Navigating Latin American Geometric Abstraction

Art Focus

Has the market for Latin American geometric abstraction reached its peak?

On the 21st of June in 2016, Joaquín Torres-García’s *Peinture Constructive*, 1931, sold at Sotheby’s, London, for nearly $1.5MM, three times the price paid for it twenty years earlier and the fourth highest price ever paid at auction for a painting by the Uruguayan artist. Arguably, the life of this painting mimics at a micro level the striking transformation that has occurred in the market for Latin American abstraction.

While this expansion does not rival the dramatic heights we have seen achieved in the arena of Post-War and Contemporary, the substantial rise of the Latin American art market has proven to be steady and stable. This growth has been impacted over the past ten years by the market’s recognition of, and desire for, Latin American geometric abstraction.

*Peinture Constructive* is an excellent example of Torres-García’s concept of Constructive Universalism, which melded international Constructivist art with forms from Pre-Columbian art as well as the urban geometries of contemporary cities. He arranged pictographic images within a grid that calls to mind both Inca stonework and De Stijl paintings, composed along the proportional and mystical system of the golden mean. The earthy palette and rough painting application suggest connection to the land while affirming the presence of the artist’s hand.

Joaquín Torres-García
*Peinture Constructive*, 1931
29 5/8 by 21 3/4 in. (75.3 by 55.3 cm.)
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Photograph courtesy of Sotheby’s
**Geometric Abstraction – Where Does it Fit In?**

What is Latin American geometric abstraction? Coming of age during the 1930s-1950s and influenced by European abstraction, this style attracted artists from major Latin American urban centers ranging from Buenos Aires to São Paulo, Havana to Caracas. Characterized by hard-edged, purely colored shapes which seem to make little or no reference to the natural world, geometric abstraction represented a universal language that communicated and embodied a broad world view. For some, its egalitarian nature offered a way to stimulate political change or social harmony. Others used this language to express spiritual or metaphysical ideals, while still others found that it could communicate a rational and mathematical order. Torres-García was among the earliest Latin American artists to adapt and personalize this style of art. Living much of his artistic life in Europe, Torres-García was deeply involved in current ideas regarding abstraction, particularly Piet Mondrian’s philosophy of Neo-Plasticism.

Carlos Cruz-Diez
*Physichromie 1760, 2012*
Chromography on aluminum, plastic inserts
39 1/2 by 79 in. (100 x 200 cm)
© 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris
© Carlos Cruz-Diez – ADAGP, Paris 2017
Photograph courtesy of Sotheby’s

Sold at Sotheby’s, November 22, 2016 for $250,000. One of the leaders of the Venezuelan kinetic art movement, Carlos Cruz-Diez is concerned with vibrations, color and visual perception.
When Torres-García’s *Peinture Constructive* was put up for sale at Christie’s in 1977 it was the only work that fell into the category of “geometric abstraction” which at that time was not a stand-alone market category. It was accompanied in the sale by works of other luminaries of the Latin American art market who all continue to have strong markets today such as Wifredo Lam, Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo and Fernando Botero, among others. At the time, these artists, mostly associated with Mexican Muralism, Social Realism and Surrealism, also represented the canon of Latin American art history as they received significant museum and scholastic attention. The phrase “Latin American Art” conjured figurative and folkloric subjects that reiterated deeply entrenched stereotypes held in the North of an exotic Latin American culture. Such a vision did not permit the inclusion of the sophisticated and cerebral avant-garde movements that also occurred in Latin America. As a result, art history outside Latin America traditionally ignored abstraction, and the art market followed suit. If it was acknowledged, abstraction was dismissed as being derivative of European models or as lying outside Western modernism or even Latin American culture.

Many forces, including academics, curators and collectors, have asserted the inaccuracy of this interpretation. Their work has dramatically broadened the field of Latin American art and this has, in turn, had a resounding impact on the market for geometric abstraction. Twenty years ago very few graduate programs in Latin American art existed in the US and Europe. Today, it is highly unusual to find an art history department in the US that does not have a Latin American specialist on the faculty. This has resulted in an increase in scholarly publications in English written by a new generation of scholars trained to think critically about past omissions and to reframe historical narratives of modernism.

