

Georgina G. Gluzman

CONSEJO NACIONAL DE INVESTIGACIONES CIENTÍFICAS Y TÉCNICAS, ARGENTINA
ORCID 000-0001-7541-1291

Latin American Women Artists: Subsidiary Human Beings? *The Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995 case*

Abstract

In 1995, the exhibition *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* opened at the Milwaukee Art Museum. This exhibition marked the first-ever survey of Latin American women artists organised in the United States. Curated by Geraldine Pollack Biller, the show included works by thirty-five women artists active in eleven Latin American countries. This article aims to analyse the categories (“women artists”, “Latin American art”, and “Latin American women artists”) adopted by the exhibition and to examine some of the artists whose works were exhibited. What artists were selected? What were the implications of the selection? Did it reinforce certain stereotypes associated with Latin America and its art? Informed by feminist and Latin American art theories, deconstructing Euro-American notions of Latin American art, I argue that the emphasis on women artists did not significantly change the perception of Latin American art as “fantastic”. The thesis presented by anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner in 1974, which suggests that women have been traditionally linked with nature while men are associated with culture, can be illuminating when applied to comprehending the Latin American exotic cliché presented by the exhibition. Women were seen as doubly subsidiary human beings (in *Rivolta Femminile*’s words): non-Western and members of the second sex.

Keywords: women artists, Latin American art, exhibition history

Introduction

In 1995 the touring exhibition *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* opened at the Milwaukee Art Museum, a large institution whose history goes back

to the last years of the 19th century.¹ Curated by Geraldine Pollack Biller (1933–2021), it was the first survey exhibition of art produced by women artists of Latin America fully conceived and presented in the United States of America. The show was organised chronologically in three parts. The first section included works from 1915 until the early 1940s. The second section, from about 1945 to 1975, included mostly abstract art. The final section focused on the last twenty years of art created by women in Latin America.²

Though it was largely based upon an evolutionist scheme, that is a clear succession of aesthetic choices understood as movements,³ and presented clichés surrounding women's artistic trajectories, the show was very influential, for it was the very first exhibition that presented a panorama of women artists in Latin America as a whole, spanning almost a century of women in the Latin American arts. As Cecilia Fajardo–Hill, co-curator of the hugely influential *Radical Women* opened in 2017, pointed out: “[Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995] was the first and, until *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, the only large-scale exhibition in the United States devoted to the topic”.⁴ Hence, it is important to critically look back at this exhibition and to analyse, almost thirty years after its opening, the almost stubborn legacy of this show, partially funded by a grant of the American National Endowment for the Arts.⁵ As a matter of fact, the catalogue (like many other texts about Latin America written in the Global North and then exported to the South) found its way to Latin American countries, facilitated by its bilingual publication (in English and Spanish).

Very often these panoramic readings of Latin American art and those of art made in other peripheral and non-canonical areas are produced in the Global North and are then read avidly in the regions where the artworks were created in the first place. Obvious economic reasons account for this situation. The financing of international research projects, demanding archival and oral history work in many different countries, is simply too high to be funded from Latin America. Therefore, those of us in the Global South are often left

1 This was its first venue, after which the exhibition travelled to Denver, Phoenix, and Washington D.C., all venues in the United States of America.

2 C. Lowe, “Women artists show dazzles”, *Tucson Citizen*, 20 July 1995, <http://tucsoncitizen.com/morgue2/1995/07/20/193010-women-artists-show-dazzles/> [accessed 27 June 2023].

3 The curator referred to women's contribution to the “evolution of most of the major trends that arose during that time period”. G.P. Biller, “Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995”, in: *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995*, ed. G.P. Biller, Milwaukee, 1995, p. 23.

4 C. Fajardo–Hill, “The Invisibility of Latin American Women Artists: Problematizing Art Historical and Curatorial Practices”, in: *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, Los Angeles—Munich, 2017, p. 22.

