

with two occupants, one of them a reference to the *Mona Lisa*.

José Campos Biscardi's figurative art deserves special mention for his incorporation of elements both from Pop Art and surrealism and what is known as New Figuration. Also, his work is inscribed in the genre of the fantastic by joining dissimilar elements (clouds, fragments of bodies, pieces of landscape) treated with forceful, flat colors and great humor. Equally emblematic is the work of Margot Römer, who began to work with the national flag in 1978, using strident colors and unusual shapes. Both her painting and her graphic art have tirelessly explored the metamorphosis of the flag and one of its constitutive elements: the star. The assemblages and paintings created by Carlos Zerpa were also given a significant space in the exhibition. Zerpa began his career in the 1960s as a conceptual and performance artist in Valencia, Carabobo state. Religious themes made into fetishes are a constant in his assemblages and

body actions, and his works present a strong cultural syncretism (art history, religion, rock music, etc.). These works in a way underscore a Venezuelan idiosyncrasy.

Finally, the exhibition took account of the repercussions of Pop Art in later decades. Among Venezuelans, Jacobo Borges, also represented by a work from the 1970s, had a prominent place with two works dated in 2011, experimental in that his pictorial vitality and his whirlwind of color is brought into digital media. Meyer Vaisman, meanwhile, parodies, decontextualizes, and reconstructs cultural images in ways that question the "consumption" of contemporary art. Completing the selection of recent and memorable works by notable artists in the local scene are selections from Jeff Koons, Kenny Scharf, and Donald Sultan.

\*All photos in this text are by Reinaldo Armas.

Susana Benko



Margot Römer. *Four Stars for a Three-Color*. Detail (No. 2), 1988. 4 parts. Silkscreen print on paper. 47 1/8 x 31 3/8 in. (120 x 80 cm).

## Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art

Smithsonian American Art Museum. Washington, D.C.

On October 25, *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* opened at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) in Washington, D.C. Much anticipated, the exhibition displays work by over seventy Latino artists working across the United States, and hopes, according to the exhibition catalog, to encourage viewers "to see Latino art not as a bounded category, but a fluid one, open to many dialogues and trajectories. Latino art cannot be reduced to a single style or storyline." This is followed by the clarification that the exhibition "does emphasize a bottom line: unlike Latin American sojourners, Latino artists have a long-standing presence in the United States. Whether residence or citizenship is chosen or imposed, Latino artists are inextricably tied to this national space." Yet even

as—or perhaps because—much of the work on view embodies exactly the kind of multiplicity, contradiction, and paradox described in the catalog, much of the most interesting conversation about the exhibition has centered not on the work, but on the word "Latino" as it is understood in the United States.

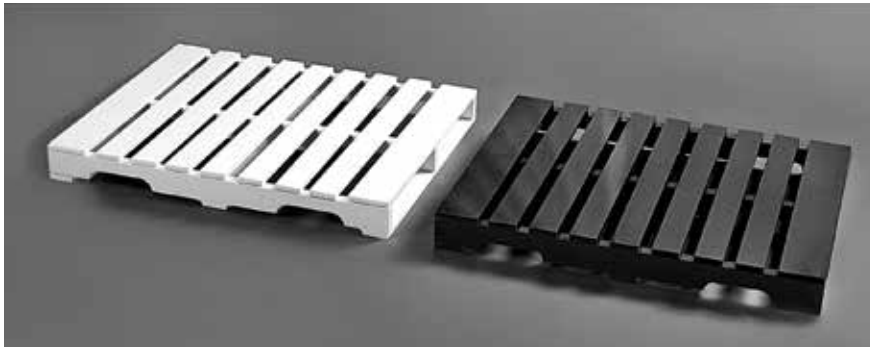
After a largely negative review of *Our America* in the *Washington Post* newspaper, a lively discussion between a number of the exhibition's artists, and others, took place on Facebook—a conversation initiated by filmmaker Alex Rivera's post that mocked and scolded the review's author, Philip Kennicott, for writing: "Latino art, today, is a meaningless category." Among the many thoughtful comments on the thread following Rivera's post was Judithe Hernandez's

assertion that "The problem [of exclusion of Latino artists] remains at its core... the need of American art institutions to preserve (defend) an aesthetic defined by Western art philosophy. It's a philosophy that has ranked style and tastes in this country for 300 years. An aesthetic that... cannot appreciate that some 'American' artists have chosen to examine their experiences in the colors and styles rooted in the mother countries of their families." True. But what role does *Our America* play in all this? Does it challenge an aesthetic defined by Western art philosophy? Does it make a compelling argument about the vitality, diversity and importance of Latino art?

