

# ABSTRACTION IN ACTION

## Modern Abstraction in Latin America

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The history of abstraction in Latin America is dense and multilayered; its beginnings can be traced back to Emilio Pettoruti's (Argentina, 1892–1971) early abstract works, which were inspired by Futurism and produced in Italy during the second decade of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the two more widely recognized pioneers of abstraction are Joaquín Torres-García (Uruguay, 1874–1949) and Juan del Prete (Italy/Argentina, 1897–1987), and more recently Esteban Lisa (Spain/Argentina 1895–1983) for their abstract work in the 1930s.

Modern abstract art in Latin America has been circumscribed between the early 1930s to the late 1970s in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela, and in more recent years Colombia, Cuba and Mexico have also been incorporated into the historiography of abstraction. Furthermore, it is only recently that interest in exploring beyond geometric abstraction, to include Informalist tendencies is beginning to emerge. Abstract art in Latin America developed through painting, sculpture, installation, architecture, printing techniques and photography, and it is characterized by its experimentalism, plurality, the challenging of canonical ideas related to art, and particular ways of dialoguing, coexisting in tension or participation within the complex process of modernity—and modernization—in the context of the political regimes of the time. Certain complex and often contradictory forms of utopianism were pervasive in some of these abstract movements that have led to the creation of exhibitions with titles such as *Geometry of Hope* (The Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, 2007) or *Inverted Utopias: Avant Garde Art in Latin America* (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004). An example of this utopianism may be found in the *Manifiesto Invencionista* of 1946 by the artists from the *Arte Concreto-Invención* in Argentina: “The artistic era of the representational fiction has reached its end. The scientific aesthetic will replace the millennial speculative and idealistic aesthetic [...] For the inventive joy. Against the disastrous romantic and existentialist moth [...] against all art for the elites” (“La era artística de la ficción representativa toca a su fin. La estética científica reemplazará a la milenaria estética especulativa e idealista [...] Por el júbilo inventivo. Contra la nefasta polilla existencialista o romántica [...] Contra todo arte de élites).

Also, in countries like Venezuela, an important modernist government project such as the Carlos Raúl Villanueva's famous Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas (1944–1970), a project of integration of painting and sculpture with architecture, where Venezuelan artists Jesús Rafael Soto (1923–2005), Alejandro Otero (1921–1990) and Omar Carreño (1927–2013) were invited to produce large works next to international artists such as Alexander Calder (US, 1898–1976), Fernand Léger (France, 1881–1955), and Victor Vasarely (France/Hungary, 1906–1997), was created largely under a dictatorial regime (democracy began in 1959). Effectively, most countries where abstraction was central between the 1940s and late 1970s, were immersed in dictatorships: Argentina 1940s to 1980s, Brazil 1960s to 1980s, Colombia 1940s to 1970s, Mexico 1940 to end of 1980s, Uruguay 1970s to 1980s, and Venezuela 1940s to 1958, without mentioning Cuba's Communist regime since 1959. This fact adds much complexity to the production and understanding of art of the period.

When we think of Abstract art in Latin America, we envision Kinetic artists such as Carlos Cruz-Diez, Julio Le Parc (Argentina, b. 1928), and Jesús Rafael Soto, whom through their international careers in Europe, residing in France, have been included in art history books and are seen integrated in international art. Since the 1990s, a new awareness grew around the *Arte Concreta* and Neo-Concretism in Brazil (1950s-60s) and also more recently for singular figures such as Gego (Germany/Venezuela, 1912–1994), Geraldo de Barros (Brazil, 1923–1998), Mathias Goeritz (Germany/Mexico, 1915–1990), Anna Maria Maiolino (Italy/Brazil, 1942) and Mira Schendel (Brazil, 1919–1988), whom have received individual attention and become emblematic postwar artists in their own countries and internationally. But in each country, such as in Colombia, Argentina or Brazil, we find many exceptional singular artists that cannot be ascribed to any movement or trend, and we also encounter styles and forms of geometry that cannot be described under any particular label. For example Carlos Cruz-Diez, who is often characterized as a Kinetic artist, considers that his chief preoccupation is an experimental scientific research on the nature of color that promotes the experience of color by the viewer, through his/her own subjectivity, in an individual, emotional and virtual way, changing thus the way we perceive space, light and movement. In short, very few artists can be described adequately under one specific trend or style. In addition, due to the experimentalism and dynamism of the abstract quest between the 1940s and the 1970s, the artists' work often changed radically in just few years or focused on different problems simultaneously, for example, Lygia Clark (Brazil, 1920–1988), was painting her *Superfícies Moduladas* or making the collages *Espaços Modulados* in the mid to late 1950s, and then developed her participative metal sculptures *Bichos* in the 1960s, then proceeded to create wearable suits

such as *Clothing-Body-Clothing: "the I and the You"* in 1967, which proposed an intimate and subjective experience and interaction of one's body with another, overflowing the realm of abstraction.

