Escaping the Provincial Trap

South America’s 20th century abstractionists found a way to be local—and universal

By ROBERT HUGHES

When Americans interested in art are asked what they have heard of from South America, the answer tends to be pretty much the same: two dead Mexicans and one live Colombian. The Mexicans are, of course, Diego Rivera, a great artist by any standard, and his wife Frida Kahlo, not a great painter by any reasonable judgment, but a tough and gifted woman who, owing to her hagiographic suffering (not to mention being ardently collected by the likes of Madonna), has become Exhibit A, by now somewhere above Artemisia Gentileschi in the pantheon of feminist artists. The live Colombian is probably the richest artist alive, the unbearably repetitious and banal Fernando Botero, 69, who has made millions, millions and millions of dollars painting and sculpting mountainously fat people over and over and over again. These sleek, bloated lumps of celulite have the same appeal to the international nouveau riche that the semi-skeletal poor of Picasso’s Blue Period used.

Clearly, that can’t be the whole story from the vast continent, and Harvard’s Fogg Museum is filling in at least some of the gaps with a show of its diachronic opposite: geometric abstraction, drawn from a distinguished and systematic collection made by Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, who lives in Caracas, Venezuela, and is an ardent evangelist for South American abstract painters and sculptors. Cisneros has a severe and finely tuned eye, and her collection is remarkably free from nationalist bias. This is a very catholic collection. Of course, some of the artists in it, such as the Venezuelan Jesus Rafael Soto, 78, have exhibited quite often in the U.S. But most of them are not all that familiar, and the show makes a strong case that some of them—including Brazil’s Helio Oiticica (1937-1980) and Lygia Clark (1920-1988), Venezuela’s Gertrude Goldschmidt (1912-1994, a sculptor who worked under the name of Gego) and Carlos Cruz-Diez, 78, and of course that long-dead Uruguayan father figure of South American abstraction, Joaquin Torres-Garcia (1874-1949)—emphatically ought to be.

There are practically no generalizations to be made that hold true across the whole spectrum of art activity in South America. How could there be? The histories of the countries that constitute it are so totally different, especially in the 20th century. What could a country like Argentina, long ruled by a semi-fascist dictator like Perón, intensely conservative in its cultural orientation, have in common with a long-running, more or less liberal democracy like Venezuela’s? In the real world there is no unified entity called South America. What this show presents is not some fiction of a general cultural ethos but rather the work of a number of talents underknown by norteamericanos, some of whom have some things in common.

Decades ago, the great New York City painter Stuart Davis christened one of his pictures Colonial Cubism—a splendidly witty reference to the dilemma American
artists found themselves in when they looked across the Atlantic to Paris. How could you get out of the colonial bind—the sense of being condemned, in the name of avant-garde aspiration, to imitate the outer forms of avant-gardism, to keep doing the new at second hand? This was the problem for South American modernists too—and in spades. The whole relation of South American art to Europe and then, after 1950 or so, to North America, was thorny and merciless to the “provincials.”

But it could be faced and challenged, and that was what the artists did, beginning with Torres-Garcia. Torres-Garcia’s education as an artist took place in Barcelona, where he and his family moved in 1891. Then, Barcelona was regarded by most people (other than Catalans, of course) as a province. It was not; it gave him the chance to know certain great early modernist sculptors, such as Julio Gonzalez, and the very young Picasso; he even worked with the architect Antoni Gaudi. Later, in Paris, he would come to know Mondrian. But he never lost his fascination with what was local and what a sense of place could mean.

What the artist of the “school of the South” must do, he insisted, is “remain conscious of the world without forgetting what is close at hand,” and work toward making the local universal. Paintings like his Locomotive with Constructive House, 1934, mean, he said, that “the romantic age of the picturesque is over and that we are faced with the Doric age of form”; to accept modernity is “to be more Uruguayan than ever,” to decolonize oneself as an artist.

There is nothing picturesque or “tropical” about the work of Torres-Garcia and the artists he stimulated into an enhanced sense of cultural independence. It’s just that the work on view here does very little to remind you of North American styles. It is independent, as indeed it yearned and needed to be. It affirms that in the 1960s and after, there was indeed a way out of the provincial trap; that you could indeed be modern without becoming a colonized clone or succumbing to this or that international recipe.

Many of the artists in this show spent time doing their work outside South America. Significantly, though, they were not much drawn to New York. North America was an imperium they felt nothing in common with and whose weight they didn’t want to succumb to. In the ’60s the American art world might have felt that Paris was in decline, but that didn’t worry the South Americans; perhaps, indeed, it attracted them because being in Paris left them feeling freer.

So a lot of the work in this show is almost fiercely spare without owing anything to U.S. minimalism, like Helio Oiticica’s origami-like Spatial Relief, 1959–91. An artist like Lygia Clark could make cool, impeccably crafted sculptures of sheet metal, which, their leaves hinged together, had no final or definitive form and yet conveyed an impression of intense rigor. But there is nothing snobbish or intimidating about Clark’s work, none of the huge scale of pretension involved in the end-of-history rhetoric of (North) American minimalism.

Jesus–Rafael Soto is probably the most approachable of these artists. Not because he is any less abstract than the others; in fact, there are no figurative clues in his work, nothing that could ever remotely be interpreted as a face, a body or a landscape, although the tangled disorder of some of the earlier pieces can put you in mind of a thickets or a hedgerow. But he’s easier to get at partly because his work has such a strong element of play built into it. The intensity of its effects come from pure optical flicker, which in turn depends on the movements of the viewer’s eye.

Most Op Art, as it was christened in the ’60s, has sunk into kitsch—think of Victor Vasarely!—but there are a few artists whose work has not collapsed in this way, chiefly Bridget Riley and Soto. With Soto, the effects are very direct but used, at best, with extreme subtlety. A black wire traces a line against some other lines behind it and at an angle to it, and the crossings move and optically blur in a fascinating way that makes use of small, slow changes, tiny inflections. It’s a kind of kinetic art, though one in which the viewer moves but the object (unlike, say, the vanes and wires of a Calder) does not.

So Sotos do not reproduce; on the page, they look (and are) rather inert. A work like Green, Red, Blue Writing, 1978, becomes flat in reproduction. On the wall it’s a different matter: the painted surface and the wires in front of it vibrate in the most delicate and unpredictable way; their movement is at one with their color; and the result is a real pictorial richness beyond any of the gimmickry that Op Art, Kinetic Art and their hybrids were accused of back in the ’70s.