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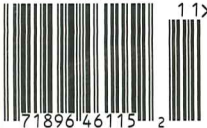
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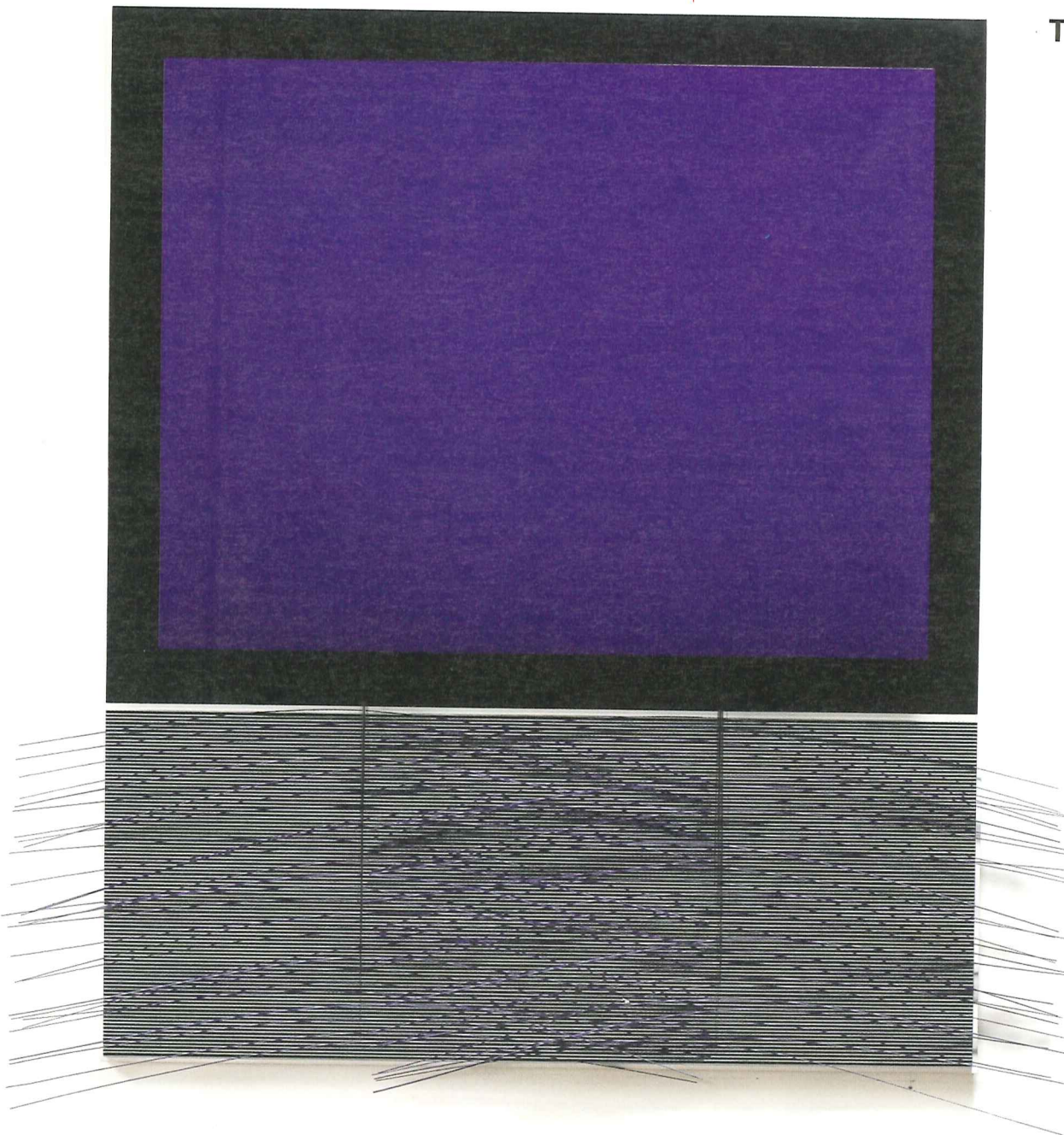


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ARTIST DOSSIER:

Jesús Rafael Soto

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

“PART MAGICIAN, PART GEOMETRIST”—that is how the architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva described his friend the Venezuelan sculptor and painter Jesús Rafael Soto in a pamphlet accompanying a 1957 exhibition in Caracas. Soto, who died in 2005, sought to impart a pure and direct experience of art in abstract and often kinetic works that are animated by the viewer’s movements around—and sometimes through—them. Although he was careful never to formally associate himself with any movement, his

early work was engaged with both Op art and the Zero group, as well as his Latin American contemporaries. “He’s the interesting case of an artist who bridges three distinct spheres,” says Emilio Steinberger, international director of Haunch of Venison, which presented a survey in New York this past spring.