5 “Museum”, *National Endowment for the Arts 1994. Listing of Grants and Financial Report*, p. 58.

to make sense of our own history through texts produced elsewhere, which generally make little reference to local intellectual traditions. A decolonial approach to shows like *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* must highlight local contributions to our understanding of artistic phenomena, that is the extant bibliography upon which these hegemonic narratives are built, as well as challenge the wide circulation of certain texts, questioning their uncritical acceptance. In particular, the catalogue of *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* was presented, from the very moment of its publication, as “an important milestone for Latin American women artists”.⁶

The show included about one hundred and fifty works by thirty-five women artists active in eleven Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and Venezuela) during the years encompassed.⁷ The selected artists were involved with diverse media, attempting to make the selection representative of the region. However, by focusing mainly on traditional media (painting, sculpture, and printing), the show adhered to an art-historical hierarchy and thus reinforced up to a certain point traditional views in art history. Moreover, the attempt to insert women artists into a male-defined narrative also strengthened a conservative view of art history, for women were simply added and any possible contributions were obscured by predefined male masters in each area.

The aim of this article is twofold: firstly, to explore the analytical categories that were developed within this exhibition (“women artists”, “Latin American art”, “Latin American women artists”); secondly, to examine carefully how two women artists from the first section of the show were presented. To this end, I shall analyse in depth the exhibition through its catalogue, the accompanying video produced for the show as didactic material, and a selection of the exhibition’s reviews⁸ – that is, a representative selection of the traces left by any exhibition. Other dimensions of the show, such as the wall texts at some of the venues of the exhibition, seemed to have been lost, at least to my knowledge.⁹

6 C. Puerto, *Latin American Women Artists, Kahlo and Look who Else: a Selective, Annotated Bibliography*, Westport, 1996, p. xii.

7 The artists were Raquel Forner, Sarah Grilo, Alicia Penalba, Liliana Porter (Argentina), Marina Nuñez del Prado, María Luisa Pacheco (Bolivia), Tarsila do Amaral, Leda Catunda, Lygia Clark, Jac Leirner, Anita Malfatti, Tomie Ohtake, Mira Schendel (Brazil), Catalina Parra, Soledad Salamé (Chile), Olga de Amaral, Beatriz González, Ana Mercedes Hoyos, Fanny Sanín, (Colombia), María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Ana Mendieta, Amelia Peláez (Cuba), Leonora Carrington, Elena Climent, Olga Costa, María Izquierdo, Frida Kahlo, Rocío Maldonado, Cordelia Urueta, Remedios Varo (Mexico), Tilsa Tsuchiya (Peru), Mari Mater O’Neill (Puerto Rico), Rosa Acle (Uruguay), Elba Damast, and Gego, (Venezuela).

8 I would like to thank Anthony Morgano, the librarian and archivist at the Milwaukee Art Museum, for his help.

9 H. Hinish wrote, in her review of the show, about the wall texts at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Heidi Hinish, “Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995 essays by Geraldine P. Biller, Bélgica Rodríguez and Marina Pérez de Mendiola. Milwaukee Art Museum, 1995”, *Woman’s Art Journal*, 1997, 18, no. 1, p. 56.

However, the two most important traces (the catalogue and the documentary) are still extant.¹⁰

This essay is informed by feminist re-readings of art history as well as by Latin American art theories, which have helped to deconstruct the Euro-American notions often applied to Latin American art. Therefore, I argue that the focus on women artists did not alter radically the label “fantastic”, often applied to Latin American art in the 1980s and 1990s in the American context, but rather reinforced it, particularly within the first section of the show, which I shall examine from the examples of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) and the Brazilian painter Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973), a key modern artist often praised for her radical artistic vision. Finally, this text is also framed by the field of exhibition studies, an increasingly important area within art history that draws attention to the key role played by shows in crafting art historical narratives.

In 1974, the anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner presented a key development for the study of women and their relation to culture. She affirmed that “women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture”.¹¹ This idea may be usefully applied to better understand the reinforcement of the Latin American exotic cliché in the show *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995*. In this context, women were seen as basically subsidiary human beings, to borrow the words of the *Rivolta Femminile*.¹² Women artists from Latin America were a symbolical other in two different ways, for they were non-Western and were also members of the so-called second sex. In her 2015 article on the category of “Latin American women artists”, Mónica Eraso Jurado expressed it very clearly: “In the representation of Latin American artists in contemporary feminist exhibitions such as *Global Feminisms*, there is a certain scent of essentialism surrounding both the concept of woman and the imaginaries about Latin American identity. Due to these concerns, it became necessary to inquire about the political contexts in which the notion of the Latin American woman artist had originated”.¹³

10 As Ana Maria Albani de Carvalho points out “This temporary event [the art show], intended to be experienced in phenomenological terms, will, in turn, be published in a catalogue or exhibition book. The catalogue performs various functions, including dissemination –of the event itself, as well as of the institution or the sponsor, whether public or private– and also registration and documentation, providing a view of history and criticism of art”. A.M. Albani de Carvalho, “A Exposição como Dispositivo na Arte Contemporânea: Conexões entre o Técnico e o Simbólico”, *Revista Museologia e Interdisciplinaridade*, 2012, 1, no. 2, p. 53. All translations are my own.