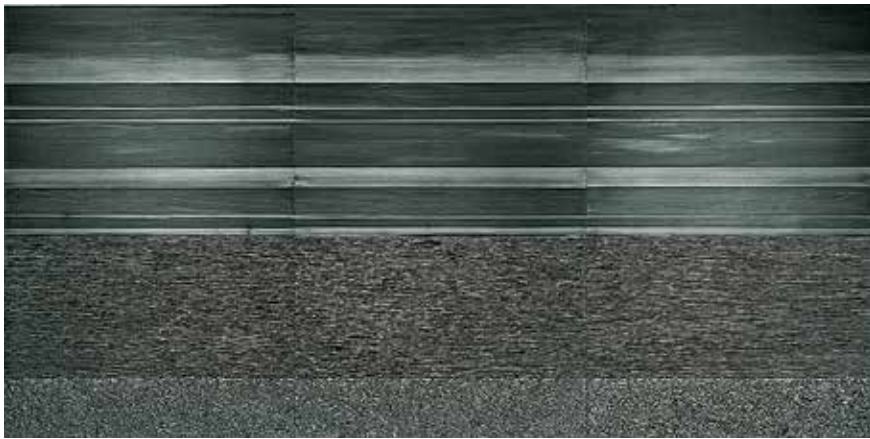
On the one hand: yes, of course. By simple fact of its existence, the exhibition is a success, and a significant accomplishment for its cura-

**Christina Fernández.** *Maria's Great Expedition*, 1995–96. Five gelatin silver prints, one chromogenic print, one inkjet print, and bilingual narrative. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment.





**Jesse Amado.** *Me, We*, 1999. Granite and marble. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Henry R. Muñoz III in honor of Lyman Morgan Jones V.



**Teresita Fernández.** *Nocturnal (Horizon Line)*, 2010. Solid graphite on panel, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment. © 2010, Teresita Fernández.

tor, E. Carmen Ramos. Ramos, who joined the Smithsonian staff in October 2010, was hired specifically to develop SAAM's Latino art collection, and then organize an exhibition integrating these new acquisitions and the existing collection. While the shopping spree aspect of this endeavor means that the collection (and the exhibition) lacks organic depth, the fact remains that in a short three-year period Ramos managed to purchase much of the work on view in *Our America*, and begin to correct the inexcusable problem of the invisibility and absence of

Latino artists in SAAM's permanent collection. Of the 92 works on view, 63 have been acquired (including donations) since Ramos joined SAAM, and a total of 120 artworks have been added to the collection since 2011.

But there is too another way in which I think *Our America* succeeds in effectively addressing some of the terms laid out by Hernandez in the quotation above. After the *Washington Post* review and the ensuing Facebook thread, the newspaper critic asked Rivera, author of the initial Facebook post, if he would like to take their

conversation public on WashingtonPost.com. At one point in the exchange that followed, Kennicott presents *30 Americans*, an exhibition that featured the work of 31 African-American artists, as an example of a show that grouped artists together based on ethnic or racial identity in a more successful, less hodge-podge, manner than *Our America*. This is a provocative suggestion because one striking feature of that show, which I agree had a more unified feel to it, was the way in which it simultaneously suppressed and embraced the artists' African-American identity. While the centrality of race to the artistic practice of almost all of the artists included in *30 Americans* is evidenced in their work, the publicity for *30 Americans* qualified that focus. An oft-repeated quotation from the Rubell Family (from whose collection the exhibition was culled) read, "We decided to call [the exhibition] '30 Americans.' 'Americans,' rather than 'African Americans' or 'Black Americans' because nationality is a statement of fact, while racial identity is a question each artist answers in his or her own way, or not at all." There is absolutely something liberating in that idea—a freedom or opportunity to move past categories of race and ethnicity as organizing societal structures. And in *Our America*, a piece such as Teresita Fernandez's *Nocturnal (Horizon Line)* (2010), would seem to fit more comfortably in an exhibition about new approaches to landscape than one addressing Latino art. She is a Latina artist, of course, but does that mean her work must be categorized as Latina art? Of course not. Nevertheless, to make compulsory a move that suppresses or moderates ethnic or racial identity, as Kennicott's language, perhaps unintentionally, seems to do, would be domineering. In this context, *Our America's* refusal to modulate the role of ethnicity in one's identity

**Delilah Montoya.** *Desire Lines, Baboquivari Peak, AZ*, 2004. Printed 2008, ink-jet print. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Gilberto Cárdenas Latino Art Collection.