Soto moved to Paris permanently in 1950 at age 27 and by the early 1960s had hit on his signature technique: superimposing wire reliefs on black-and-white striped surfaces, which the

In a sign of a maturing market for Jesús Rafael Soto, even late works are starting to fetch higher sums. *Gran azul*, 1999, sold at Sotheby’s New York this past May for an above-estimate \$362,500.

overlays seem to disappear into and reemerge from as spectators walk around them. In 1969 he created the first of his “Penetrable” installations: large architectural volumes composed of dangling colored tubes, which viewers set in sonorous motion as they pass through the spaces. All during his career, he treated his series like variations on musical themes—gaining in scale or intensity of color but never straying from the concept of perceptually dematerializing mass.

Although Latin American and European institutions have long admired and acquired Soto, he hasn’t had a major museum exhibition in the U.S. since 1974, when the Guggenheim in New York staged a retrospective that traveled to the Hirshhorn, in Washington, D.C. According to the scholar and curator Estrellita Brodsky, critics at the time failed to understand the idealism embodied in the show, largely ignoring or dismissing as mere optics the pieces displayed. Lately, however, Soto’s profile in the U.S. has been rising. In 2004 he was featured prominently in “Inverted Utopias,” a show of avant-garde Latin American art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which commissioned what turned out to be his final work: a giant installation composed of 24,000 hand-painted plastic tubes, to be suspended from the soaring, 36-foot-high ceiling of the central hall beginning in 2013. Moreover, passionate Soto collectors, such as Patricia Phelps de Cisneros and Ella Fontanals-Cisneros (Phelps’s former cousin by marriage), put the artist front and center in recent shows of Latin American abstraction that toured New York, Austin, Texas, and Long Beach, California. Now Brodsky is organizing a solo exhibition, “Soto: Paris and Beyond, 1950–1970,” opening

at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery on January 10, 2012. “It’s time for Soto’s work to be revisited, especially considering there are so many artists in the past 10 to 15 years who have reembraced similar concerns,” she says, pointing to the audience-engaging installations of Olafur Eliasson, Jennifer Steinkamp, and Mona Hatoum, the last of whom specifically references Soto’s work in her 2009 barbed-wire piece *Impenetrable*.

Soto was born in 1923 in the provincial town of Ciudad Bolívar. As a teenager he painted murals and designed movie posters, but he never saw an easel, let alone examples of modern art, until he moved to Caracas, in 1942, to enroll at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas. There he was attracted to the shifting light of the Impressionists and the Cubist geometry of Georges Braque. After serving from 1947–50 as director of the Escuela de Bellas Artes in Maracaibo, Soto decamped to Paris to immerse himself in the avant-garde. He found camaraderie with fellow Latin American artists Carlos Cruz-Diez and Julio Le Parc and inspiration in the mobiles of Alexander Calder and syncopated color of Piet Mondrian’s late paintings. He began juxtaposing striated surfaces, placing Plexiglas over wood, in an attempt to imply movement and create kaleidoscopic effects. These early experiments caught the eye of Victor Vasarely, a Hungarian artist also living in Paris who shared similar interests. Vasarely included Soto with Calder, Marcel Duchamp, and Jean Tinguely, among others, in the landmark 1955 exhibition “Le Mouvement” at Galerie Denise René, which continues to handle the Venezuelan artist’s work. Since 2004 he has been exhibited by a slew of international dealers, including Sicardi Gallery, in Houston; Galerie Max Hetzler, in Berlin; Galería Elvira Gonzalez, of Madrid; and Haunch of Venison, all in cooperation with Soto’s estate, which is managed by his widow and their four children. »

From above: *Un trou sur l’orange*, 1970, brought an artist-record \$758,500, more than double its high estimate, at Christie’s New York in May 2010; and *Ambivalencia en el espacio color no. 25*, from 1981, is on offer at Galerie Max Hetzler, in Berlin, for \$205,000.

