

The Utopian Angle

A traveling exhibition provides a new look at Latin American geometric abstraction by artists both renowned and lesser-known.

BY CHARLES DEE MITCHELL

In criticizing the Fourth Bienal de São Paulo of 1957, Brazilian writer Mário Pedrosa berated the international jurors for identifying as “indigenous” those elements of Latin American art that displayed “primi-

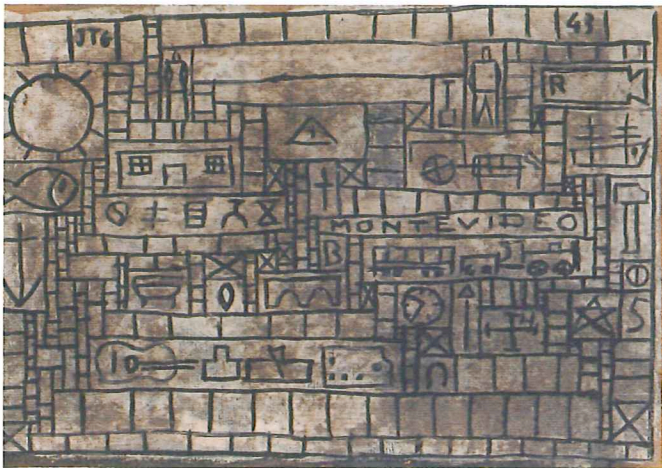
of Art at the University of Texas, Austin, and currently at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University [to Dec. 8], contains over 125 works from the Cisneros collection. Based in Caracas, the collection represents a 30-year project that has assembled Latin

American art ranging from the 17th century to the present day. Including primarily works from the 1930s to the '70s, the exhibition focuses on six cities that produced significant 20th-century art movements. In the catalogue, the curators trace not only the movements themselves but the specific historical events that preceded them, the social and literary climate that surrounded them, and the dialogue that existed among them. The cities are Montevideo, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Caracas and Paris. The last comes as something of a surprise, but the

number of Latin American artists who both studied there and contributed significantly to Parisian movements justifies its inclusion. And the emphasis here is on the transformation of European influences that took place before and during the period covered by the exhibition.

the exhibition catalogue to illuminate the historical setting for the flowering of modernism that begins in the 1930s. Starting in the early years of the 20th century, waves of European immigrants to the cities along the eastern coast of South America established a professional class with a commitment to the arts, and they created a culture of museums, art schools and salons devoted to both European and regional developments. Torres-García and those who returned to their own home cities after foreign studies all benefited from an already established tradition.

This was a time of movements and manifestos. In 1946 and 1947, Buenos Aires generated in rapid succession *Arte Concreto-Invencción* and the *Madí* movement, both concerned with bringing geometric abstraction out of the



Joaquín Torres-García: Constructive Composition 16, 1943, oil on cardboard, 17 by 25½ inches. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VEGAP, Madrid.

tivism, romanticism, wilderness-ism—that is, at the end of the day, exoticism.” This was around the time that U.S. art historian Bernard S. Myers’s essay “Painting in Latin America: 1925-1956” consistently drew parallels between Latin American and contemporaneous New York art, with the former always suffering in comparison with the latter, and lumped together artists and movements from diverse cultures ranging across South America.

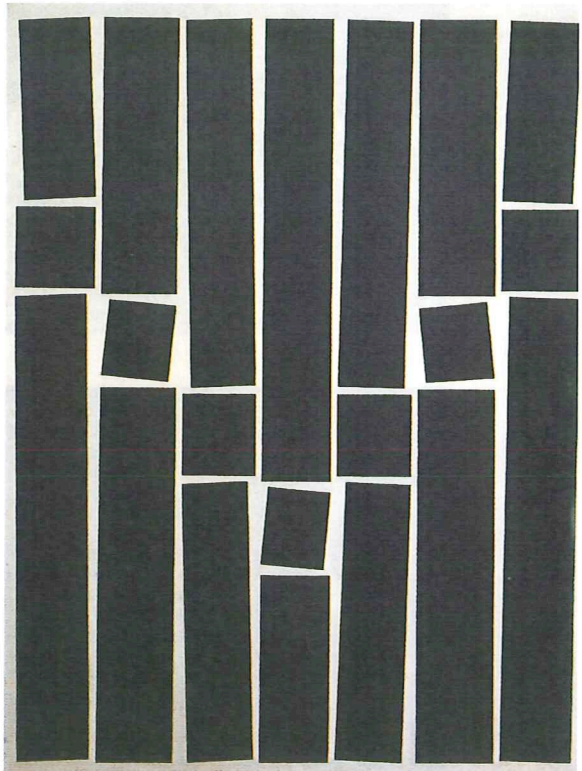
Fifty years later, “The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection” attempts to expunge any lingering traces of “exoticism” and “continentalism” (as catalogue essayist Paulo Herkenhoff labels the tendency to group together all South American artists) that still cling to Latin American art. The exhibition, organized by the Blanton Museum