11 S.B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”, in: *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968–2014*, ed. H. Robinson, Chichester, 2015 [1974], p. 21.

12 R. Femminile, “Ausencia de la mujer en los momentos exaltadores de las manifestaciones creadoras masculinas”, in: *Escupamos sobre Hegel y otros escritos sobre liberación femenina*, ed. C. Lonzi, Buenos Aires, 1978 [1971], pp. 129–133

13 M. Eraso Jurado, “¿Qué es una mujer artista latinoamericana? ‘Figuras algo soñadoras, fantásticas, y eróticas’”, (*Pensamiento*), (*Palabra*) y *Obra*, 2015, 14, p. 25.

What is Latin American art, anyway?

In his survey of 20th century Latin American art, the well-known American art historian Edward Sullivan wrote about *Latin American Women Artists* and its influence on the American art scene. Sullivan highlighted the relevance of the show and its impact on the American public, who had a privileged opportunity to discover the work of relevant Latin American women artists:

“... in 1994 an ambitious exhibition was inaugurated at the Milwaukee Art Museum: *Latin American Women Artists (Mujeres artistas latinoamericanas 1915–1995)*. Both the exhibition, whose curator was Geraldine Biller, and the catalogue, written by several specialists (including myself) from the United States and Latin America, made known to the American public important images and a large number of female artists from all Latin America”.¹⁴

This exhibition was part of a larger process, described in detail by Mari Carmen Ramírez as the “boom” of exhibitions on Latin American art presented in the United States. Shifra M. Goldman had already identified this phenomenon in 1989, when she compared the “literary boom” that had brought Latin American writers to the U.S. audiences with the new interest the “Latin American art boom” of that decade. Goldman emphasised the timely events: “Booms in the art arena can be identified by numerous blockbuster museum shows, lots of mainstream critical attention, a proliferation of gallery exhibits, and sustained activity on the auction market. All of these “symptoms” have occurred since the early 1980s, and the stage is set for the 1990s—at least through the 1992 Quincentennial of Columbus’s voyages to the New World”.¹⁵

In this same vein, Ramírez highlighted in 1992 “the unprecedented number of shows of Latin American/Latino art organized and funded by US institutions (museums, galleries, alternative spaces) over the past decade or so”.¹⁶ Moreover, Ramírez carefully analysed how art exhibitions are “privileged vehicles for representation of individual and collective identities”.¹⁷ But, despite the good intentions of many curators, the Latin American art exhibitions, such as the well-known *Art of the Fantastic* often reinforced cultural stereotypes, as Ramírez has argued. Edward J. Sullivan, who had been one of the *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* advisors, stated in his review of the show: “There

14 E. Sullivan, *Arte latinoamericano del siglo XX*, Madrid, 1996, p. 12.

15 S.M. Goldman, “The (Booming) Spirit of Latin America”, in: S.M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas. Art and Social Change in Latin America and The United States*, Chicago—London, 1994, p. 358.

16 M.C. Ramírez, “‘Beyond ‘The Fantastic’: Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art”, in: *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. G. Mosquera, Cambridge, 1996, p. 229.

17 Idem.

is no denying, of course, that fantasy and a 'larger-than-life' quality can be found in Latin American art throughout the ages".¹⁸

Ramírez also mentioned the existence of an "unequal axis of exchange" between Latin America and the United States, demonstrated by the fact that curators who were not experts in Latin American art organised many Latin American art exhibitions.¹⁹ The case of Geraldine Pollack Biller is strikingly clear in this sense, for she was hardly an expert in Latin American art and culture. Biller, who had received a B.A. in interior design and fine arts in the 1950s, lived in Ecuador, Argentina and Chile, thanks to her husband's job in the 1960s. The curator was certainly not an expert in the field of Latin American art and had not been engaged in similar projects before. After returning to Milwaukee in the 1980s, Biller, who was working at the Milwaukee Art Museum as a curatorial assistant, defended her M.A. dissertation at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee on a topic unrelated to Latin America: *New York Pop and Chicago Imagism of the 1960s: the Question of Affinities and Influences*.²⁰ Nevertheless, in his preface to the catalogue, Russell Bowman, then Director of the Milwaukee Art Museum, stated that Biller "was ideally experienced to direct this project", particularly thanks to "her years of residence in Latin America during her husband's career in the diplomatic service, her fluency in Spanish and her art history background".²¹

