

## TWENTIETH CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN ARTISTS, DISCOVERY AND RECORD: A WORK IN PROGRESS

By Cecilia Puerto

**Abstract:** The paper identifies the need for a bibliographic apparatus that brings together readily available sources in the United States on twentieth century Latin American women artists. The author describes a work in progress which attempts to accomplish this goal and, in the process, highlights the resources of the Art Exhibition Catalog Collection housed in the Arts Library at the University of California at Santa Barbara. The paper draws upon some of these resources to present descriptive and visual information on two exiled Cuban artists.

It became readily apparent to me early in my career as librarian that scholars wishing to investigate the artistic production of women in and from 20th century Latin America were greatly hindered by their relative inaccessibility in so-called international reference sources, not only rendering research in the field a time consuming and expensive proposition but, more importantly, greatly hindering our knowledge about the universe of these artists. A cursory search of works such as *Contemporary Artists*, *World Artists 1950-1980: an H.W. Wilson Biographical Dictionary*, *Oxford Companion of Twentieth Century Art*, and *Contemporary Art and Artists: An Index to Reproductions* for example, yielded among them entries for ALicia Peñaöba, Lygia Clark, and Marisol Escobar, accomplished artists from Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela, respectively. The *Handbook of Latin American Art* provides references to artists active for the most part during the first part of the 20th century, the majority of Mexican origin, such as Lilia Carillo and María Izquierdo. Nevertheless, the bibliographic citations refer to materials which, for the most part, are not easily accessible in the United States.

As I reflected on the virtual invisibility of this group of artists in mainstream reference sources I pondered the impact this lack has on the understanding and appreciation of world art. During the 20th century women from the region, many

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with outstanding international reputations, have made significant contributions in the plastic arts in such mediums as painting, printmaking, sculpture, photography, and ceramics and they have begun more recently to incorporate approaches encompassing mixed media, as well as installation and performance art. Although their work has been shown in the U.S. on and off throughout the century, it has been only in the relatively recent past that interest in art by Latin America women has "taken off," due mainly to a groundswell of exhibitions in museums, as well as public and private galleries, dedicated to promoting a general awareness of art produced in Latin America.

While art from "south of the border" (chiefly of Mexican origin) has sporadically been the focus of major exhibitions during this time period, critics agree that for the most part it has been undervalued in the past, if not in terms of monetary value, certainly with regards to the relative lack of attention given to it by curators. New York gallery owner Nohra Haime reflects on the consequence which have ensued to artists of both genders as a result, noting that "You can't collect something that you do not know exists" (Stellweg, 30). And - remarking on the recent flurry of activity taking place - she notes, curiously, that "much more is happening artistically than what is ... included in catalogues or books" (30).

From a librarian's perspective Haime's statements pose a challenge. Certainly a direct corollary to not knowing what exists is not being able to study it. In 1991 when I began to survey the literature, and the activity of Latin American artists in general, I discovered that women were then riding high on the waves of prominence and - to judge from the sustained interest - there is little chance that attention to their work will diminish any time soon. Facilitating the research process while at the same time raising the visibility of 20th century Latin American female artists has, as a result, become for me a double-pronged imperative. Exhibition catalogs, critical reviews and profiles in art journals, general interest periodicals and newspapers document well their artistic production, more often than not being rich sources of biographical and illustrative details. Access to the literature, nonetheless, is scattered and in need of systematic organization. My objective is to control this information via an annotated bibliography of sources readily available in the United States to assist not only in identifying who these women are but also, it is hoped, to provide a stimulus for further research so that we may learn more about them.

A rich source of information has been the art exhibition catalog which, frequently, is the only extensive study on a particular artist. In this regard, the Art Library at the University of California at Santa Barbara has been a valuable resource, thanks to its extensive collection of art exhibition and museum catalogs. The Art

Exhibition Catalog Collection at UCSB presently boasts holdings of some 80,000 pieces, making it the largest of its kind in the United States. The inspiration for establishing this unique collection was UCSB's acquisition in the mid 1960's of rare 18th and 19th century catalogs from the collection of Marcel Nicolle, a Perisian bibliophile. Since that time the collection has grown significantly principally through private donations, gifts, and exchanges with museum libraries.