It is also worth mentioning that the important role of women in abstraction has yet to be researched and acknowledged, because even though artists such as Lygia Clark (Brazil, 1920–1988), Lygia Pape (Brazil, 1927–2004), Mira Schendel (Brazil, 1919–1988), Gego, and to lesser extent other artists such as Marta Boto (Argentina, 1925–2006), María Freire (Uruguay, b. 1917), Carmen Herrera (Cuba, b. 1915), Thomie Ohtake (Japan/Brazil, 1913), Lidy Prati (Argentina, b. 1921), Grete Stern (Germany, 1904–Argentina, 1999) have been recognized, many continue to lack important monographic publications and exhibitions, and a place in the historiography of the period. Artists such as Regina Aprijaskis (France/Peru, 1921–2012), Margarita Azurdia (Guatemala, 1931–1998), Feliza Bursztyn (Colombia, 1933–1982), Araceli Gilbert (Ecuador, 1914–1993), Elsa Gramko (Venezuela, 1925-1994), Judith Lauand (Brazil, b. 1922), María Martorell (Argentina, 1909–2010), Amalia Nieto (Uruguay, 1907–2003), Mercedes Pardo (Venezuela, 1922–2005), Matilde Pérez (Chile, b. 1920), Ana Sacerdote (Italy/Argentina, 1925), Fanny Sanín (Colombia, b. 1938), Loló Soldevilla (Cuba, 1901–1971) and Niobe Xandó (Brazil, 1915–2010) among others, need to be explored further.

Argentina together with Uruguay produced an important number of abstract trends and unique singular artists in the 20th century. The multidisciplinary *Arte MADÍ* in the 1940s is the best known of the pre-war abstract avant-gardes movements in Latin America and was characterized mainly by the creation of irregular shaped paintings of flat colors by artists such as Gyula Kosice (Hungary, 1924),

Carmelo Arden Quin (Uruguay, 1913–2010), Rhod Rothfuss (Uruguay, 1920–1969) and Martín Blaszko (Germany/Argentina, 1920). Another experimental abstract movement from the mid-1940s was *Arte Concreto-Invencción*, led by artists such as Tomás Maldonado (Argentina, 1922), Manuel Espinosa (Argentina, 1912–2006), Lidy Prati (Argentina, 1921–2008), Alfredo Hlito (Argentina, 1923–1993), Ennio Iommi (Argentina, 1926), the publisher of the *Manifiesto Perceptista* in 1947, Raúl Lozza (1911–2008), Alberto Molemborg (Argentina, 1921) and Juan Melé (Argentina, 1923–2012) among other artists.

In Brazil, the most prominent abstract tendencies are found in the Arte Concreta and Neo-Concretism between the 1950s and 1960s. Concretism emerged within the interest for the Constructivist avant-garde in Russia, the Bauhaus and De Stijl, and the exploration of seriality and scientific and mathematical experimentation with geometric forms. The major Concretista artists are Waldemar Cordeiro (Brazil, b. 1925), Mauricio Nogueira Lima (Brazil, 1930–1999), Ivan Serpa (Brazil, 1923–1973), Luis Sicilotto, Mary Vieira and Alfredo Volpi (Brazil, 1896–1988). Neo-Concretism represented the rupture with Concretism, by moving away from the mechanistic and scientific approach of the Concretist artists—to the point that some artists such as Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape moved away from constructivist postulates—through the “*sensitization and dramatization*” of the work of art, in the words of Ronaldo Brito. Neo-Concrete seminal artists were Hercules Barsotti (Brazil, b. 1914), Aluisio Carvao (Brazil, 1920–2001), Amílcar de Castro (Brazil, 1920–2002), Lygia Clark (Brazil, 1920–1988), Willys de Castro (Brazil, 1926–1988), Hélio Oiticica (Brazil, 1937–1980), Lygia Pape (Brazil, 1927–2004), and Franz Weissmann (Austria/Brazil, 1911–2005).

Argentina also has a great number of artists concerned with Kinetic Art, involving either the movement of the viewer or in the work itself, creating thus virtuality and optical effects. The main artists being Julio Le Parc (though he does not consider himself a kinetic artist), together with Marta Boto, Horacio García Rossi (Argentina, b. 1929), Luis Tomasello (Argentina, b. 1915), Gregorio Vardanega (Italy/Argentina, 1923–2007), Antonio Asís (Argentina, 1932), Hugo Rodolfo Demarco (Argentina, b. 1932) and Rogelio Polesello (Argentina, b. 1939). Venezuela is also best known for its kinetic art which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s through figures such as Jesús Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez.

