

The New York Times

Abundant Straight Lines, All Ahead Of the Curve

Until recently, the heroic tale of postwar abstract painting was dominated by a handful of New York artists. You know the names and the drill: Various Europeans flock to New York during World War II, their bags packed with malleable, largely

Surrealist notions of automatic drawing and biomorphic form. These ideas influence local talents like Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. New York overtakes Paris as the capital of art, setting the stage for Pop, Minimalism and beyond.

ROBERTA
SMITH

ART
REVIEW

But the past is always on the move. During the last few decades the ranks of North American abstractionists of the 1940s, '50s and '60s have swelled, adding names like John McLaughlin, Steve Wheeler, Beauford Delaney and Janet Sobel.

Even more significant, a large cast of Latin American artists has shouldered its way into the narrative. Unlike many of their northern cousins, these artists received no Surrealist inoculation against the purity and idealism of the geometric abstraction that also blossomed in Europe between the wars. Having skipped their shots — as did American acolytes of Mondrian, like Burgoyne Diller — they embraced this geometry and worked to extend it. "The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art From the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection," a spirited display at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, reveals the fruits of that embrace.

Latin American abstraction has tended to be ignored in North America, when not dismissed as fussy, gimmicky and a tad kitschy. This show of about 105 works by nearly 30 artists invites a reconsideration of such attitudes. Working through its riches is both humbling and thrilling; you encounter your ignorance and have a chance to rectify it.

The exhibition was organized by Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, curator of Latin American art at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin, and originated at the Blanton, where it was somewhat larger. Its array of paintings, sculpture, works on paper and especially reliefs generally undermines the dominance of Abstract Expressionism and, in the case of the artists from Caracas, challenges the frequent dismissal of Op Art. The exhibition suggests that Latin American artists were ahead of the Minimalists in experimenting with nontradi-

Continued on Page 42

The Geometry of Hope

Juan Melé's "Irregular Frame No. 2" (1946) is part of this show of Latin American abstract artists, through Dec. 8 in the Grey Art Gallery at New York University.



PATRICIA PHELPS DE CISNEROS COLLECTION / JUAN MELÉ

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From Weekend Page 35

tional materials like sheet metal and Plexiglas, while they countered the macho egocentricity characteristic of much New York art with a stubborn devotion to restraint, intimate scale, whimsy, group manifestoes and the notion of art as more mindful and ambiguous than cathartic or authoritative.

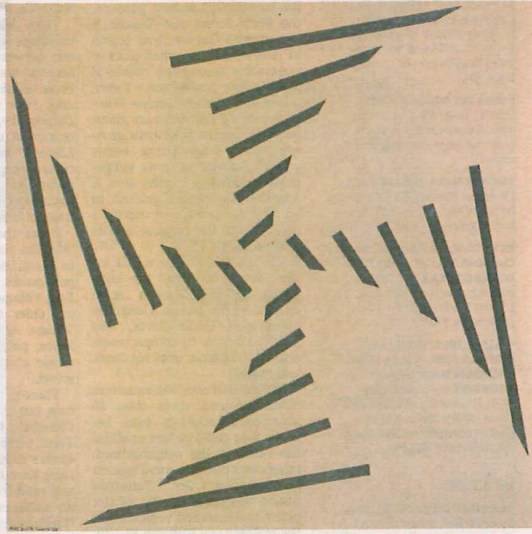
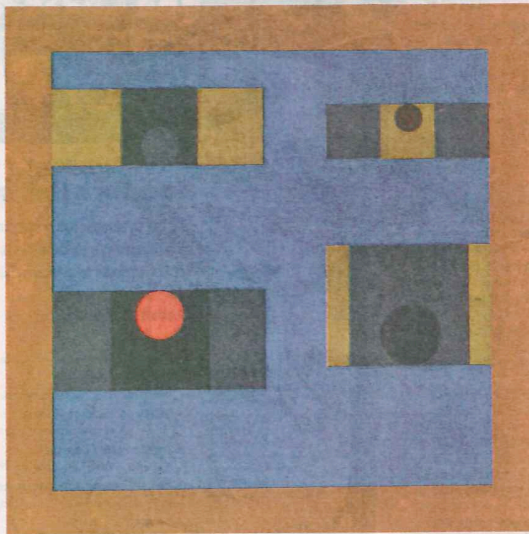
Old assumptions about the sterile, mechanical surface quality of Op Art may dissolve in front of Jesús Rafael Soto's "Vibration" (1960). Here a downpour of thin white vertical lines painted on a slightly bumpy black surface telegraphs an idiosyncratic physicality. The work gives the illusion of being made of thread that seems as real as the delicate tangle of actual black wire tacked to the painting's center, but the wires' existence is cast into doubt by the optical patterns of the lines.

This is but one of several surprises provided by Mr. Soto's work, which is also represented by a driftwood Op tribute to the French innovator Yves Klein and an early (1956) Op foray into painted Plexiglas and Minimalist boxiness. The 1956 work projects from the wall like a transparent cube, a direct if static descendant of Duchamp's mechanized proto-Op rotary discs. In 1957 Mr. Soto reiterates the illusion of stripes and transparency in painted wrought iron that resembles rebelliously abstract porch furniture.