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In 1934 the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García returned to Montevideo after 43 years spent studying and exhibiting in Europe and established the Taller Torres-García. This signal event is often seen as the beginning of modern art in Latin America, and it provides a starting point for “The Geometry of Hope” as well. In the case of Montevideo and the other Latin American cities covered by the exhibition, the curators use

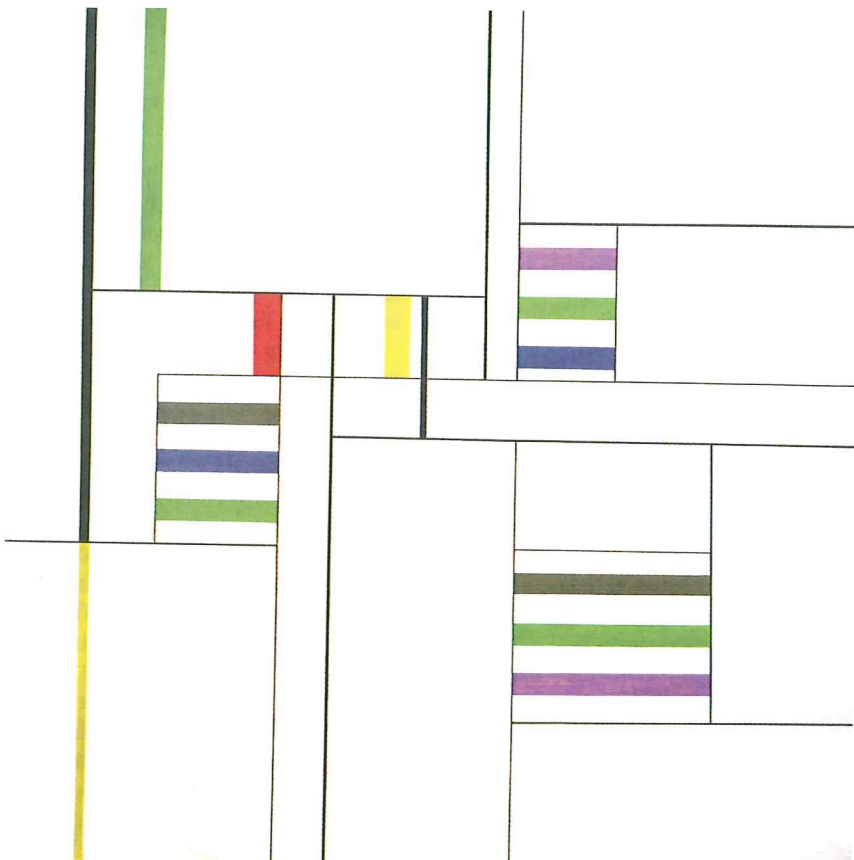
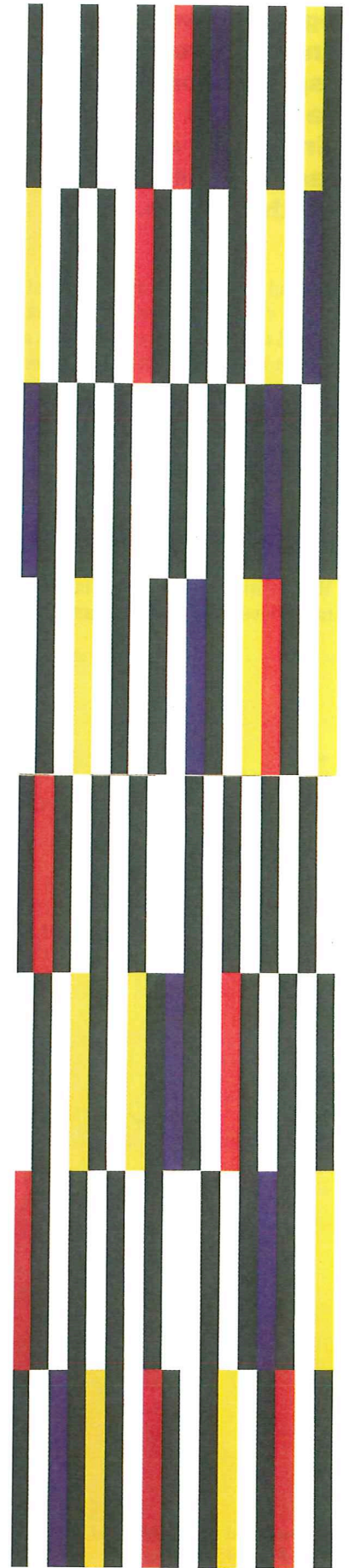
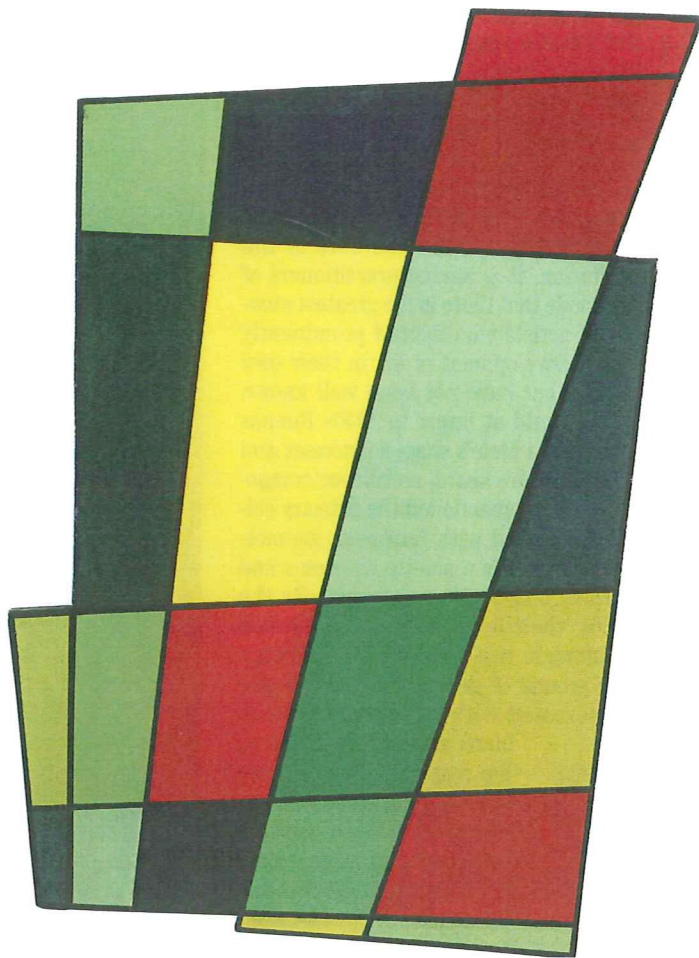
Hélio Oiticica: Painting 9, 1959, oil on canvas, 45½ by 35 inches. All photos this article courtesy Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection, Caracas.