Another relevant issue raised by Ramírez was the enduring presence of surrealism in shaping Euro-American conceptions on Latin American art.²² This was evident in the space that was granted to Frida Kahlo in the exhibition, the comments in the catalogue explicitly linking her to surrealism,²³ and in the reception of the show. To begin with, the cover of the catalogue featured a still life by the already celebrated Mexican artist, famously praised by André Breton as a *natural* surrealist. The context of the so-called *fridamania* provided a useful platform to promote the show, even if it meant conceding to stereotypes. As Patricia Mayayo explained: "immortalized in posters, calendars and t-shirts, the Mexican artist has become a true cult figure".²⁴ Moreover, Kahlo seemed to be the ideal Latin American woman artist: mestiza, victimised by her womanising husband, and perpetually suffering.

The critical reception of the show focused on the fascinating personality and work of Kahlo, even if other eight women artists from Mexico. Some of them had clear links to Kahlo, such as María Izquierdo. But Kahlo indeed stole the show. Heidi Hinish, in her review of the show for the *Woman's Art*

18 E.J. Sullivan, "Review: Art of the Fantastic", *Art Journal*, 1988, 47, no. 4, pp. 376–379.

19 Idem.

20 G.P. Biller, *New York Pop and Chicago Imagism of the 1960s: the Question of Affinities and Influences*, MA dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 1991.

21 Bowman, "Preface", in: *Latin American...*, p. 3.

22 Ramírez, "Beyond 'The Fantastic'...", p. 232.

23 "Frida Kahlo", in: *Latin American...*, p. 107.

24 P. Mayayo, *Frida Kahlo. Contra el mito*, Madrid, 2008, p. 12.

Journal, wrote: “Best known for her arresting self-portraits and fantastic imagery, Kahlo still manages to shock us with works like *Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1939), which graphically portrays her friend’s death”.²⁵

Paul Richard, in his review of the show for *The Washington Post*, also began his review with Kahlo: “Of the 96 objects in ‘Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995’, at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, one is unforgettable. It’s a painting of a suicide, by jumping, in Manhattan”.²⁶ So, what is the reader left to think about the remaining “objects”? Predictably the rest of the article focused almost exclusively on Kahlo and ended like this: “‘Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995,’ [...] also includes a wall of magical imaginings by Remedios Varo of Mexico. But it is Frida Kahlo’s art that flays the viewer’s memory and dominates the show [...]”. Instead of taking Kahlo’s career as an example of women artists’ perpetual presence in the art world, for women have always created art, the exhibition showcased Kahlo as an exceptional woman.

What are Latin American women artists, anyway?

When *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* opened, there had been some all-female exhibitions in the United States completely dedicated to Latin American women artists, focused on specific groups of artists rather than attempting to offer a survey of women’s interventions in the visual arts.²⁷ Shows like *Latin American Art: A Woman’s View* (1981), organised at the Miami-Dade Community College, contrasts sharply with the ambitious scope of Biller’s project and with her self-awareness, which I shall explore at the very end of this text.

The catalogue for this 1981 show spoke of Latin American society as “male-oriented”,²⁸ a cliché that intersects with racism and the alleged superiority of American society. Jacqueline Barnitz had already expressed this racist trope in 1975, in an article where she analysed the work of some Latin American women artists. The issue of the “less freedom” Latin American women had, “especially in Hispanic countries with their Islamic heritage” according to the noted art historian, stood in sharp contrast with the “Anglo-Saxon

25 Hinish, op. cit., p. 54.

26 P. Richards, “Stilled Life with Flowers”, *The Washington Post*, 2 March 1996, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1996/03/02/stilled-life-with-flowers/97b441b0-f737-4917-be16-0bbd29b29f0c/?utm_term=.9c4fca5f6cfb [accessed 21 May 2022].