Our notions of the origins of shaped paintings are readjusted by "Irregular Frame No. 2," a distorted grid in shades of green, blue, rust and yellow made startlingly early, as these things go, by the Argentine artist Juan Melé in 1946. In this flamboyant little work geometry turns blunt, in advance of Minimalism, and cartoonishly savvy, in advance (and somewhat contradictorily) of the abstract painter Elizabeth Murray.

And, incidentally, Murray's penchant for eggplant purples, reds and blacks is presaged in a spare tightrope of a composition, "Development of a Theme," painted in 1952 by another of the show's discoveries, Alfredo Hlito, of Buenos Aires. Works in the Buenos Aires section of the show reveal that even during World War II, Latin American artists were destabilizing Mondrian's stable grid with the tilting planes and diagonal lines of Russian Suprematism. Reliefs made by Mr. Melé, as well as by Raúl Lozza and Juan Alberto Molenaar, helped ignite a spirit of physical experimentation that is evident throughout

"The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection" runs through Dec. 8 at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, at Waverly Place, Greenwich Village; (212) 998-6780. A cross-disciplinary program of performances, lectures and panels, centered on a daylong symposium on Oct. 5, accompanies the exhibition; a schedule is at www.nyu.edu/greyart.



ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

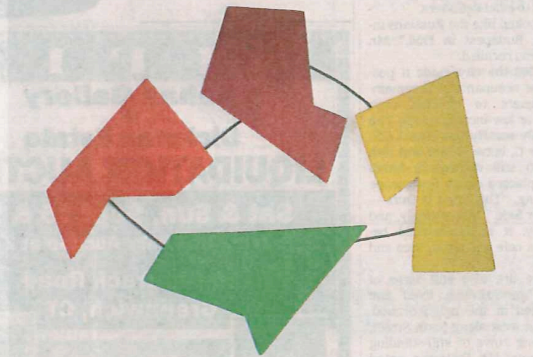
Additional images of "The Geometry of Hope" at the Grey Art Gallery: nytimes.com/design

this exhibition. Meanwhile, a penchant for an almost weightless, prancing linearity that owed something to late Kandinsky appears in the paintings of Mr. Hlito, Virgilio Villalba and Gregorio Vardánega. Next to this skittering energy, the four-square boxes and grids of American Minimalism can look pretty flat-footed.

In the war's aftermath the Latin artists were spurred by modernizing impulses at work in architecture, design and science. The "geometry of hope" in the show's title counters the "geometry of fear," a phrase coined by the British art historian Herbert Read in postwar Britain.

The show is arranged by city. The story starts in the 1930s in Montevideo, Uruguay, to which Joaquín Torres García returned in 1934, after 40 years abroad, and began spreading the gospel of Modernist abstraction and what he called the School of the South. It covers Buenos Aires in Argentina; Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in Brazil and Caracas in Venezuela, as well as Paris, where numerous Latin American artists visited and where a few continue to live today.

The detailed object labels outline each artist's movements. Mr. Soto, born in Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela, in 1923, lived mostly in Paris from 1950 until his



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GREY ART GALLERY

death in 2005. Carlos Cruz-Diez, another Op-inclined Venezuelan, was born in 1923, but lived in New York (1947-55), Barcelona (1955-57) and Caracas (1957-60) and now divides his time between Caracas and Paris. (His charming 1954 relief of round dowels protruding from a white panel to form a primary-color constellation is especially good.) Other artists, like Gertrud Goldschmidt (known as Gego and the subject of a retrospective at the Drawing Center in New York) and the talented Mira Schendel, emigrated from Europe.

Still others never left home, including the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, who

with her protégé Hélio Oiticica pushed a Russian-Constructivist-inspired abstraction toward increasingly dimensional, adjustable and usable objects. (Ms. Clark's "Contra Revelo," from 1958, is a dead ringer for one of Ellsworth Kelly's black-and-white shapes paintings of the same period, but more sculptural.)

Another Brazilian homebody (and another find) is the miniaturist Willys de Castro, who in the late 1950s delighted in enlivening small planes of wood both narrow and broad with almost impossibly delicate strips and squares of color. His work would make sense in a show

Above left, an untitled gouache on paper by the Brazilian Hélio Oiticica (1955); above right, "Concrete 61," a painting by the Brazilian Judith Lauand (1957); and left, "Relief," a wall relief by the Argentine Raúl Lozza (1945).

with similarly light-touched American artists like Myron Stout, Anne Truitt and Richard Tuttle, as would Alfredo Hlito's tightrope compositions. The spare, geometric works by Judith Lauand, of São Paulo, would also fit in this company.

Because the more recent works demand the high-ceilinged ground-floor galleries at the Grey, the show is installed chronologically backward. The installation begins in these galleries with Caracas and ends on the lower level with Buenos Aires and finally Montevideo. It concludes with seven examples of the pulsating, compartmentalized fields of symbols and hieroglyphs with which Torres García fused language, abstraction and reality. These works — the show's most soulful — were painted between 1932, just before he left Europe for Montevideo, and his death in 1949.

This reversal works to the show's advantage by requiring you to pass through its multivoiced presentation twice. First, it takes you back in time, narrowing down toward the beginning. Then you return, moving toward the present, with everything expanding around you, which is what is happening all over the history of 20th-century art.