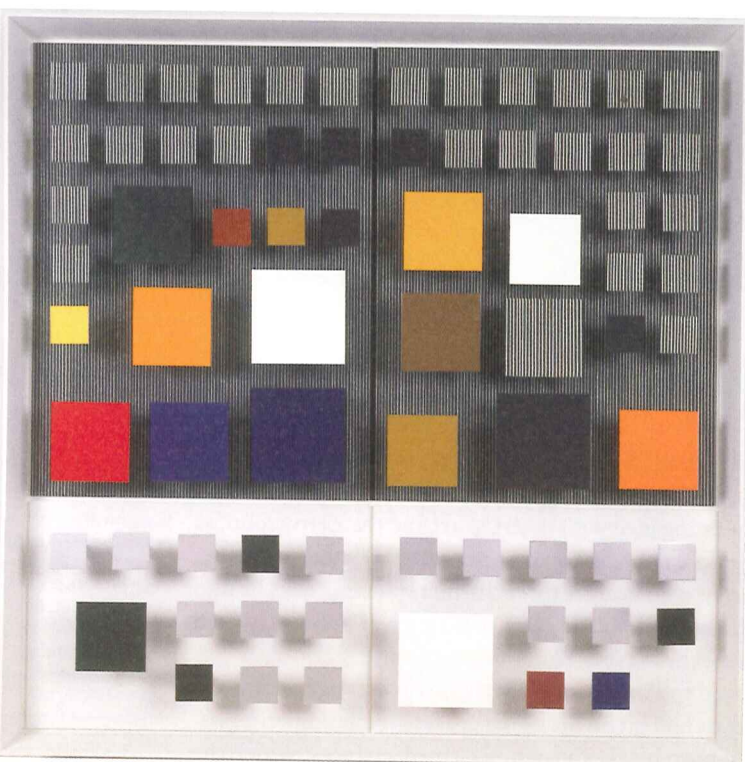
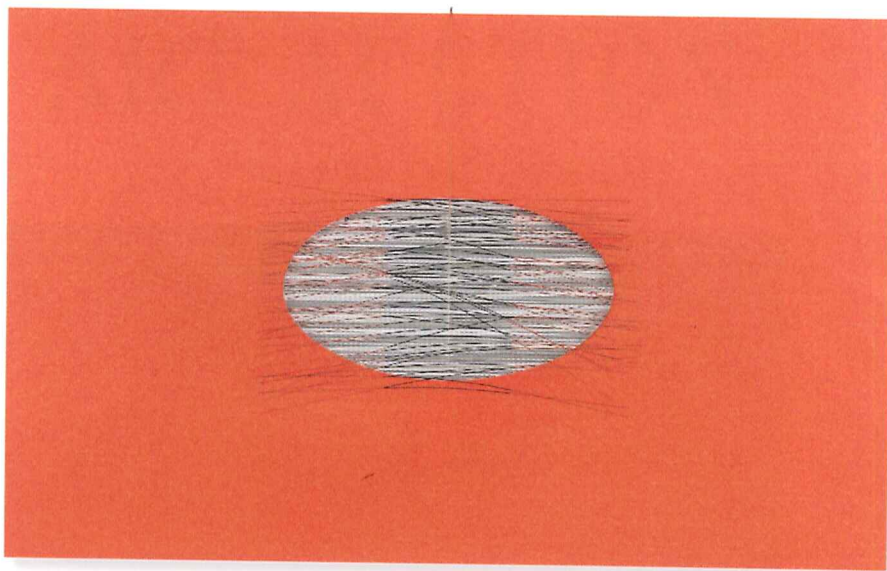
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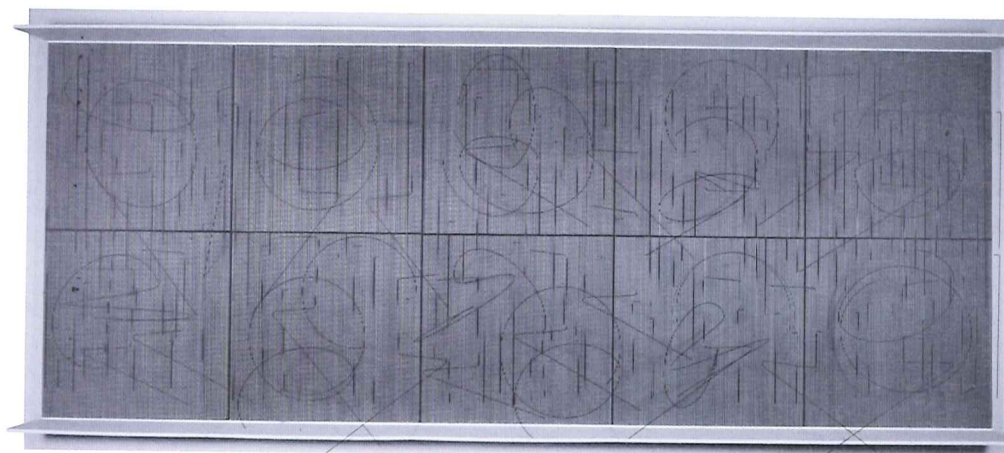
- In 1973 the artist inaugurated the **Jesús Soto Museum of Modern Art**, which contains pieces from his collection, to provide his hometown of Ciudad Bolívar with access to progressive art that he never had there.
- The auction record for one of Soto’s three-dimensional multiples is €48,000 (\$64,000), paid at **Sotheby’s** Amsterdam in 2006 for *Anello*, 1971. *Maquette esfera theospacio*, 1989, a small multiple related to the “Penetrables,” recently