27 Other shows, such as *Women of the Americas: Emerging Perspectives* organised in 1982 by the Kouros Gallery and the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York, were not focused solely on Latin America, but rather chose to encompass also American artists, such as Alice Neel and Lynda Benglis, and Canadian artists. G. Glueck, “Art”, *The Guide*, *The New York Times*, 10 October 1982, p. 3.

28 R. Griffin, “Latin American Art: A Woman’s view”, in: R. Griffin, *Latin American Art: A Woman’s View*, Miami, 1981, unpagged.

world”.²⁹ However, as celebrated American painter Lee Krasner put it rather bluntly in 1971: “Any woman artist who says there is no discrimination against women in art should have her face slapped”.³⁰ Sexism is evidently present in North American culture, and it is not just a “primitive” aspect of Latin America.

Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995 was much more nuanced, researched and intelligent than *Latin American Art: A Woman’s View*. How were the stereotypes surrounding Latin American art exhibitions altered by the focus on women artists, if they were indeed transformed? Charlotte Lowe, reviewing the show for *Tucson Citizen*, wrote: “This broad scope exhibit covers all major movements ranging from figuration and abstraction to surrealism, earth art and site-specific installations. Gender, politics and contemporary life are interpreted and re-evaluated”.³¹ Firstly, it must be noted that the curator maintained the traditional succession of male-defined movements. Secondly, the opinions of the reviewer were not clearly supported by the show itself, as I shall argue, for the critical category of gender was not consistently applied or considered. The curator herself made clear her political position when she declared: “‘I am not a feminist,’ says guest curator Geraldine P. Biller, ‘but the work of women artists in Latin America has not been given the credence it should’”.³² The curator’s work was simply to set the record straight and to incorporate women into established, male-defined narratives.

Moreover, the intersection of race, class, sexual orientation, and gender was often hidden. The curator often fell into broad generalisations. For example, after making a brief mention of the immigration of the artists’ families (forced in the case of María Magdalena Campos Pons, descendant of enslaved people), Biller pointed out that the concern for the “cosmos” and “cosmic themes” was typical of Latin American artists.³³ Even if key texts on Latin American women artists had been already published, such as some of Shifra Goldman’s ground-breaking texts,³⁴ the exhibition took a far more traditional, almost conservative, path. Complexities, instead of being highlighted and analysed, were simply erased. *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* seemed to present a “natural” group of artists on two different grounds. Firstly, the “primal, ahistorical and instinctual essence”,³⁵ in Ramírez’s apt words, the so-called Latin American identity was presented as a single and closed category, as well as those of “women artists”.

29 J. Barnitz, “5 Women Artists”, *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, 1975, 9, no. 14, pp. 38–39.

30 C. Nemser, “Forum: Women in Art”, *Arts Magazine*, 1971, 45, no. 4, p. 18.

31 Lowe, op. cit.

32 G.P. Biller, “Milwaukee. Latin Beauties”, *Departures*, Milwaukee Art Museum, Research Center, March–April 1995, p. 28.

33 Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 23.

34 S.M. Goldman, “Six Women Artists of Mexico”, *Woman’s Art Journal*, 1983, 3, no. 2, pp. 1–9.

35 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘The Fantastic’...”, p. 235.

Secondly, the analytical category of “women artists”, developed from the 1970s onwards thanks to the parading of the feminist art history, was presented without any further explanations. There was not any attempt to properly contextualise and explain the complexities of the social roles played by Latin American women (artists). The curator did not delve into the modes of gender construction and instead pointed out at an ahistorical category of “women artists”: “[exhibiting the work of women artists together] emphasizes the unique nature of feminine expression”.³⁶ Bélgica Rodríguez, one of the catalogue’s contributors, insisted:

“The woman artist in Latin America, like those all around the world, generally differs from her male counterpart, in that her work has been associated more directly with an everyday existential experience, with the everyday where the cognitive arises as a fundamental problem. It is the definition of the object of desire, of aspirations in the light of a visible reality. It is not strange that the commitment of Tarsila (Brazilian landscape), of Marina Núñez del Prado (the Andes mountains and the condor), of Elba Damast (the house), or of Ana Mendieta (the land and the being), is (or has been) a direct confrontation with the visible world to turn it into a magical experience in which the interiority of ‘being’ and its relations with visible reality produces a creative connection of the artist’s associations with life”.³⁷

For Rodríguez, Latin American women artists, just like their male colleagues, exhibited a distinctive approach to art: what set them apart was their ability to connect their work to the rawness of everyday life. Women artists were closer to nature, even if those experiences were more or less cognitively mediated.

