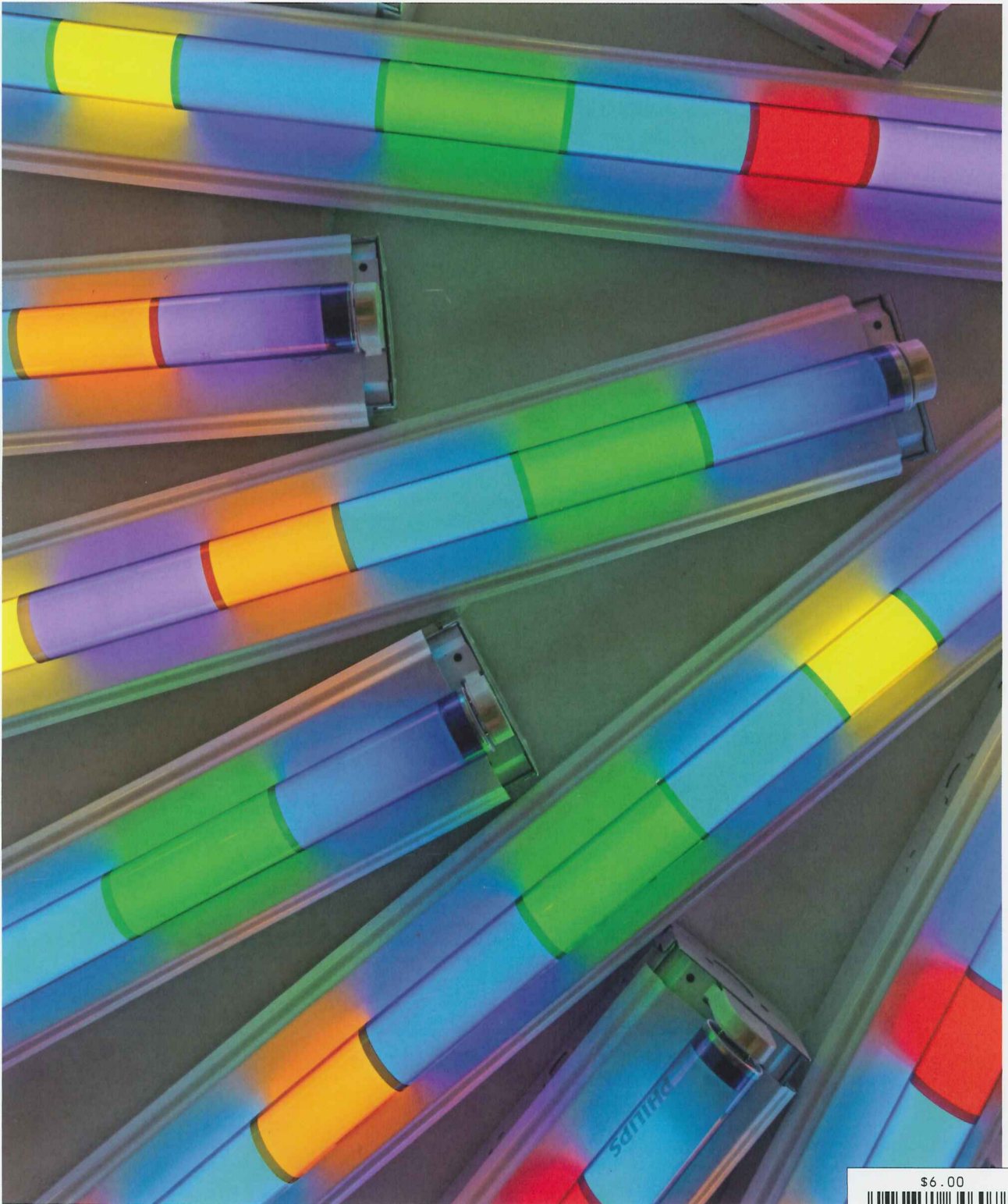


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# Antonio Berni

Museum of Fine Arts

Houston

The Argentine artist Antonio Berni (1905–1981) was no stranger to audiences throughout the world in the mid-20th century. He won the grand prize for graphic arts at the 1962 Venice Biennale and was the subject of a 1966 retrospective at New York's Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art. Nonetheless, he has been off the radar of many for years. Over the last decade, U.S. audiences interested in Latin American art have tended to be more attuned to geometric abstraction. Berni was a relentless realist. Socially engaged for much of his career, he flirted with Cubism and Surrealism in Paris in the late '20s and early '30s (he was once called the "South American Picasso"). In the mid-'30s he created a series of larger-than-life-size, photo-based social-realist portrayals of downtrodden inhabitants of Buenos Aires.

Cocurators Mari Carmen Ramírez and Marcelo Pacheco provided viewers with a stunning, thought-provoking, and deeply moving exhibition, made up of more than 160 examples of Berni's work from the 1960s and '70s—his most productive period, during which he invented two fictional characters, Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel. They are the main subjects of his many prints, paintings, assemblages, and other (sometimes mammoth) mixed-media pieces.

Juanito, a boy from the slums of Argentina's capital, serves as an emblem of



**Antonio Berni, *El coronel golpista, no. 3* (The Coup Leader, No. 3), 1966, oil, cardboard, plastic, and metals including bottle cap, tap shoe tips, gilded escutcheons, glue, and staples on plywood, 20¾" x 17¼".**

the poverty and social disintegration there. *Juanito Goes to the City* (1963) shows him trudging through the capital's outskirts literally through mounds of trash made of found materials that Berni picked up from the streets and flea markets of Buenos Aires as well as Paris, where he had a studio for many years. Also from 1963, *Ramona Lives Her Life* is a xylo-collage relief (a unique wood-cut print form of Berni's own invention). It portrays Ramona as a prostitute

brazenly displaying herself to a client in a Buenos Aires brothel. She entered the profession to escape a life of misery as a seamstress. These works demonstrate Berni's devotion to materials drawn from the detritus of everyday life. The anxieties of the post-World War II period are evident in references to the space race, as in *The Cosmonaut Waves to Juanito While Passing over the Flores Marshland* (1961), as well as other Cold War themes. The years after Juan and Evita Perón's reign as the dictator and quasi-queen of Argentina were marked by drastic economic shifts as the poor got even poorer.

Berni takes the pulse of this society and movingly dramatizes it for us in gigantic monsters (some as tall as seven feet), including the 1964 *Sordidness*, made of scrap metal, wood, cardboard, and other materials. Prefiguring the fantastical creatures of director Julie Taymor, but much more scary, the characters reflect our worst nightmares. These fiendish beings inhabit the dreams of Juanito and Ramona but also exist for the viewer as wonders of invention. Berni's work evokes an esthetic conversation with the French neorealists and Narrative Figuration artists as well as with Pop icons such as Rauschenberg, Wesselmann, and Lichtenstein. But Berni overtly delved further into our collective psyche, creating work that expresses some of our most profound fears.

—Edward J. Sullivan