To celebrate our coming together on this beautiful island, as well as the almost near finish of this work in progress, I would like to highlight the work of two artists who were born in Cuba, but who became separated from the country at a very early age. A review of the available literature on these artists indicates that the great sense of loss and alienation they experienced as a result of exile impacted significantly on their artistic production. My presentation this afternoon will consist of a brief synthesis of some of the biographical and critical materials I have found related to these women during the course of my work, as well as an offering of slides I have produced which I hope serve as window into their creative worlds.

The first artist, Ana Mendieta, has been called the "high priestess of performance work" (Rauch, 44). Ana was born in Havana in 1948. Her life took an unexpected turn when she was 13 because of political difficulties experienced by her father at the time. Along with her older sister Raquel, Ana was sent to the United States where she spent her early years in a foster home in Iowa. She later undertook the study of art at the University of Iowa where she received a B.A. in 1969 and, three years later, an M.A. Her sister Raquel relates that Ana did not find painting "real enough for her purposes" (38) and shortly thereafter she began work on a M.F.A. in the Multimedia Department of the School of Art at the University of Iowa. This decision was pivotal in the development of Ana's aesthetic since it allowed her to explore the myriad creative possibilities of performance, multimedia and video, all of which were to play a major role in the crystallization of her artistic vision.

A common thread woven throughout the literature on this artist indicates that her feelings of dislocation from culture and family served as enervating force for her artistic production. The artist herself validated the impact which enforced exile had on her life and clarified why she was drawn to develop the highly original and individualistic artistic voice which she did:

"I have been carrying on a dialog between the landscape and the female body ... I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb. My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth ..."  
(Perreault, 10).

Ana's profound need to return to her origins via the earth went beyond mere metaphoric representation, however. Rauch notes that she approached her performances with ritualistic fervor (45), emphasizing her relationship with the environment by utilizing natural elements which others might consider starting, even strange, but which she considered life-giving forces. Her primary vehicle of expression became her own body which she used in combination with blood, fire, earth, water, leaves, flowers and other materials to create images of herself on trees, on the ground, and on beaches. Uruguyan artist Luis Camnitzer, a close friend of the artist, writes that in so doing "she expressed her mystic belief in a force which flows through everything" (134). Seeking links with her Cuban culture and the spiritualization of her performance art she incorporated principles of Santerfa - a merging of African religious traditions and Catholic beliefs - in numerous of the works she executed, among them elements of animals sacrifice. Rauch says that in making "no concessions to the standard ideal of beauty, her potent, sometimes crude statements urge the viewer to go beyond the confines of the conventional" (47).

Ana's journey of self-discovery and reencounter with the earth led her perform and execute her pieces throughout the 1970s and early 1980s in Iowa, Miami, Mexico and, ultimately, her beloved Cuba in 1982. Writing in Spanish Geraldo Mosquera emphasizes the significance of Ana's return to her native country, pointing out that the etchings and carvings of female figures she created in the Escaleras de Jaruco near Havana represented more than merely a return to *la tierra*, the earth - it was a return to *su tierra*, her homeland (55).

The impermanence which characterized much of her work, perhaps, has much to do with the fleeting quality of life itself. Given the nature of her death Camnitzer remarks that the ephemeral form she gave to her ideas became a "chilling metaphor of her life" (134). Using video and photography Ana, nevertheless, was able to capture for the viewer the essential meaning of her imagery - her need to reunite herself, if not physically, at least spiritually with the life-generating aspects of our universe and with her homeland. At a collective and more universal level critics have interpreted the sexual symbolism present in much of her work to be a representation of "prehistoric beliefs of an omnipresent female force whose body parts made the earth a living creature" (Rauch, 47).

Recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment of the Arts award and the 1983 Prix de Rome, Ana died an ambiguous and premature death in 1985. It is unclear whether at the peak of her career and in the midst of a marital quarrel she jumped or was pushed out of a 34th floor New York apartment window by her artist husband, Carl Andre.

