final agreement on whether abstraction is ultimately derived from reality, or if it may have no direct reference to it, partly because of the subscription to the early 20th century avant-garde notion that you could create a totally independent reality in painting. Kazimir Malevich (Russia, 1878–1935), in the early 20th century attempted to create a 'new reality' completely separated from external reality, by painting geometric forms that floated on a white background. Piet Mondrian (Holland, 1872–1944) developed a form of 'pure abstraction' by creating compositions of flat primary colors divided by a grid of black lines, that he called Neoplasticism. Nevertheless the early 20th century utopian purist of ideas in abstraction no longer hold. As early as 1937, Meyer Shapiro argued that abstraction did not respond to the exhaustion of the imitation of nature (the argument put forward by Alfred Barr in 1936)—proof of this is that art is still engaged with the real world, not only through the traditional mediums but in photography, and new technology—but that the need for abstraction responded to changes in modern culture, and as part of participating in it, even if purposefully excluding its reference.

The notion that modern abstraction could transcend ideology made it 'ideologically problematic.' It is this contradictory idea of being beyond ideology and at the same time being a form of resistance that still today makes us believe that abstraction is a problematical form of art, because it may be seen as apolitical or disengaged with the world.

We can affirm nevertheless that abstract art, both in the past and today, has proposed itself as an oblique way of discussing and participating in the reality in which we are embedded, often in an attempt to resist the alienating pervasive politics of representation of the real and propose alternative visualities. Following Shapiro's argument, abstract art is as related to everyday life and context as any form of art. Art may be more about asking questions than to answer them, and the abstract realm is a suggestive and expansive arena for this, as today it is not necessarily conceived as an empty signifier, but as a loaded and content driven art form.

Briony Fer in her book *On Abstract Art*, 1997, insists rightly that the definition of abstraction through the conventional opposition between abstraction and representation is inadequate, and that abstract art since its inception was characterized by a duality: "The relationship between matter and ideal, between presence and absence, the visible and the invisible had always been

contradictory and even fraught, like a magnetic field of attraction and repulsion.”¹ Abstraction may be seen as an investigation of reality, charged with the implications and politics of the real world; as a continued critical dialogue with the history of abstraction and art and its ideology; and finally as an attempt to continue to expand the realm of visual perception and push the limits of subjectivity and the possible.

Latin America possesses a long and original tradition in abstract art beginning in the 1930s throughout the 1970s. Abstraction was developed mainly in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, and Venezuela, though countries such as Cuba, Chile, Ecuador and Mexico, for example, include also important abstract modern artists. In the 1980s and 1990s abstraction had less prominence, though it never went away. Many important artists that had been exploring abstraction since the 1970s or earlier such as Feliza Bursztyn (Colombia, 1933–1982) whom until her early death in 1982 continued to experiment with assemblage and kinetic structures; Eduardo Costa (Argentina, b. 1940), works in multidirectional and irreverent investigation on color, the nature of painting/paint, abstraction, bi and tridimensionality; Carlos Cruz-Diez (Venezuela, b. 1923) undeterred research on the nature of color continues to date; Eugenio Espinoza (Venezuela, b. 1950) never stopped exploring and imploding the grid since the 1970s; Gego’s (Germany/Venezuela, 1912–1994) production of her *Dibujos sin papel* (Drawings without paper) from the 1970s to the late 1980s and *Tejeduras*, at the end of the 1980s was a continued experimentation on an expansive and unpredictable form of geometry. Other examples are Carmela Gross’ (Brazil, b. 1946) *Pintura-Objeto* installations and her enigmatic *Quasares* series in the 1980s; Manuel Mérida’s (Venezuela, b. 1939) pigment kinetic circular sculptures-paintings; Cesar Paternosto (Argentina, b. 1931) continued research into the dynamics of composition, surface, structure and color in painting; Osvaldo Romberg (Argentina, b. 1938) conceptual research and expansion of the conventions of painting since the 1970s; and Horacio Zabala’s (Argentina, b. 1943) dialectical relationship between abstraction and the sign. These are just a few examples of the persistence of abstraction into the present by some of the earlier protagonists in the field.