The white-cube aesthetic of the exhibition design and the complete absence of archival materials in the show were key in the curator’s project: to exhibit the works and let them speak for themselves, even if this allegedly unmediated presence of the artworks was indeed mediated by very general, even diffuse, concepts regarding women in art. The two unquestioned categories of “Latin American” and “women artists” were brought together to reinforce cultural stereotypes. Both subjects, Latin Americans and women, were perceived as closer to nature and far from the Euro-American rationality. Heidi Hinish, in her review for the *Woman’s Art Journal*, focused on the so-called “fantastic vein” present in many of the featured artists.³⁸

The *extra* layer of meaning added by the focus on women did not alter, in Ramírez’s words, “the notion of the Latino subject as a primitive outcast or outsider inhabiting a space closer to nature and the preindustrial, premodern world than his or her European or North American colleagues”.³⁹ Women were the *other fantastic other*. As it happens, the influential show *Art of the*

36 Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 21.

37 B. Rodríguez, “Artistas latinoamericanas 1915–1995”, *Art Nexus*, 1995, 17, p. 77.

38 Hinish, op. cit., p. 54.

39 Ramírez, “‘Beyond ‘The Fantastic’...”, p. 239.

Fantastic had only included five women artists: Tarsila do Amaral, Beatriz González, Frida Kahlo, Rocío Maldonado, and Tilsa Tsuchiya. Hence, there was plenty of room to explore the most fantastic group within the exoticized Latin American art idea.

The video documentary, made for the exhibition, reinforced the inevitable connection between Latin American art and nature, strengthened in the case of women artists. The voice-over spoke across footage of a rural area: "Each of the artists represented in the exhibition is influenced by the Latin American country of her birth or immigration. Therefore, in order to understand the artwork, it is important to comprehend the vast geographical variety south of the United States border and to realize the strength of Catholicism, of indigenous cultures, and of language". The catalogue spoke of a "continent with its endless plains, deserts, and majestic mountains" which may have influenced a *primordial* concern with nature and space.⁴⁰

There is little room for the nuanced political readings advanced by theorists such as Margot Lacroix, one of the founding members of the editorial board of *Aquelarre*, a bilingual journal created in Vancouver in 1989.⁴¹ In her 1990 article, Lacroix approached the topic of women artist in Latin America from a considered and respectful angle:

"First and foremost, no homogeneity of genre, practice or point of view is to be expected here. Differences in class, religion, ethnicity or language should not be allowed to be erased either; these categories are in incessant interaction and create the particular conditions affecting the cultural production of women in Latin America, within each country, and within specific economic and political situations. One historical element does however unite Latin American national realities. They share a long-standing and on-going struggle with the forces of colonialism, with its concomitants of foreign domination and dependence, and this has had deep ramifications for the cultural and artistic spheres".⁴²

Thus, Lacroix suggested that political struggles, not links with nature, are central to understanding women's artistic ventures in Latin America. Topics like the relation with art centres, financial issues, social representations of femininity, and the double marginalisation of women artists from Latin America were critically assessed. Lacroix added: "The term 'Latin American woman artist' should therefore be seen as a historical tool, a point of departure; its usefulness does not lie in defining a particular aesthetic but in identifying, in an initial moment, sets of conditions, issues and concerns that may be helpful in addressing the works and lives of individual Latin American women

40 Biller, "Latin American...", p. 25.

41 M. Lacroix, "An Illegal Gathering of Witches", *Kinesis. News about Women that is not in the Dailies*, September 1989, p. 7.

42 M. Lacroix, "Mujer y Arte en la América Latina: Notas desde el Norte / Women and Art in Latin America: Notes from the North", *Aquelarre*, 1990, 4, p. 9.

artists at various points in time".⁴³ This subtlety is almost entirely missing from *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995*.