The second artist, María Martínez-Cañas, has, like Ana Mendieta, distinguished herself in her career not only in the individualistic approach she has taken towards her subject matter, but also in the articulation of "nostalgia" for a culture which, unlike Ana, she never knew firsthand.

María's family left Cuba for Puerto Rico in 1960 when she was only three months old. In 1978 María sought a new path, leaving the island to pursue studies at the Philadelphia College of Art and, after receiving a B.F.A. in 1982, she enrolled at The School of the Art Institute in Chicago where two years later she earned an M.F.A. Of this time in her life and the conflictive feelings she experienced as a result of being caught between cultures María says.

"In reality, I feel much more Cuban than Latin American; although I grew up in Puerto Rico, I always felt like a foreigner there. Later in Philadelphia, I experienced a great culture shock with American life. I didn't have any Latin or Cuban friends there; it wasn't until I moved to Chicago that I began to realize the many values my culture had to offer" (Fuentes-Pérez, 312).

María's area of concentration in school was photography, the medium which she uses to craft her highly original compositions. In the process of seeking her own artistic voice and style she was drawn to explore the creative possibilities of combining negatives of photographic images with other materials using a variety of techniques. The aesthetic she developed eventually allowed her to articulate in a fresh and unusual way the embeddedness of Cuban culture in her life, as well as the conflict and enigma associated with culture contact.

A six-month stay in Spain on a Fulbright-Hays grant in 1985 served as catalyst for the development of the body of work which to date has gained for her international recognition.

Her discovery of Cuban maps in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville dating from the Spanish conquest proved significant, giving tangible presence to her longing for a cultural past she did not encounter directly but which, nevertheless, was psychologically very much a part of her. When she returned from Spain she began to develop images based on what she had seen during her study in Seville. Utilizing sheets of amberlith, a knife and negatives of assorted images, María created compositions which reverberated with "Cubannes", as in "Isla nada más (a mi padre) [Only an Island (to my father)]" and "Plano de Ciudad" produced in 1986-1987. Elisa Turner describes the technique she used to produce her images:

"With incisive cuts in the amberlith, Martínez-Cañas drew forms echoing the long-ago maps, outlining the contours of Cuba itself and the plans of colonial Havana, placing her images on stark white fields. The grids of streets and the protruding arrow-shaped watch towers of fortresses became favorite forms, to be repeated and interrupted" (85).

More recently María's concern with the effects of culture contact inspired such works as "Dos Mundos" (1992), a composition filled with forms and shapes suggestive of land masses surrounded by water which encase photographs of textual material and other images.

María's art embraces and has been influenced by her Cuban culture in other ways. Those familiar with the work of Wilfredo Lam will recognize the impact of his style reflected in works such as "Los fantasmas: lamento" (1991) and "Tres Totems (Serie Negra) [Three Totems (Black Series)]" (1990). Terence Pitts, Director of the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, comments on this work in the exhibition catalog *María Martínez-Cañas: Encounters* in the following way:

"The natural world is represented by photographic imagery of deserts and jungles and by graphic representations that suggest cactus and thorns. The pre-Columbian world is shown in photographs of the extraordinary monuments and structures of the Yucatan peninsula. The Spanish conquest becomes apparent in images of Spanish colonial architecture, the recurring theme of the European city grid, and images of Catholicism. Finally, María adds yet another component: travel photographs of places like Venice and Arizona that seem unrelated to the works as a whole, but which serve as a kind of testimony to the life of an exile. All of these chaotic and contradictory elements are held together in an intuitive balance, in a sort of triumphant, artistic juggling act that reflects the artist's hard-won but tenuously held vision of the way in which history and individual destinies intersect" (Martínez-Cañas, 3).

These are but two of the approximately 200 artists whom I have "discovered" to date in the literature. Originating from twenty Latin America countries they represent truly only a fraction of the total number since my work, limited as it is by travel and time constraints does not - indeed, cannot - take into account all of the literature and art exhibition catalogs published in the region. An exciting, collaborative project would be the harnessing of all of these resources so that we can achieve a more complete picture of women's achievements and contributions to the Latin American 20th century artistic scene!

#### Notes

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