Some younger artists who emerged in the 1980s, did so working in the not so widespread realm of the abstract then, such as Sigfredo Chacón’s (Venezuela, b. 1950) investigation of modernism and issues of originality; Iole de Freitas (Brazil, b. 1945) though working since the 1970s with performance based work, in the 1980s began producing ambitious and precarious sculptures of assembled materials; Flavio Garcandía’s (Cuba, b. 1954) work built a highly charged dialogue with the political icons of Cuba and the ideology of modernism; and Nuno Ramos’ (Brazil, b. 1960) monumental overloaded sculptural paintings.

As abstraction has become a renewed widespread field of contemporary art, there have been new attempts at conceptualizing and classifying it. For example, Marie Lund in her 2013 compilation on *Abstraction*, maps out three main strands in this field today: ‘formal’, ‘economic’ and ‘social abstraction’, and Bob Nickas in the publication *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*, 2009, creates several groups: ‘Hybrid Pictures’; ‘Rhythm and Opticality’; ‘Color and Structure’; ‘Found/Eccentric Abstraction’; ‘Form, Space’; and ‘Scale and The Act of Painting’. None of these ‘categories,’ or forms of classification fit the present abstract production in Latin America, and if they do seem to fit, the way these are defined makes

¹ Briony Fer. *On Abstract Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997 (2008), p. 154

them inappropriate and forced, partly because these categories are articulated with the total exclusion of Latin America from the abstract arena.

In this text we may point at some of the themes/fields that may encompass contemporary abstraction in Latin America: **Abstraction and Modernism; The Monochrome; Abstraction and Popular and Mass Culture; and Open or Uncertain Abstraction.** There are other themes that could be described such as: intercultural abstraction, conceptual abstraction, contingent abstraction or political abstraction. Many of the artists mentioned here under some of the suggested themes, may be discussed differently under other conceptual and more or less political approaches. This is symptomatic of the multifaceted nature of many of these artists and their work, which cannot and should not be pinned down simplistically to any category or closed theme or concept. It is important to point that many artists working in abstraction or using this vocabulary in Latin America today, often work with multiple art forms, including representational art, some would not define themselves as abstract artists, and not even define the 'abstract' work they do as abstract.

Abstraction and Modernism: is a broad theme that may be subdivided into two aspects. The first one corresponds to the critical revisions of the unresolved, interrupted, non-linear and often utopian modernities in the continent, by abstract artists dealing with ideology, architecture and urban environment in their work. Examples of this approach is found in artists such as Amadeo Azar (Argentina, b. 1972), Iosu Aramburu (Peru, b. 1986), Alexander Apóstol (Venezuela, b. 1969), Aníbal Catalán (Mexico, b. 1973), Eugenio Espinoza (Venezuela, b. 1950), Nicolás Guagnini (Argentina, b. 1966), Lucia Koch (Brazil, b. 1966), Felipe Mujica (Chile, b. 1974), Miguel Ángel Ríos (Argentina, b. 1943), Jaime Tarazona (Colombia, b. 1975), Ana Tiscornia (Uruguay, b. 1951), amongst many others. For example, Iosu Aramburu's installation *Vivir en una casa de cristal, (Ostolaza)*, 2013, is an investigation into modernist architecture and the ideology of the official discourse, while in his *Untitled* paintings from 2012, with neon or cutout architectural shapes, he overlaps the pre-Hispanic ruin and modern architecture to reveal the erasure of the past and its paradoxical coexistence with modernity and present day haphazard urban spread. *The Green Line*, 2012 by Ana Tiscornia superimposes and divides unstable, unfinished, architectural shapes with a green line, making architecture and abstraction, two key aspects of modernism in Latin America, collide and expand in the present, confirming their unfinished condition.

The second focus relating to modernism centers on the expansion of the aesthetic investigations of the nature of abstraction, visual and sensorial perception, color, composition, modularity, interactivity, space and spatial relations, light and movement and kinetics. The first aspect is grounded on a critique of the ideology of modernism and the political processes that coexisted or promoted it, and the second perspective focuses on the continuation, expansion, and challenging of the experimental tradition in abstraction that emerged in the early 20th century in Latin America until the 1970s.