A case of Tarsila: unravelling the fascination

The curator of *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* chose several women artists from the Brazilian art scene: Anita Malfatti, Tarsila do Amaral, Lygia Clark, Tomie Ohtake and Mira Schendel. The Brazilian examples from the first section could have guided the curator to question simple narratives connecting women and nature. The solid involvement of both Anita Malfatti (1889–1964) and Tarsila do Amaral with modernism and urban modernity could have destabilised the cliché connecting women and nature. Nonetheless, the clichés overlapped and strengthened the traditional equation of women and nature. The selected works reinforced a cultural stereotype. The five works representing Tarsila do Amaral were all dated between 1923 and 1929, undoubtedly the canonical years of the painter. They were preparatory sketches for *A negra* and *Antropofagia*, and the oils *Lagoa Santa*, *Sol poente* and *Urutu*.

Heidi Hinish, analysing the work *Urutu* in the *Woman's Art Journal* wrote: "In *Urutu*... archetypal nature unfolds before an austere landscape. [...] The artist successfully adapted modern European styles to her own cultural experiences..."⁴⁴ The reader is left to figure out what cultural experience the reviewer refers to. The *exotic nature* is undoubtedly a fate for Latin American artists, in general, and Latin American women artists simply cannot escape. In the review of the show *Art of the Fantastic*, Edward Sullivan himself had stated: "[...] these artists [Tarsila do Amaral and Armando Reverón] present fascinating examples of an exotic imagination".⁴⁵

The inclusion of *Lagoa Santa* further expanded this idea. The painting reinforced the notion of a rural and uncontaminated Brazil. However, as Néstor García Canclini argued, in Latin American countries modernity and tradition coexist.⁴⁶ Moreover, as Ramírez already pointed out, works by Latin American artists that deal with the urban and cosmopolitan character of Latin American society were often simply left out of shows such as *Latin American Women Artists*.⁴⁷ This taste for the rural Tarsila was hardly a novelty. In 1945, for example, the show *Veinte artistas brasileños*, that travelled to Argentina and Uruguay, featured a similar choice.

43 Ibid., p. 10.

44 Hinish, op. cit., p. 54

45 See Sullivan, "Review...", p. 377.

46 N. García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, México, 1990.

47 Ramírez, "Beyond 'The Fantastic'...", p. 239.

But this simplistic reading contradicted other dimensions of her work. Class and race, two key topics the artists dealt with, were erased. Works like *Operários*,⁴⁸ which featured urban workers prominently, were simply left out, as if the artist had literally stopped producing art after 1929. Recent analysis by Ana Paula Cavalcanti Simioni has shown how the artist “consistently chose to present herself an elegant, tidy woman dressed in the latest fashion from Paris (Paul Poiret), thus highlighting her cosmopolitan, white, elitist character and, finally, her beauty”.⁴⁹ In the more recent anthological show *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2017, some of the same clichés re-emerged, serving to prove how difficult it is to move away from established approaches and also how influential *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* was for the English-speaking art world.

In the 1995 catalogue, Biller declared that “Tarsila do Amaral’s use of Léger-inspired forms to describe the heritage of her native Brazil has been widely recognized and appreciated in Europe, and more recently in the United States”.⁵⁰ This statement can be used to chart the shifting reception and deeper understanding of Tarsila do Amaral in the American context in the past twenty years. In other words, what has changed and what remains of the rather simplistic statement by the show’s curator twenty-two years after *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* in the recent show devoted to Tarsila do Amaral in the Museum of Modern Art, *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*, curated by Stephanie D’Alessandro and Luis Pérez-Oramas? The much more nuanced and careful reading of her life and works is the main difference, but the core of the analysis is largely based upon the same omissions.

However, the more recent catalogue does not incorporate a much-needed gendered analysis, particularly in connection to Tarsila do Amaral’s class and ethnicity. Instead of examining Tarsila do Amaral’s gender and social position, the authors repeat Aracy Amaral’s rather naïve statement from 1975: “As a woman, she always managed to do exactly what she wanted, even while always trying to keep up appearances”.⁵¹ For instance, the curators point out that her self-portrait from 1924 offers “a fascinating example” of her “public persona”,⁵² which would have deserved a more careful analysis in terms of gender and class. The construction of the “caipirinha” dressed by Paul Poiret,

48 Tarsila do Amaral, *Operários*, 1933, oil on canvas, 150 x 205 cm, Acervo Artístico-Cultural dos Palácios do Governo do Estado de São Paulo.

49 A.P. Cavalcanti Simioni, “Corpos expropriados: mulheres artistas e a questão do nu no modernismo”, in: *Imagen/Deseo. Placer, devoción y consumo en las artes*, eds. S. Dolinko, M. Marchesi, Buenos Aires, 2015, pp. 193–194.