*Right, Juan Melé:
Irregular Frame No. 2,
1946, oil on masonite,
28 by 18 inches.*

*Far right, Alejandro
Otero: Pampatar Board,
1954, lacquer on wood,
126¼ by 25½ inches.*

*Below, Alfredo Hlito:
Chromatic Rhythms III,
1949, oil on canvas,
39¾ inches square.*



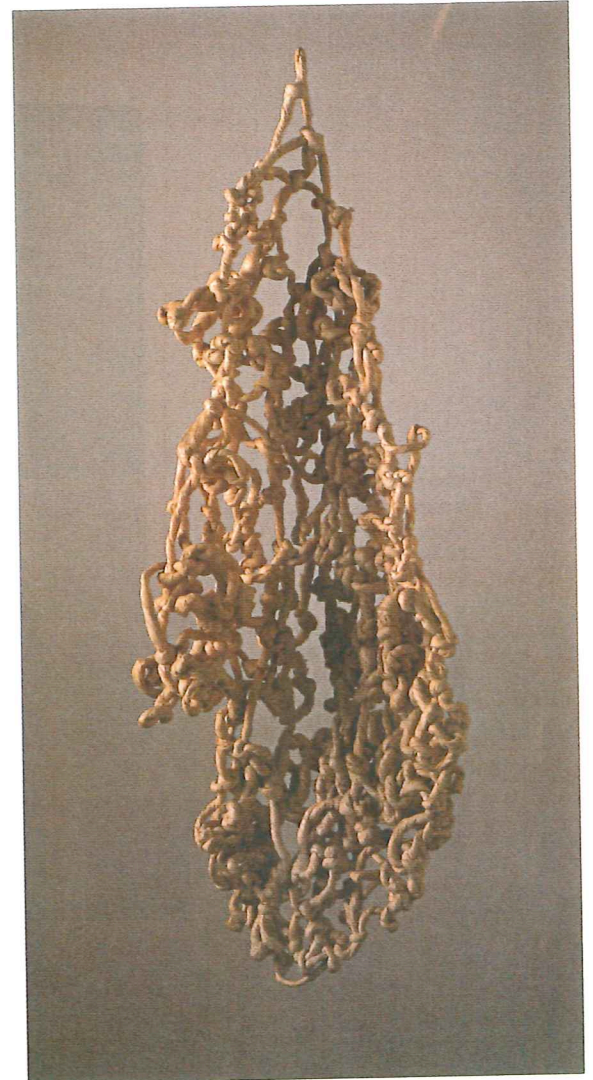
Gego used wire and thin metal rods to draw in space, conjuring images that are both spindly and elegant, with shadows often incorporated into the image.