The expansion of the aesthetic possibilities of abstraction is a prolific field in Latin America and can be found in artists such as: Marta Chilindrón (Argentina, b. 1951), Elías Crespín (Venezuela, b. 1965), Fabiana Cruz (Venezuela, b. 1984), José Dávila (Mexico, b. 1974), Marcolina Dipierro (Argentina, b. 1978), Iran do Espírito Santo (Brazil, b. 1963), Magdalena Fernández (Venezuela, b. 1964), Jaime Gili (Venezuela, b. 1972), Magdalena Jitrix (Argentina, b. 1966), Macaparana (Brazil, b. 1952), Karina Peisajovich (Argentina, b. 1966), and Diana de Solares (Guatemala, b. 1952).

For example, Elías Crespín, departing from his computer science background and his close relationship with Gego's work since childhood, creates kinetic motorized structures that push the boundaries of optical illusion, the virtuality of transparency, and the transformative nature of movement in abstraction, in works such as *Tetralineados Circular Azul*, 2009. On the other hand, Magdalena Fernández's works, such as *1pmSO11*, 2011 a video installation from the series *Mobile Paintings*, in homage to Jesús Rafael Soto, explores the connection between abstraction and nature. The transition between night and day is accompanied by the in crescendo sound of crickets, frogs and birds, which generate changing and intricate compositions of superimposed geometric non-linear shapes. Marcolina Dipierro investigates the line, ranging from very delicate explorations of thickness, composition and structure that create a constructive tension in the intimate surface of small sheets of paper, or sculptural structures of protruding and irregular angles that are inserted in corners, disarticulating space. Another example is Karina Peisajovich's research into theories of color and the differences between color in light and color in pigment (color is neither light nor pigment, but a sensation). In works such as *Color Making Machine*, 2009, the artist experiments with the dynamic of color perception, both emotionally and visually, revealing how, surprisingly, by receiving certain light through the retina, we are able to perceive millions of colors through only three human photoreceptors called 'cones' –long (red), middle (green) and short (blue).

Both perspectives often overlap, in a mixture of positive referencing and creative re-articulation of the past, and also of a critical deconstruction of it. For example, Adán Vallecillo (Honduras, b. 1977), for his large installation *Topografía XVI*, 2012, deploys a grid, made with recycled tires, forcing into the geometric rigid structure a topography of accidents, patches and wear and tear from popular tires in Honduras, thus imploding the genealogical hierarchy of the modernist grid in abstraction. Key to both approaches is the concept of repetition, as the means of both reinterpreting, and as the assertion of the never conclusive, the open-ended, the non-dogmatic, and the non-canonical, as found in Eugenio Espinoza's insistence on investigating the grid.

Within this realm of 'aesthetics abstraction' we may consider the **monochrome**, which we mostly define as a single color, though as suggested by Barbara Rose, as an art form, it goes back to ancient China and the use of monochrome ink in calligraphy and landscape representations. Here, the monochrome is not solely conceived as a single plane of one color as we find it in Minimalism, but as a much more subtle and nuanced idea to include representation and variability, and it ranges from the picture plane to objects, installation, and space. Barbara Rose explains that "[the monochrome] rather relates to the seeming dominance of many colors."² Even if within modernism, the monochrome was born as a radical search for an absolute, the immaterial and the spiritual, it may function as an oblique and complex way to relate to reality. The contemporary monochrome in Latin America is as diverse as it is complex, and it addresses both the history of modernism, as well as it researches contemporary material culture as it relates to daily life, materialism, visuality, aesthetics, us. Examples of artists that produce works that we may think of as monochromes are: Georgina Bringas' (Mexico, b. 1975) *Colección de tiempo*, 2010 made with miniDV tape on wood; Gabriel de la Mora's (México, b. 1968) egg shell pieces, ceiling series, burned papers, Styrofoam and

² Barbara Rose. *Monochromes from Malevich to the Present*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2004, p. 14.