In the last decade major museum exhibitions have also advanced this argument. Among the most influential exhibitions of Latin American abstraction (and collections) is *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*. Organized in 2007 by Gabriel Perez-Barriero the exhibition drew entirely from the collection of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros and her husband, Gustavo, the savvy sellers of *Peinture Constructive* at Sotheby’s in June. They began collecting art in 1970 and by the end of the decade established the non-profit, Caracas, and New York City-based, Fundación Cisneros, out of which the Colección operates. Dedicated to the advancement of scholarship and the appreciation of the diversity and sophistication of Latin American art, the Colección has been a dynamic force in inserting geometric abstraction into existing art historical narratives.

Patty Cisneros’ vision of Latin American art has influenced major institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art in NYC, where she has been a trustee since 1992. Just this October she and her husband announced the donation of over 100 works to MoMA. In the last few years MoMA presented a number of important exhibitions curated by major names in this field and devoted to key artists in Latin American abstraction such as Torres-García (2015), Lygia Clark (2014) and León Ferrari and Mira Schendel (2009).

Despite these strides, many institutions and galleries are still grappling with how to integrate Latin American art into their collections.

MoMA has collected Latin American art since the 1930s, yet its positioning of such work, recently under a stairwell, for example, and not in context with other abstract movements, suggests that the institution is still figuring out how exactly this material fits into its narrative.

A significant development in Latin American scholarship and curatorial practice has been the study of international networks. In 2010, The Newark Museum organized the exhibition *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America-1920s-50s*, which was the first to consider the direct and conceptual connections that existed among abstract artists across the Americas. Since then, London’s Whitechapel Gallery and MoMA have also held exhibitions focusing on the global connections and networks amongst abstractionists.1 Exhibitions like this have broadened public knowledge of the range of work produced by Latin American artists while also demonstrating that their work should be understood as being part of, and having helped shape, international art movements.
The Market

Not surprisingly, this wave of attention from scholars and sophisticated collectors has had a dramatic impact on the market for Latin American abstraction, which has expanded into the international market. Many institutions, recognizing their historical blind spots, are in the mode of catch up and are actively acquiring works for their collections to reflect integrative narratives. For many new, individual collectors, Latin American abstraction still offers attractive price points and it is a draw for new collectors coming into the market with a growing body of international buyers from the likes of Asia, Russia and the United Kingdom.

Auction houses have met this demand. Phillips was among the first to take advantage of this niche; in 2009 they created a separate sales category devoted to Latin American art, setting themselves apart from the other houses by focusing on modernist abstraction and contemporary art. In the last few years, Sotheby’s and Christie’s have created two separate sales for Latin American art: one “Modern” where you find the type of work traditionally found in Latin American sales, including Mexican Muralism, Surrealism and Realism (as well as 19th century works). The other, titled “Contemporary,” “is solely dedicated to avant-garde movements including: Constructivism, Geometric Abstraction, Kinetic Art, Conceptual Art, Concrete/Neo-Concrete and new trends in contemporary art from the Americas.” Needless to say, these categories do not necessarily follow art historical logic but rather a market logic. Auction houses are in the business of selling and proper art historical framing is not a prerequisite for all collectors. While some buyers are intellectually driven, others are attracted to the fashionable minimalistic ‘good looks’ of the material.