frame and into a more dynamic relationship with the viewer. São Paulo in the early '50s produced its own school of geometric abstraction with the similar title *Arte Concreta*, a movement that produced a significant body of work but was often criticized at the time as merely a more dogmatic version of what had already taken place in Buenos Aires. Neo-Concretism in Rio de Janeiro incorporated the thriving music scene and social ferment of early 1960s Brazil into a project that moved from geometry to the performance-based work of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. Artists in Caracas developed a Venezuelan form of Con-

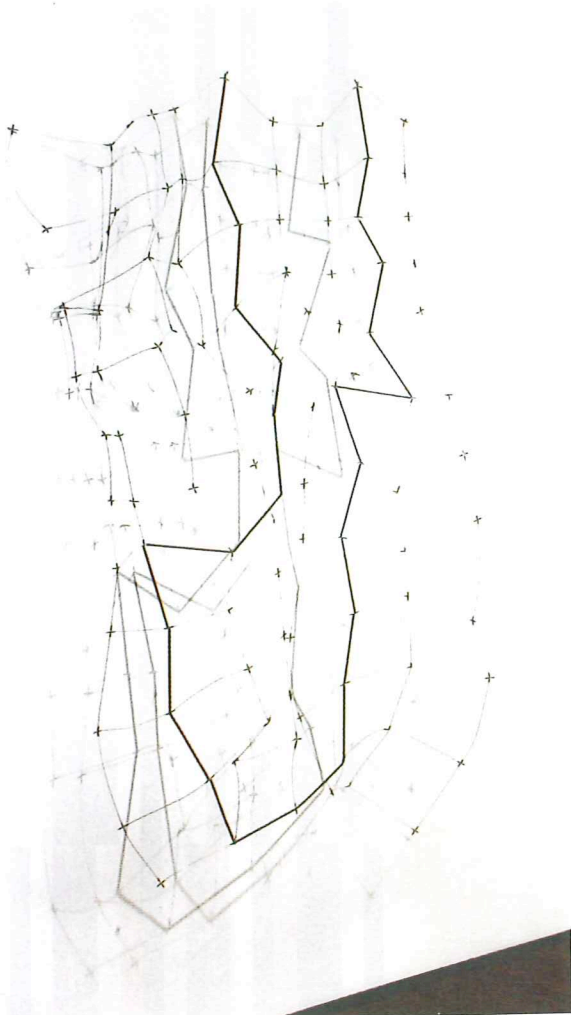
structivism (in the late '40s and '50s) and kinetic art (during the '60s and '70s), the former producing an impressive range of architecture and public projects. Publications, exhibitions, dance, theater and films accompanied each of the movements.

Three decades of hard-edged geometric abstraction forms the core of the exhibition. It is among practitioners of this mode that there is the greatest number of artists who figured prominently in the development of art in their own regions but have not been well known to the world at large. In 1940s Buenos Aires, Juan Melé's shaped canvases and Alfredo Hlito's spare, rectilinear compositions both abandoned the primary colors associated with European geometric painting for a palette of greens and purples and shades of orange. By the 1950s, their fellow Argentinian Tomás Maldonado had reduced his paintings to a ground of shades of white sparsely crisscrossed with pencil-thin lines of black and red. In Caracas, the painters went for more startling, optical effects. Alejandro Otero applied heavy coats of lacquer onto wood to create 10-foot-tall columns structured by alternating bars of black, white and bright color.