layers of paint works; Thomas Glassford's (USA/Mexico, b. 1963) *Partituras*, made with aniline on anodized aluminum; Valentina Liernur's (Argentina, b. 1978), ripped *Denim Interior* pieces from 2012; Marco Maggi's (Uruguay, b. 1957) floor installations of yellow Wausau paper, cuts on envelopes, and cuts on paper in slide mounts such as in *Sliding*, 2012; Mariela Scafati's (Argentina, b. 1973) arrangements of canvases in red or blue as in *Soy rojo y rosa*, 2012; Rubén Ortiz-Torres' (Mexico, b. 1964), interactive thermic paintings where the color changes with higher or lower temperatures, as in *Cañón del cobre*, 2012—from copper to blue—and with the contact of the human skin such as hands on the surface of the paintings, leaving an ephemeral mark on the work. Most of these monochromes are as far from the idea of 'the death of painting' associated to the monochrome in the early 20th century, as they are close to a broad dialogue with the common and **popular and mass culture**.

This brings us to a large arena of abstraction which relates directly to **popular and mass culture**, though here again, these 'categories' or 'modes' of abstraction overlap or their borders merge, and often it may not be possible, even unproductive to clearly define and separate them. This separation is relevant to some extent in Latin America, because popular culture here does not subscribe to the canonical notion of pop which is linked to mass communication, consumerism and the leisure industry, which began in 19th century France. Here, 'popular' denotes the hybrid cultures that stem from the coexistence of different cultural and popular traditions and economic realities in Latin America often removed from mass consumerism, as seen in Manuel Antonio Pichillá's (Guatemala, b. 1982) *Quipu*, 2004 which displays a superimposition of an abstract industrial paint monochrome geometric with a traditional Mayan textile with its own color and compositional aesthetic. Another example, is Federico Herrero's (Costa Rica, b. 1978) paintings and architectural interventions that incorporate the popular vernacular inventiveness found in the streets of Costa Rica, that are not only daring in their color palette, but resourceful in the use of available materials and adaptation to the informality of architecture and its improvised nature. Abraham Cruzvillegas' (Mexico, b. 1968) *Autorretrato ciego cambiando pañales y perfeccionando el pulgar derecho para no enarbolar causas perdidas*, 2013, a reconfigurable installation of orange acrylic paint on photographs, drawings, tickets, napkins, postcards, envelopes, recipes, and other paper surfaces. More artists worth mentioning in this section are: Alberto Casari (Peru, b. 1955), Abraham Cruzvillegas (Mexico, b. 1968), Darío Escobar (Guatemala, b. 1971), Thomas Glassford (USA/Mexico, b. 1963), Jorge de León (Guatemala, b. 1976), Aníbal López A-1 53167 (Guatemala, b. 1964), Pepe López (Venezuela, b. 1966), Jorge Méndez Blake (Mexico, b. 1974), Gabriel de la Mora (Mexico, b. 1968), Marco Maggi (Uruguay, b. 1957), Moris (Mexico, b. 1978), Ramiro Oller (Argentina, b. 1982), Ricardo Rendón (Mexico, b. 1970), Luis Roldán (Colombia, b. 1955), Jaime Ruiz Otis (México, b. 1976), and Omar Barquet (Mexico, b. 1979). For example, Darío Escobar's recent series of 'ready-made' paintings such as *Abstract Painting No. 1*, 2012, are the result of the artist choosing the workshops of more or less skilled blacksmiths, and leaving the paintings in strategic places in their workshops to accumulate the daily spraying activities on fences, windows, etc., and then decide when to finish the process.

The **popular/mass culture** arena is one of the most dynamic areas of abstraction, which can clearly be differentiated from the early forms of modern abstraction that intentionally wanted to separate themselves from the real world. One of the art forms that were crucial to the experiments with abstraction was the Cubist collage, which incorporated non-traditional art materials such as newspaper clippings and fabric. The contemporary abstraction that deals with popular and mass culture is close to the idea of collage and collaging of cultures. If we were to find some identifying features for abstract works that deal with mass culture