It is understandable why the houses have capitalized on the trend of abstraction; a look at the Brazilian sub-set of the Latin American abstraction market highlights this. In 2002 a collector might have purchased a Bicho by Lygia Clark for about $50,000; a comparable work in November 2013 sold for $1.8MM at Phillips. The work of sculptor Sergio Camargo has followed a similar trajectory; one of his all-white textured reliefs sold for $2.2MM in 2013, setting a new record while in the early 1980s these works were practically unsellable. The market for abstract works has always been strong within Brazil but as the country deals with political, economic and health crises, the national art market has seen significant drops. However, the international demand for Brazilian 20th century and contemporary art has expanded. Gallerists in Brazil have reported that sales to foreign buyers, largely concentrated in the United States, United Kingdom and Switzerland, have doubled from 2014 to 2015, from $34MM to $67MM.²

Carmen Herrera
Cerulean, 1965
Acrylic on canvas with artist’s frame
69 x 68 1/2 in. (175.3 x 174 cm.)
© Carmen Herrera; Courtesy Lisson Gallery
Image Courtesy of Phillips Auctioneers LLC. All Rights Reserved

Sold for $970,000 at Philips Evening 20th Century & Contemporary Art Sale, New York.

On November 16, 2016, a new auction record was set for the work of Carmen Herrera, who, at the age of 101, is the subject of a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art (in autumn of 2016). Born in Cuba, Herrera has painted refined, hard-edged abstractions in New York since the late 1940s.
Bichos are flexible, hinged aluminum sculptures intended to be bent and folded by the viewer.

This expansion of the international market has compelled Brazilian, and more broadly Latin American galleries, to participate in the global art fair circuit, within Latin America as well as at fairs including the Armory show in NYC, Art Basel Miami Beach and Frieze (London and NYC). Some, such as Galeria Nara Roesler have opened spaces outside of their native countries, in this case New York City, where they have found willing buyers.

Although it should be noted that this trend hasn’t worked in the reverse; White Cube, for example, opened a gallery in São Paulo in 2012 and closed after three years. Likewise, a large number of US and European galleries are trying to claim shares in this market by adding Latin American artists to their rosters, notably mega-galleries Hauser & Wirth, David Zwirner and Lisson. The quality of the work is debatable, but with prices in the six-figures it highlights dealers taking advantage of the opportunities to cash-in on a new batch of geometric abstraction material.
Caveat Emptor – Know What You are Buying

While there is much to celebrate in all of this attention, the positive market response has revealed certain potholes to collecting in this area. There are gaps that should give one pause and signal caution. Authenticity and proper dating of works often present serious challenges in this field as many movements and works were ignored or dismissed at the time they were made. As a result, artists moved on and didn’t properly preserve their work. Come the 1990s, when interest began to grow, some artists recreated their early innovations. And in some cases, particularly amongst the Argentine abstraction groups, there was back-dating of work that, while it represented ideas devised by the artists early in their careers, had been created more recently. This is why collectors often favor a painting showing age-appropriate deterioration. In the past auction houses compounded the problem of dating by unquestioningly accepting the date of a work assigned by the artist. This makes early studies of these artistic movements and primary sources very significant. Another challenge has been a serious lack of technical knowledge regarding Latin American abstraction, which can also play a role in authentication and dating. This is about to change, however, as the Colección Cisneros, the Getty Conservation Institute and the Getty Research Institute have partnered to undertake the first study of the materials and artistic practices of artists from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela.

All of this begs the question: where is the market for Latin American abstraction headed? Several signs point to a degree of uncertainty or at least suggest that the market has peaked. Historically, academic, curatorial and collecting trends ebb and flow, and that certainly seems to be the case here where we are seeing changes in all three areas. Criticism against the dominance of geometric abstraction is emerging and more academic interest in what we might call “traditional” modern Latin American art is apparent: reevaluations of artists like Frida Kahlo and Wifredo Lam, highlight this. The market is following suit; whereas in 2013 we saw new auction records for Lygia Clark’s Bichos, in the last year-and-a-half two major Bichos have failed to sell at Christie’s and Sotheby’s. During that same time new auction records have been made for the work of Rufino Tamayo. Despite this, the continuing public and academic attention concentrated on geometric abstraction indicates that this market is not set to disappear any time soon.

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3 A useful free digital database is by the ICAA called the “Documents of 20th century Latin American and Latino Art”.

4 The results of this multi-year study that has focused on art works from the Colección Cisneros will be part of the next incarnation of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA (Los Angeles/Latin America) The Material of Form: Industrialism and the Latin American Avant-Garde.