Even if Latin American artists felt that their work was often misinterpreted and over-generalized by critics in Europe and the United States, most of these national movements did gain some exposure in museums and commercial galleries outside of Latin America. Jesús Rafael Soto (1923-2005), a Venezuelan artist who relocated to Paris in the 1950s, has been widely exhibited internationally. In his early work, thinly painted black and white lines form the background for wire constructions that extend a few inches off the support. The result is a jittery, hard-to-define space that exceeds the simple means used to create it. That in-between space became his special domain in works that play with increasingly elaborate effects employing striped Plexiglas, mirrors and opaque surfaces. In 1990 he invited the public into that space with his first *Penetrable*, a 16-foot cube composed of trans-



Mira Schendel: Little Nothing, 1966, woven rice paper bags, 26¼ by 10¼ by 6¼ inches.



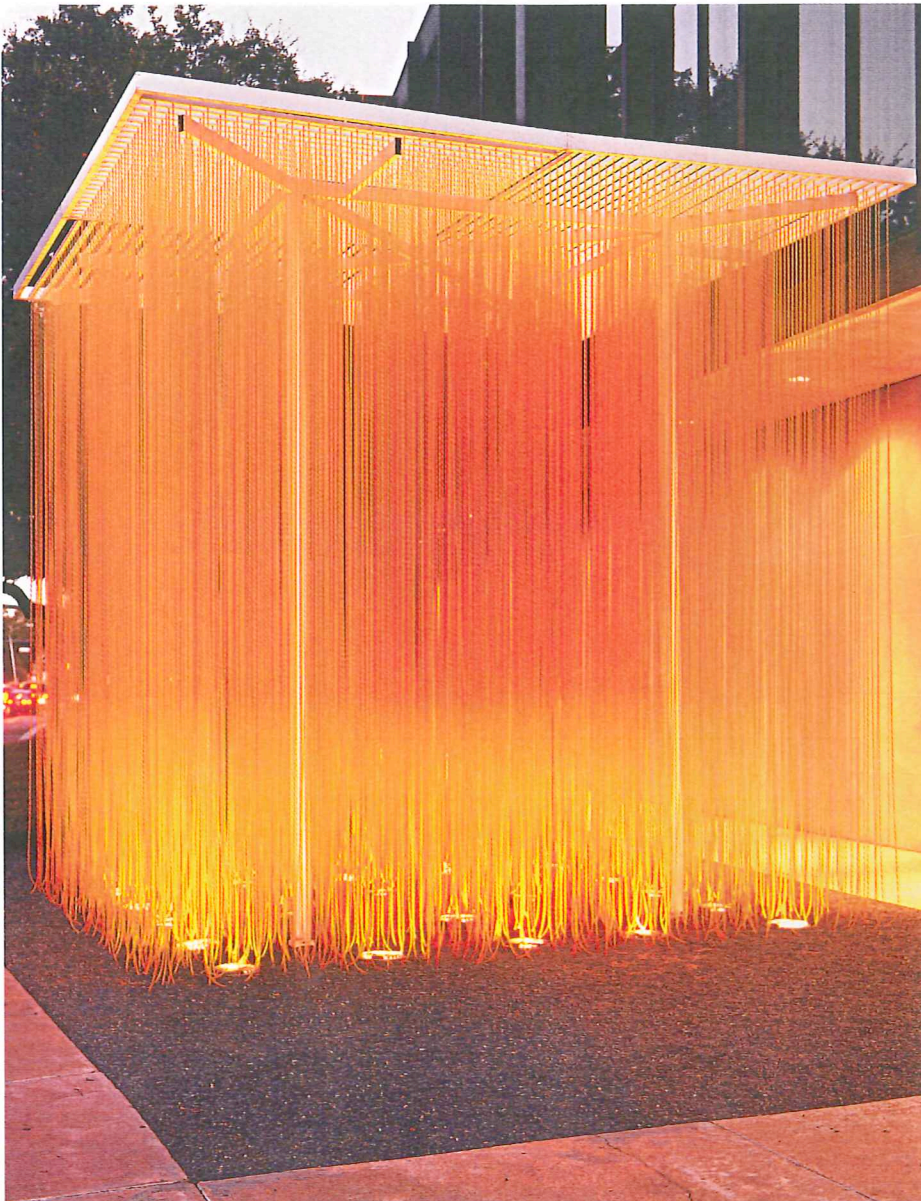
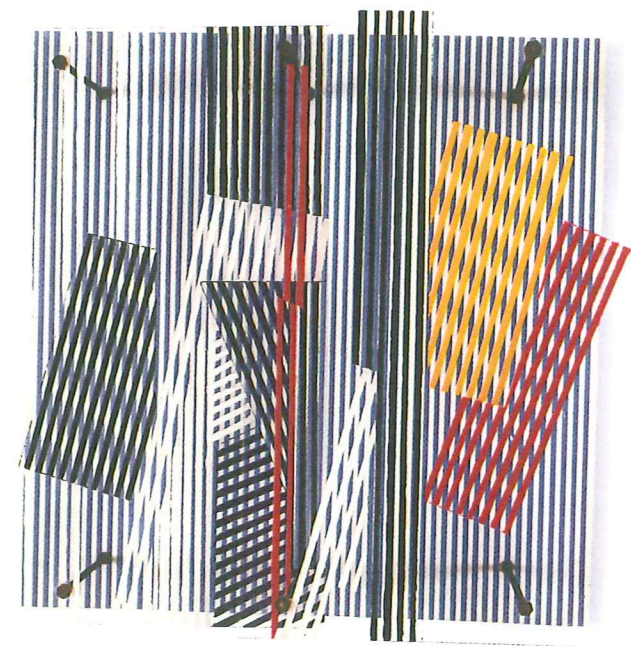
Gego: Decagonal Trunk, 1976, steel, lead and metal, 84½ by 22 by 22¾ inches.