There are too many original and important abstract artists in Latin America, that it is beyond the scope of this short introduction to modern abstraction in Latin America to attempt to either mention or describe them. This is symptomatic of the impossibility to characterize or encompass easily so much diversity and complexity, and how the category abstraction, or geometric abstraction are indeed limited or too general. Long lists of names are never very meaningful, nevertheless here it seemed to be necessary to at least mention some of them, since so many artists are unknown, and it could be that by leaving a trace of their names on the internet, could lead to further explorations.

Colombia for example, produced its own bed of abstract artists such as Feliza Bursztyn (1933–1982), Eduardo Ramírez-Villamizar (b. 1923), Carlos Rojas (1933–1997), Edgar Negret (b. 1920) and Manolo Vellojín (1943–2013) to mention only a few. Beginning from the early 1940s through the 1960s, four important artists from the Río de la Plata in Uruguay produced a unique form of geometric abstraction: José Pedro Costigliolo (1902–1985), María Freire, Antonio

Llorens (1920–1995), and Rhod Rothfuss (1920–1969). In Venezuela, in addition to Soto and Cruz-Diez, many abstract artists flourished, amongst them stand out Alejandro Otero (perhaps the most complex of abstract artists from Venezuela), Omar Carreño, Gego, Gerd Leufert (Lithuania/Venezuela, 1914–1998), Víctor Lucena (b. 1948), Mion Gerrario, “Nedo,” (1926–2001), Mercedes Pardo (1922–2005), Francisco Salazar (b. 1937), Víctor Valera (b. 1927), amongst others. Finally, Mexico is beginning to explore its abstract traditions from the 1960 and 1970s more fully. Mathias Goeritz (Germany/Mexico, 1915–1990), Carlos Mérida (Guatemala/Mexico, 1891–1984), and Gunther Gerzso (Switzerland/Mexico, 1915–2000), are the three more established abstract artists, though we can mention many others such as: Manuel Felguérez (b. 1928), Helen Escobedo (b. 1936), Hersúa (Jesús Hernández Suárez, b. 1940), Marta Palau (Spain/Mexico, b. 1934) Ricardo Regazzoni (b. 1943) and Vicente Rojo (b. 1932). From Cuba it is worth to mention Mario Carreño (Cuba/Chile, 1913–1999), Carmen Herrera (b. 1915), José Mijares (1921–2004), Sandu Darie (Romania/Cuba, 1908–1991) and Loló Soldevilla.

Informalism and other non-geometric forms of abstraction also took place between the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America, principally in Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela. Two central figures of *Informalismo* in Argentina are Alberto Greco (1931–1965) and Kenneth Kemble (1923–1998) (*Destructive Art*, 1961). Many others relevant to mention are Enrique Barilari (1937–2002), Olga López (b. 1938), Fernando Maza (b. 1936), Mario Pucciarelli (b. 1928), Towas (Tomás Monteleone, b. 1931), Luis Alberto Wells (b. 1939), and photographer Jorge Roiger (b. 1934). From Brazil stand out Tomie Ohtake (Japan/Brazil, b. 1913), Frans Krajcberg (Poland/Brazil, b. 1921), Ibere Camargo (1914–1994) and Ivan Serpa (1923–1973).

From Venezuela: the radical group El Techo de la Ballena (1961–1969) and two of its most prominent members, Carlos Contramaestre (1933–1996) and José María Cruxent (Cataluña/Venezuela, 1911–2005); Mercedes Pardo (1922–2005), Osvaldo Vigas (b. 1926), Alberto Brandt (1924–1970) Elsa Gramko (1925–1994) and Mary Brandt (1917–1985).

There is also a large field of modernist photography that started to be explored less than ten years ago. Brazil is especially important, with figures such as Geraldo de Barros (1923–1998), Ivan Cardoso (b. 1952), Gaspar Gasparian (1899–1966), and Thomaz Farkas (Hungary/Brazil, b. 1924). In Colombia we find Leo Matiz (1917–1998); in Argentina: Horacio Coppola (b. 1906) and Grete Stern (Germany/Argentina, 1904–1999), to mention only a few.

By the mid to end of the 1970s, many abstract artists moved away from abstraction to produce conceptual art or other forms of art, as in the case of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. Some artists such as Eugenio Espinoza (Venezuela, b. 1950), developed an abstract oeuvre in the 1970s against the grain of the established—and by then canonical—abstract tendencies in Venezuela. Others such as Mira Schendel (Brazil, 1919–1988), continued to develop throughout her life a unique form of subjective abstraction, with a vocabulary of indecipherable signs and calligraphies.