

Art



Light Fantastic

Futuristic sculpture from the '60s illuminates Sicardi Gallery

BY KELLY KLAASMEYER

If you're near a computer, search YouTube for a video of Brigitte Bardot singing "Contact." The 1960s Serge Gainsbourg song sounds like early French electronica, and the video's got a goofy *Barbarella* thing going on. Bardot sports a sexy silver alien micro-mini dress by Paco Rabanne, and she's surrounded by weird, futuristic-looking machines that light up and rotate. Several of the "machines" are actually sculptures by Martha Boto and Gregorio Vardanega, whose work is on view at Sicardi Gallery in "**CONTACT LE Cyber-Cosmos De Boto et Vardanega.**"

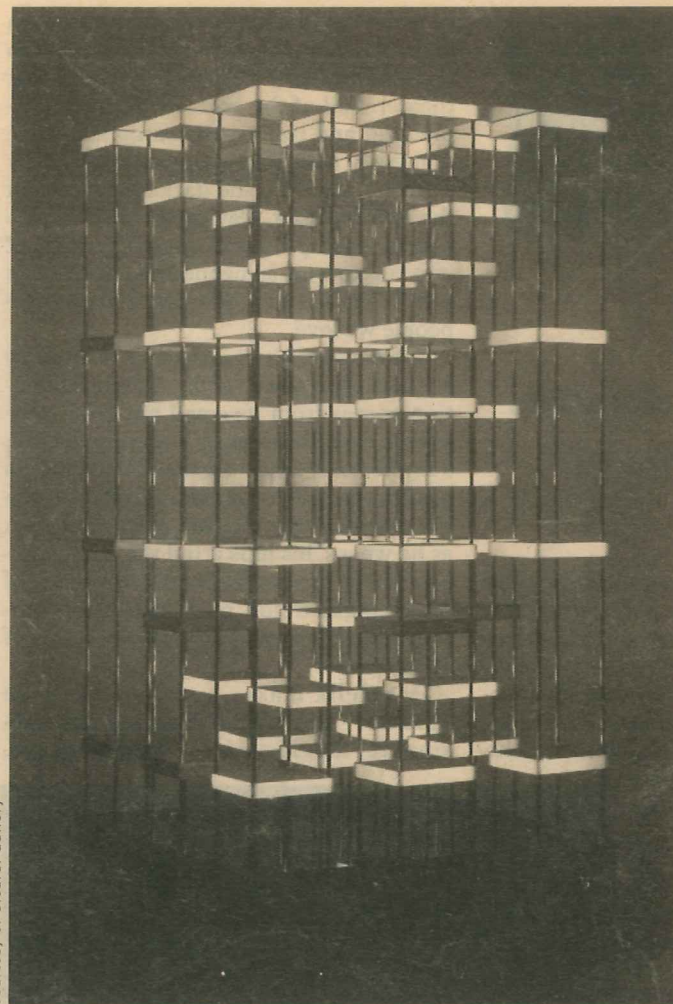
Sicardi has a knack for bringing in amazing artists we've probably never heard of. This is the first U.S. exhibition of the work of Martha Boto, who died in 2004 at the age of 78. Gregorio Vardanega, her husband, is now 83, and this is only his second U.S. show — his first was a 2001 group exhibition at the Americas Society in New York. Boto and Vardanega both grew up in Argentina but in 1959 moved to Paris, where they joined a contingent of Latin American expatriate

artists such as Venezuelans Carlos Cruz-Diez and Jesús-Rafael Soto. But where Soto and Cruz-Diez primarily combine color with 3D elements to create a sense of movement, Boto and Vardanega use flickering lights and motors.

Come by Sicardi Gallery as close to dusk as you can — Boto and Vardanega's sculptures are especially great when it's dark outside. The whole space becomes a little like the set in the "Contact" video as lights turn on and off and reflect off mirrors and metal (but you'll have to bring your own space-vixen costume).

The sounds of clicking switches and humming motors fill the gallery. Most of the works in the show were made in the late '60s and early '70s, and they are wonderfully low-tech, using simple motors to control the lights and rotate objects. Today most artists would design an elaborate software program to achieve similar effects — and it would probably malfunction. According to gallery director María Inés Sicardi, the nearly 40-year-old works, which were shipped from Paris, came out of their crates and started up as soon as they were plugged in.

Boto has a thing for rotating cylindrical forms in her work. The standout piece is *Déplacements Optiques* (1967-1979). (A similar sculpture is in the "Contact" video.) It's a seven-foot-tall, semicircular cabinet lined with strips of mirrored Plexiglas. In the center, polished stainless steel cylinders are skewered on a pole and rotate as light moves over and reflects off their curved surfaces. The elements Boto uses are incredibly sim-



Lights turn on and off in Gregorio Vardanega's skyscraper-like *Tour Orthogonale*.

ple, but the effect is spectacular. In other works, rotating planes of Plexiglas acquire an otherworldly luminosity.

Most of Vardanega's work is built around sequences of lights turning off and on. In *Multiplication Electronique III*, (1966), a shallow wooden box is set on end and divided into squares by a wooden grid, which is inset with square boxes within square boxes. Lights in and behind them turn off and on to create repeating patterns. One of Vardanega's later works, the 1987 *Tour Orthogonale*, also employs grids and

squares, but the result is a skyscraper-like aluminum structure with illuminated "floors" made from white opaque Plexiglas. When it's turned on, it looks like a coordinated contingent of night janitors are flipping light switches in an office tower.

Métamorphose Chromatique I (1968), Vardanega's most elegant and hypnotic work, starts with a wooden case inset with layers of wooden panels. A series of concentric circles have been cut into them, but the circles are off center, creating an organic-looking vortex that ends in black. Multicolored lights illuminate each level and create a mesmerizing psychedelic effect.

Sicardi visited Vardanega in the tiny Paris studio he shared with Boto. The artist is still dealing with the loss of his wife but, according to

Sicardi, when visitors ask to see his sculptures, a transformation takes place. Vardanega begins hopping around the cramped space, over power cords and sculptures, inserting plugs and flipping switches. As his work springs to life, so does the artist.

Sometimes vintage kinetic work can feel quaint. This show does have retro appeal, but even though most of the

works were made almost four decades ago, they still feel smart and fresh. It's the kind of work that makes you wonder where it's been all your life. ●

"CONTACT" LE Cyber-Cosmos De Boto et Vardanega

Through December 1 at Sicardi Gallery, 2246 Richmond, 713-529-1313.