lucent yellow hoses suspended from a steel armature and lit by spotlights embedded in the ground below. (The work was included in the Austin installation of the show but was not seen in New York.)

Gego, born Gertrude Goldschmidt in Hamburg, Germany, in 1912, is another Venezuelan kinetic artist who continues to gain a wider audience thanks to her recent retrospective at New York's Drawing Center and her inclusion in the many group shows that have raised the profile of Latin American art for world audiences. Gego used wire and thin metal rods to draw in space, conjuring images that are both spindly and elegant. They often hang close to the wall so that their shadows are incorporated into the image. Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark have both received extensive exhibitions, and not surprisingly they are heavily featured in "The Geometry of Hope." Oiticica began working as a teenager in the

Left, *Jesús Rafael Soto: Double Transparency, 1956, industrial paint on Plexiglas mounted on wood, 21½ by 21½ by 12½ inches.*

Below, *Soto: Penetrable, 1990, steel, aluminum and plastic hoses, 16¾ by 16¾ by 16¾ feet.*



mid-1950s, studying with the group surrounding Rio de Janeiro artist Ivan Serpa. Although he would later say that there was no reason to take seriously work he produced before 1959, the examples shown here demonstrate that Oiticica was quickly and imaginatively absorbing Serpa's lessons on strict geometry, precision and clean lines. He produced an amazing 450 gouaches on paper under Serpa's tutelage, and by 1959 was forging his own style. In *Painting 9*, a work from that year, he placed seven columns of black oil paint against a white ground and destabilized the image by off-kilter squares that set the otherwise rigid construction into motion. *Painting 9* provides the first evidence of the fluidity that would develop later into the fabric work of the 1960s, a path from abstraction to performance that Lygia Clark followed as well.

Lygia Pape is a lesser-known Brazilian figure from the same milieu that produced Clark and Oiticica. Her *Book of Creation* (1959) consists of a boxed edition of 16 paper sculptures that can be assembled into a playful, abstract version of the story of Genesis. Since Pape has not recently received the same level of international exposure as Clark and Oiticica, her presence here is a good example of what might be a new discovery for many and a chance for others to reacquaint themselves with an excellent artist from this period. Also from Brazil is Mira Schendel, whose hanging sculpture of braided and knotted rice paper, *Droguinha* (Little Nothing), 1966, might invite just the sort of comparison South American critics were decrying in the 1950s; it will look to many viewers like an Eva Hesse work from about the same period. But Schendel used her paper sculptures as costuming or piled them on the floor and allowed visitors to arrange them however they wished. Inclusion of a number of her works in the latest Documenta afforded a new opportunity for international audiences to rediscover this artist.

Referring to angst-driven, postwar European art and its often twisted, tortured forms, Herbert Read in 1952 coined the phrase "the geometry of fear." It's appropriate that this exhibition, focused as it is on South America's transformations of European traditions and the creation of new visions, should invert the sense of Read's phrase to describe work that played with the rigidity of geometric abstraction while maintaining a utopian spirit. □

"The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection" opened at the Blanton Museum of Art, the University of Texas, Austin [Feb. 20-Apr. 22], and is currently on view at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University [through Dec. 8].

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