**Ken Gonzales-Day.** "At daylight the miserable man was carried to an oak..." from the series *Searching for California Hang Trees*, 2007. Inkjet print. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment. © 2007, Ken Gonzales-Day.



**Amalia Mesa Bains.** *An Ofrenda (Offering) for Dolores del Rio*, 1984. Revised 1991. Mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers and glitter, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program © 1991, Amalia Mesa-Bains.

is significant, and reveals, I think, how what might at first feel like an outmoded version of identity politics retains currency in our contemporary world where terms like post-racial are gaining traction.

So on the one hand, *Our America* functions as a corrective to years of exclusionary collecting practices at the Smithsonian and grants visibility to Latino artists, as well as to the idea of Latino art. But on the other hand, the exhibition, in trying to articulate the dynamic between inclusion and exclusion loses subtlety. In his essay, "The Orphans of Modernism," Chon Noriega smartly observes that members of Asco, an artist collective whose work is included in *Our America*, "examine the conceptual dimensions of invisibility rather than fill the void with new or reclaimed iconographies." *Our America*, as an installed space, would have benefited from a similar methodological approach. Instead, the exhibition's structural desire for a kind of clarity (even as it was ultimately unable to produce it) seems designed to appeal to a European-American desire for transparency and knowability. Divided into three main groupings—"Reframing the Past and Present," "Defying Categories," and "Signs of the Popular"—the exhibition situates the included work historically, that is, in relationship to "American" themes like

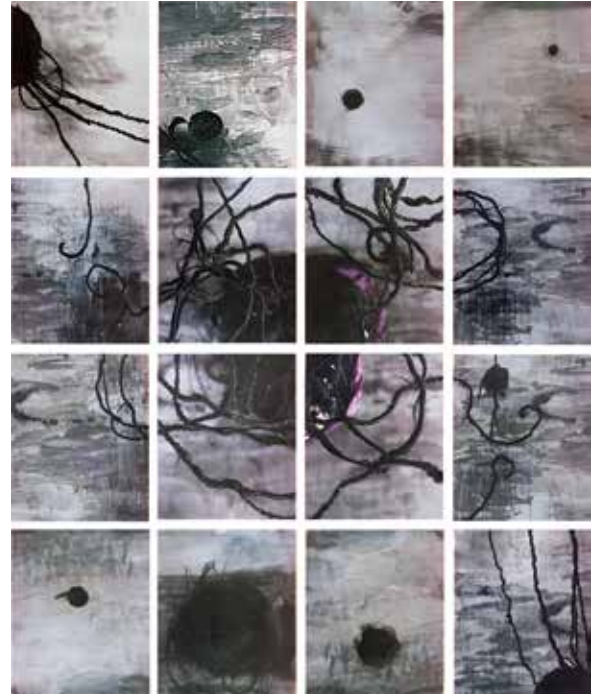
landscape and migration; in dialogue with mid-twentieth century modernist and avant-garde movements such as geometric abstraction and minimalism; and as contemporary art practice that tends to emphasize everyday life. But these groupings strain against themselves and struggle to remain meaningful (as evidenced by the many subcategories). In this regard, I wish the exhibition had sought more to engage—rather than explain—its conception or idea of Latino art as a way to actively resist transforming the objects on display into objects of knowledge for other more or "truer" American observers. I am left wondering what the exhibition would have looked like had the curator sought to create a space that openly worked *against* a kind of certainty of identity, and ultimately, *against* the clarity of signs upon which established power rests? Yes, the show included artists from various locales and presented a cross-section of styles and stories, but as a whole, the installation failed to play with this diversity in as full or imaginative a manner as it might have. For me this is not a small point; it is the source of my ambivalence about the show.

