



José María Cruxent, *Sans erotisme il n'y aurait pas d'amour* (Without Eroticism There Would Be No Love), 1965, mixed media on canvas, 54 3/4 × 62 5/8". From "Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela, 1955–1975."

## “Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela, 1955–1975”

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

Rethinking modernity and modernism in Latin America is still a pending task. This was one premise of the comprehensive exhibition curated by Mari Carmen Ramírez and Tahía Rivero at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, that included more than thirty artists with more than one hundred works in various media, from painting and sculpture to collage and film. For the first time in a historical survey of art in Venezuela, the exhibition focused on informalism, or art informel. Michel Tapié launched this term in France with the publication of *Un art autre: Où il s'agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel* (An Other Art: Regarding New Unspoolings of the Real, 1952), where he used *informel* to describe painting that emphasized the opaque materiality of paint, as in the work of Jean Dubuffet and Jean Fautrier, or spontaneous

expression, as evinced by Georges Mathieu. By focusing on informalism's transatlantic reach, this exhibition questioned from the start the narrative of geometric abstraction's postwar dominance in South America—the latest modernist myth to be projected over the continent. While one cannot deny the looming presence of kinetic art as a specific form of this rationalist aesthetic in the Venezuelan art scene (here one might recall Marta Traba's fierce criticism of kinetic art as the official art of the oil-rich country), what "Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela, 1955–1975" made clear was how a diverse group of artists intersected with and made use of formlessness. The exhibition's opening gallery, with the title "Surface Tensions," highlighted the unconventional materials (e.g., wire and textiles) used on thickly impastoed surfaces by painters such as José María Cruxent and Humberto Jaimes Sánchez.

Each of the exhibition's elegantly installed galleries displayed works by artists associated with different movements, from lyrical abstraction (Mercedes Pardo) and action painting (Alberto Brandt, Francisco Hung) to the less conventionally affiliated aesthetics of new figuration (Jacobo Borges, Juan Calzadilla, and Manuel Quintana Castillo) and assemblage. All were in some way tied to informalism. Given the contamination among movements and their levels of formal experimentation, this structure produced a productive defamiliarization—even with the work of such kinetic-art masters as Carlos Cruz-Diez, Alejandro Otero, and Jesús Rafael Soto, whose practices were highlighted via specific works that could be read as informalist. Far from immune to a "formless" influence, Otero's and Soto's assemblage and collage aesthetic on display in the "Return of the 'Real'" gallery evinced less the "essence of objects" (as the wall text claimed) than the persistence of an expressive abstraction, in works that seemed to embrace a pictorialist objecthood.

Beyond its charting of stylistic resonances, the exhibition displayed its true conceptual force through its positioning of works in relation to their sociopolitical contexts. As Rivero explained in the catalogue, "Informalism included a wide range of pictorial expressions that resonated with and spoke to the profound changes that were taking place in philosophy, science, and daily life," both within and outside of Venezuela. This idea came through in works by Borges and Calzadilla, among others, who developed a commitment to painterly figuration during times of political unrest, and in the work of artists associated with the short-lived avant-garde group El Techo de la Ballena (The Roof of the Whale), which, after the

return to democracy in 1958, embraced an unruly art characterized by print media distribution and performances. “Contesting Modernity” ended with documentation related to *Imagen de Caracas* (Image of Caracas), 1968, a multidisciplinary event organized by a diverse group of artists with Borges at its helm. In contrast to informalism’s painted forms, these artists used live action and projected images as a way to narrate the history of the titular city—and to create the utopia of a collectively constructed history.

—Kaira M. Cabañas

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