

ALEJANDRO OTERO

[1921 - 1990, Venezuela]

Born March 7, 1921 in El Manteco, Venezuela, Alejandro Otero was a painter and sculptor who played a leading role in the history of modernist abstraction in his native land. From 1939 to 1945 he studied at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Artes Aplicadas de Caracas. Awarded a scholarship to move to Paris, he lived there between 1945 and 1952. It was in Paris that he began producing some of his most important bodies of work, including *Las cafeteras* (the Coffeepots), painted between 1946 and 1948, a series that marked his transition from figuration to abstraction. The canvases of this series were exhibited at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas in 1949, an event that aroused great controversy, opening the way for the emergence of geometric abstraction in Venezuela.

Upon his return to Paris in 1950, Otero founded the group Los Disidentes along with other young Venezuelan expatriate painters interested in abstraction. The group published a magazine of the same name that criticized the backwardness of the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Artes Aplicadas de Caracas and the museums and salons of Caracas; it also asserted the artists' identification with Paris and international artistic movements.

During the winter of 1951, Otero traveled to the Netherlands to study the work of Piet Mondrian, an artist who would have a significant influence on the development of the *Líneas de color sobre fondo blanco* (Colored Lines on a White Ground) of 1951 and the *Collages ortogonales* (Orthogonal Collages) of 1951-52. The weave of multicolored strips of paper in the works of this latter series explored the optical effects of line and color, as well as a dynamic conception of space and of two-dimensional structure. Here the idea of the module first emerged in Otero's practice. The spatial emphasis in the *Collages ortogonales* led Otero to consider the need for a format "different from the two-dimensionality of canvas and paper" and to imagine possibilities made available through architecture. This new interest drew Otero back to Caracas, where he met some of the architects involved in the burgeoning modernist movement; soon after he was invited to participate in the project of integrating the visual arts into the architectural program of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), a project directed and promoted by architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva and considered the most advanced effort in architecture and urbanism in the country. As part of large group of Venezuelan and foreign artists—including Mateo Manaure, Francisco Narváes, Jesús Rafael Soto, Alexander Calder, Fernand Léger, Jean Arp, and Victor Vasarely—contributing to the project, Otero realized a series of large-scale public works.

In 1955, Otero began to produce the *Colorhythms*, a series of modular paintings of Duco, an industrial lacquer, sprayed onto wood panels with white and dark parallel bands and vibrating forms of brilliant colors. In 1956, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City acquired *Colorhythm 1*. Otero represented Venezuela at La

Biennale di Venezia in 1956, and again in 1962 and 1966. In 1958, he was awarded the National Prize for Painting at the Venezuelan Official Salon for *Colorhythm 35*. He was included in the 1958 Pittsburgh Bicentennial International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture at the Carnegie Institute of Technology and in 1959, represented Venezuela in the Bienal de São Paulo with *Colorhythms*, receiving an honorable mention.

Otero moved to Paris a second time in 1960 and lived there until 1964. His works underwent changes, and he experimented with collage, assemblage, and objets trouvés. In 1963, he exhibited in the Bienal de São Paulo and, in 1966, Signals Gallery in London presented Otero's first retrospective outside Venezuela, *A Quarter of a Century of the Art of Alejandro Otero: 1940-1965*. In the 1960s, Otero began to work on large-scale sculpture and ultimately produced outdoor public sculptures in Latin America, the United States, and Europe. In 1971, Otero received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and was a visiting artist at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). During his tenure at MIT, he developed structural ideas for his sculptures.

Otero died in Caracas on August 13, 1990.

Otero's works have been shown in numerous important exhibitions, including *Moderno: Design for Living in Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela, 1940–1978*, Americas Society (AS), New York City, New York, USA (2015); *The Rhythm of Color: Alejandro Otero and Willyss de Castro: Two Modern Masters in the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, The Aspen Institute, Colorado, USA (2006); Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil (1957); *From Venezuela, Thirty Years of Contemporary Art (1960-1990)*, Exposición Universal de Sevilla 1992, Pabellón de las Artes, Spain (1992); *Otero, Soto, Cruz-Diez: Three Maestros of Abstractionism in Venezuela and their International Projection*, Galería de Arte Nacional (GAN), Caracas, Venezuela (1994); *O Espaço Ressoante Os Coloritmos De Alejandro Otero*, Instituto de Arte Contemporânea (IAC), São Paulo, Brazil (2012); *Alejandro Otero, A Retrospective Exhibition*, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, Texas, USA (1975); *Art d'Amérique Latine, 1911-1968*, Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (1993); *Alejandro Otero, Últimos Trabajos*, Museo Alejandro Otero (MAO), Caracas, Venezuela (1991); *Alejandro Otero*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas Sofía Imber (MACCSI), Caracas, Venezuela (1985); *Alejandro Otero*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, Mexico (1976); *Kazuya Sakai*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, Mexico (2016); *Heterotopias, A Half a Century with no Place, 1918-1968*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS), Madrid, Spain (2000); *The Heroic Century: The Museum of Modern Art Masterpieces, 200 Paintings and Sculptures*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), Texas, USA (2004); *Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela, 1955–1975*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), Texas, USA (2018); *Intersections*, Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA), Long Beach, California, USA (2013); *MOLAA At Twenty: 1996-2016*, Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA), Long Beach, California, USA (2016); *Sur moderno: Journeys of Abstraction, The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift*, Museum of

Modern Art (MoMA), New York City, New York, USA (2019); *Kinesthesia: Latin American Kinetic Art, 1954–1969*, Palm Springs Art Museum, California, USA (2017); *Embracing Modernity. Venezuelan Geometric Abstraction*, Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, Florida, USA (2010); and *Radical Geometry. Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, Royal Academy of Arts (RA), London, England, UK (2014), among others.

Otero's works are represented in several major collections including Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros (CPPC), Caracas, Venezuela and New York City, New York, USA; Dallas Museum of Art (DMA), Texas, USA; Galería de Arte Nacional (GAN), Caracas, Venezuela; Museo Alejandro Otero (MAO), Caracas, Venezuela; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas (MACC), Venezuela; Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá (MAMBO), Colombia; Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela; Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, Mexico; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), Texas, USA; Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York City, New York, USA; National Air and Space Museum, Washington DC, USA; and the University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, Arizona, USA.

Biography from *Resonant Space: The Colorhythms of Alejandro Otero*, Rina Carvajal, 5 Continents Editions, 2014.