This is not to say that there weren't instances of real revelation. Entering the exhibition, viewers encounter a suite of works, including: Christina Fernandez's *Maria's Great Expedition*

(1995-96), a photographic essay that plays with the format of ethnographic museum display and features Fernandez, dressed as her great-grandmother, reenacting various family migration stories; Raphael Montañez Ortiz's *Cowboy and "Indian" Film* (1957-58), a 16 mm film that consists of an appropriated old cowboy and Indian film that has been chopped with a tomahawk, disassembled, and then reassembled into a new configuration that unmakes the violence and the racial stereotypes of Western epics; Ken Gonzales-Day's "At daylight the miserable man was carried to an oak..." from the series *Searching for California Hang Trees* (2007) and *Erased Lynchings* (2006), both of which document the gruesome history of the lynching of Mexican-Americans in California; and Delilah Montoya's *Humane Borders Water Station* (2004, printed 2008), a series of photographs depicting the desert border-space between Mexico and the United States. Visible within Montoya's images are trails made by individuals hoping to traverse the border, as well as a number of water tanks and bottles strategically placed by humanitarian workers to help prevent migrant deaths from dehydration; the apparent barrenness of the landscape—its seeming neutrality—is thus made to reveal its history, the hidden stories



**Margarita Cabrera.** *Brown Blender*, 2011. Vinyl, copper wire and thread. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment. © 2011, Margarita Cabrera.



**María Magdalena Campos-Pons.** *Constellation*, 2004. Instant color prints, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment. © 2004, María Magdalena Campos-Pons.

of those who have traveled across the land. The passage of images and objects is powerful here; this is not an America anyone could think sprouted from mythical rural Midwestern origins, free of political rancor or the scandal of violence. Rather, the key terms in this origin story are threat and uncertainty.

There are also plenty of individual works of real beauty and depth. Magdalena Campos-Pons's *Constellation* (2004) rests in a dreamlike space between representation and abstraction. In the work's eight photographic panels, long braids float across an expansive field of purplish-gray, like tentacles searching for something to attach to, but instead finding themselves wandering homeless in an unidentified space. Temporary shelters form as braids gather together in clusters and tufts. But those shelters, also unattached to land, continue to float across the abstract space, searching for a ground that does not exist, like refugees searching for citizenship and sovereignty in a place that refuses to recognize their presence. Or Amalia Mesa-Bains's altar-installation, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio* (1984, revised 1991), which, with its lush colors and material presence demands to be seen and taken seriously. Honoring one of the first Mexican superstars in Hollywood, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio* transforms the ceremonial aesthetic of

home altars into a secular installation and a feminist declaration.

Or Jesse Amado's *Me, We* (1999), which takes the form of two shipping pallets, and thus references key components of corporate globalization: hidden physical labor and the transportation and mobility of goods. However, these empty pallets, constructed out of the traditional sculptural materials of granite and marble and displayed on the floor, seem to halt the containerization process—the invisible motor of global capitalism—as well as the viewer's path. But why relegate Amado's work to the room dedicated to "Defying Categories," which consists primarily of "abstract" works that, in some way, engage historical movements, in Amado's case, Minimalism? Why not place *Me, We* in dialogue with a work like Mesa-Bains's *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*? Or Campos-Pons's *Constellation*? Or works such as Margarita Cabrera's *White Coffee Maker* (2011), *Black Blender* (2011), or *Black and Grey Toaster* (2011)? Cabrera's soft sculptures of everyday objects—objects of daily use, manufactured by low-wage employees in out of sight locations—are sewn out of vinyl, a malleable material that causes her forms to sag and wiggle. The threads with which she constructs these pieces have also been left long and exposed. A result of these

visible, unkempt threads and the soft, animated forms is that Cabrera's objects, though static, refuse to sit totally still. Or rather, their stillness seems to have occurred prematurely—labor is made present, calcified, the fantasy of wealth without workers exposed. Why not place these objects next to Amado's *Me, We* in a space that engages histories of labor and capital, and perhaps even still a history of Minimalism and Pop Art, but from a critical, rather than aspirational, perspective?

In her catalog essay, Ramos argues that *Our America* seeks to situate "Latino artists not as isolated figures embroiled in an intragroup conversation about identity, but as peers dialoguing with other American artists and their national context. What is needed are frameworks that look to Latino art not solely as excluded contexts, but as an element that reconfigures notions of American art, history, and culture." Given the context of the exhibition at the Smithsonian's American Art Museum, I understand the instinct (requirement?) to frame the exhibition this way. Yet this positioning seems to consign the work precisely to that excluded context, with those "other Americans" assuming the position of permanent mainstream.

**Terri Weissman**