sold at **Haunch of Venison** for €30,000 (\$42,000).

The “Penetrable” works don’t make it to auction because they are too complicated to install. Privately, they sell for up to \$1 million.

Ecriture, N.Y., 1984—first shown at the **Charles Cowles** gallery, in New York, the year it was made—sold at **Christie’s** New York in 2005 for \$262,400, an artist record at the time. Now Haunch of Venison is offering it for almost three times that price.





“vibrations” pieces, composed of horizontal rods strung on nylon that move gently in the air in front of colored or striped backgrounds; earlier this year *Rond et carré jaune*, 1968 (est. \$200–300,000), sold at Christie’s New York for \$506,500. Another coveted group is the “Ecritures,” in which stationary reliefs of looping wire suggestive of handwriting seem to flicker and frag-

In New York in November 2004, two of Soto’s works crossed the \$100,000 mark: At Sotheby’s an untitled circa 1959 relief was chased to \$232,000, well over the high estimate of \$80,000, and *Rond jaune*, 1972—a panel with a large circle on a yellow field overlaid with a spine of horizontal rods—more than tripled its \$40,000 high estimate to achieve \$136,300 at Christie’s the next day. These sales marked a turning point in his market, according to Virgilio Garza, head of Latin American art at Christie’s New York. Today the artist’s auction record is \$758,500, paid in 2010 by a private collector at Christie’s for *Un trou sur l’orange*, 1970 (est. \$250–350,000). The large wood relief, painted bright orange and featuring a striped oval opening that vibrates visually, drew “interest from museums and collectors across the board,” says Garza. According to David Ayers, of Sicardi Gallery, in Houston, private Soto sales have approached \$1 million.