50 Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 23.

51 S. D’Alessandro, L. Pérez-Oramas, eds., *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*, New Haven, 2017, p. 19.

52 Ibid.

as Oswald de Andrade put it, needs to be reconsidered and studied to better understand Tarsila do Amaral's navigation within the artistic and social milieu in Brazil.

By way of a conclusion

The curatorial essay, written by Geraldine Pollack Biller, emphasised the role of Latin American women artists as “documentalists”, that is to say, as allegedly objective witnesses of “historical, political and social life”.⁵³ However, this *recording function* converged with another characteristic: “The multiplicity of cultural influences (including the spirituality, myths, and rituals of the various belief systems that are part of daily life in much of Latin America) influenced their work”.⁵⁴ The religiousness of Latin America was never questioned and it reinforced stereotypes regarding the pristine state of Latin America. Spirituality appeared as a Latin American only experience, instead of a shared characteristic between Latin America and considerable portions of the entire world.

Latin American Women Artists was surely a ground-breaking show, displaying and appreciating so far ignored artworks in the American context. It is useful to recall the number of women artists of the show *Art of the Fantastic. Latin America, 1920–1987*, which were only five. However, it must be noted that it never questioned the categories upon which it was constructed. Neither a feminist nor a critical show, it sought to bring together works capable of showing “the unique nature of feminine expression and its importance in art history – in this case the history of Latin American art”,⁵⁵ in the words of Geraldine Pollack.

Charlotte Lowe, reviewing the show, wrote: “If a viewer comes with a stereotype of Latin American and women’s art, it may well be dispelled”.⁵⁶ Although the two last sections of the show helped to deconstruct the idea of Latin America as a land of colour and emotion, the first section and the way artists such as Tarsila do Amaral were presented reinforced the notion of a Third World as a colourful promise. Landscape, nature, and womanliness are part of the solidly established concept of Latin America.

The fact that the origins of Brazilian modernism in the 1920s were closely connected with two women artists was never analysed. The new social and cultural spaces open to women were simply left aside. Concepts related to gender studies or feminism approaches to art history were not used consistently throughout the catalogue. There were some mentions to the canon

53 Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 19.

54 Ibid., p. 23.

55 Ibid., p. 21.

56 Lowe, op. cit.

of art history as a male-defined arena,⁵⁷ but no further analysis was carried out. As a matter of fact, the few gendered remarks created the lasting impression of a whole area of the world, Latin America, where women, nature, and natural expression converged. Overall, *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* proved that an all-female show could actually reinforce patriarchal clichés, instead of helping to destabilise established narratives. The feminist discourse was erased: only the notion of an affirmative action towards women artists survived, that is to say, the idea that women artists had to be put back into art history.

Moreover, feminism (as an ideology, as a political movement, and as praxis) seemed to be something merely imported, for the show never even suggested either the vivid feminist movement that existed (and exists) in Latin America or the modernization of women's roles throughout Latin American history, for the territory was presented as a space outside of history: an exuberant *terra incognita* filled with wonders.

The deceptively simple category of “Latin American women artists” effectively erases and conceals the complexities of a region and of a particular group within this region, while it reinforces political and social hierarchies between those who are under scrutiny and those who are presenting them. Any radical experiences, whatever this elusive concept may represent, were suppressed in favour of traditional ideas, which positioned women in the realm of nature. The artists were presented in “ready-made frameworks of identity” in Ramírez's words.⁵⁸

Despite its silences and omissions, the exhibition revealed the curator's sensitivity and the position imbued with tensions that she experienced. In the catalogue, Biller pointed out her “gringa” heritage and her privileged position over the geography represented in the exhibition: “I am admittedly and unapologetically a *gringa*, organizing this exhibition for a mainstream museum in the heartland of the United States”.⁵⁹ This declaration of principles and this awareness of the hegemonic space occupied reveal another possible legacy, not merely the conflictive appropriation of the artworks of the *other* and the repletion of clichés, of this historical exhibit, whose catalogue was exported to the South and constitutes to this day a mandatory reference.

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⁵⁷ Biller, “Latin American ...”, p. 17.

⁵⁸ M.C. Ramírez, “Brokering Identities”, in: *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. B.W. Ferguson, R. Greenberg, S. Nairne, London—New York, 2005, p. 23.

⁵⁹ Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 19.

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