as opposed to popular culture, we could describe the use of industrial materials which are associated to cultural referents which are not necessarily vernacular and that are invested in industrial societies and a continued process of modernization such as we find in Richard Gare's (Uruguay, b. 1972) video works that refer to the 'noise' both visual and auditive in contemporary society; Rubén Ortiz-Torres's (Mexico, b. 1964) thermic paintings which relate to the Light and Space movement in Southern California in the 1960s and the car industry; Pablo Rasgado's (Mexico, b. 1984) assemblages of fragments of walls from museographies in both Mexican museums and international museums such as LACMA, Luis Zerbini's (Brazil, b. 1959) compositions of intervened slides, Magdalena Atria's (Chile, b. 1967) large installations with plasticine; Emilio Chapela's (Mexico, b. 1978), series of abstract geometric compositions based on studies of the color compositions of international popular brands; or Danilo Dueñas' (Colombia, b. 1956) assemblages with Formica and found materials such as in *Fragmentos*, 2005 on the one hand, and large installations of industrial debris in large cities on the other.

Uncertain or Open Abstraction may not be conceived as much as a form of 'construction' but as a form of poiesis, or relational, psychological, open-ended and subjective form of abstraction. Informalist artists from the 1950s and 1960s in Argentina, Venezuela and Brazil primarily; political or controversial artists such as Alberto Greco (Spain/Argentina, 1931–1965), and collectives such as El Techo de la Ballena (Venezuela, 1961-69); and certain aspects of conceptual art, may be referents for these forms, but not necessarily and always in a conscious or informed way. Emilia Azcárate (Venezuela, b. 1964) for example, uses nearly obsessive repetition, to construct visual forms that disclose the spiritual and the existential in daily life. The artist often deploys discarded organic and industrial materials such as used bottle caps found in the streets or cow dung and reconfigures them to become shapes such as mandalas. In her recent works related to her Nichiren Buddhist practice, she has developed the *Practicables*, 2012-13 where she experiments with the invention of an inexistent vocabulary of signs, shapes and colors that articulate the philosophy, the sound and rhythm of the practice and her subjective experience. Fernanda Gomes (Brazil, b. 1960) works in the realm of subtlety and complexity, producing works which are made mainly with found materials usually white monochromes. Both her pieces and her installations are articulated through a practice of assemblage, where debris, delicate, almost insignificant fragments of plastic bags, or wires, engage with the architectural space or the picture plane, to stand for something poetic, concrete and yet limitless.

Anna Maria Maiolino's (Italy/Brazil, b. 1942) work, encompassing her *Mental Maps Series* from the 1970s, her series of *Piccole Note* or *Aleph* in the 1980s, her *Material Actions Series* and clay pieces in the 1990s, and her *Drop Marks Series* in 2000, approach on the one hand the realm of the mental space, and on the other hand, the 'repetition of the gesture,' as explained by Marcio Doctors.³ Memory, circularity of time, the trace of the body, the psychological, the subjective, are all central to her work. Luis Roldán (Colombia, b. 1958) produces a complex work that incorporates free association of ideas together with references to different fields of knowledge. Also, the work is multidirectional, never linear, multifocal, and the daily and the intimate coexist with multiple realities and temporalities often mixing figurative, life forms, real objects and abstraction. Furthermore, in his installations, such as *Circunstancias*, at Casas Riegner in 2009 the artist compares the space with a brain, as a virtual and complex space

³ Marcio Doctor. "The Art of Immanence" in *Anna Maria Maiolino*, Pinacoteca de Estado de Sao Paulo, 2005, p. 154.

that—through the way he constructs the works in it—contains other spaces. This ‘open’ abstraction may encompass artists whose work is constructed in the hybrid space between abstraction and figuration such as: Amadeo Azar (Argentina, b. 1972), Iosu Aramburu (Peru, b. 1986), José Luis Landet (Argentina, b. 1977), Adriana Minoliti (Argentina, b. 1980), and Mariela Scafati (Argentina, b. 1973), all of whom could be interpreted simultaneously through other perspectives.

The artists mentioned here are only some of the countless working expansively on abstraction today in Latin America. The framings or contexts proposed in this introduction are solely few of many for thinking about contemporary abstraction in Latin America. This is a broad experimental arena for the revision and critique of the unresolved modern traditions inherited; for dialoguing with contemporary culture and; resisting canonical ideas of representation.