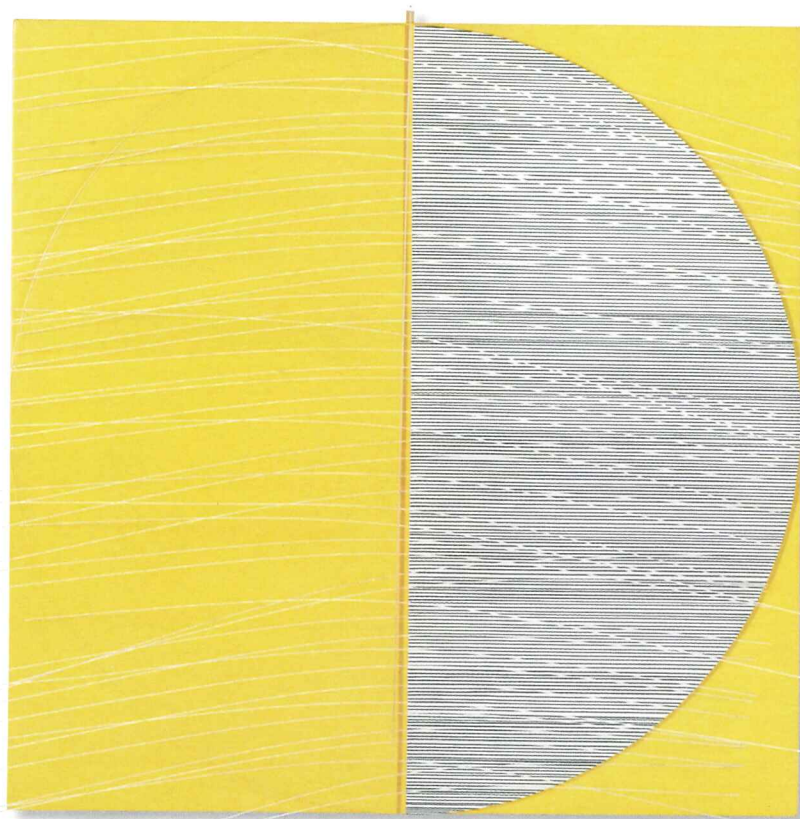
Although in the U.S. Soto’s pieces are confined to auctions of Latin American art, in Europe they appear in contemporary sales, a sign of his broader international appeal. Axel Stein, a Sotheby’s vice president for business development who oversees all major sales in the Latin American category, has followed Soto’s market for a long time and says the works most sought after by institutions and those who collect the artist in depth are the very rare brutalist assemblages—composed of informal materials like twisted wires, stucco, fabric, and rubber—from his “baroque” period, 1958 to 1962. At that time, Soto was closely associated with Yves Klein and exhibited alongside Zero group artists, including Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, who were also using humble and industrial materials to make antiromantic art. *Vibración*, a circa 1959 baroque piece composed of painted wood with metal elements, from the collection of the Brazilian artist Sergio Camargo, sold in 2005 at Sotheby’s New York for \$419,200. “If it came to auction right now, the price could overflow \$800,000,” says Stein.

The rest of Soto’s 10 most expensive works at auction—half of which appeared on the block in the past year—are all from the mid 1960s and 1970s, when Soto shifted to a cleaner, more uniform geometry. One series favored by collectors comprises his

ment against geometric backdrops. The top auction price for an “Ecriture” is \$422,500, paid at Sotheby’s New York in 2010 for *Ecritura negra a la izquierda*, 1977. Haunch of Venison in New York is currently offering a monumental 1984 example four times the record holder’s size, *Ecriture*, N.Y., for \$775,000.

For those seeking more modest prizes, “the multiples are very successful because they are the low and midmarket for Soto and they are very beautiful,” says Stein. “If you can’t buy the real McCoy, you can buy the real edition.” The prolific artist also made prints, which start at a few thousand dollars, but Stein cautions that “the value is not there.”

Although serious collectors prefer Soto’s early oeuvre, “for a onetime buyer the date may not be what tips the decision,” says Garza, who generally prices pieces made after 1980 from \$200,000 to \$400,000. “People may look for scale or color, and later in life Soto had a more ambitious approach.” These later works have topped out at \$362,500, paid at Sotheby’s New York earlier this year for *Gran azul*, 1999, a large deep-blue panel with vibrating elements on nylon string. “If it were a 1970s piece, it would have gone for around \$500,000,” notes Stein. Ayers, of Sicardi Gallery, concurs. “The prices for the more recent work tend to be lower,” he says, “and that, in my view, is where the opportunity is.” ▣



From top: *Ecriture*, N.Y., a five-panel piece from 1984, at Haunch of Venison in New York, which recently started working with Soto’s estate; and the nylon-fringed *Rond et carré jaune*, 1968, is emblematic of the artist’s most sought-after works. It sold at Christie’s New York this year for \$506,500.