



## Latin American Art

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Many Latin Americans consider homosexual behavior to be deviant and, therefore, harass and attempt to oppress the gay community. Consequently, gay and lesbian Latin American artists frequently use their artworks to portray their desire for sexual and political liberation. Often they combine traditional subject matter with personal insights to stress their desire for acceptance by their communities.

Another crucial context in which homosexual art must be placed is that of Latin American *machismo*. The polarized gender differentiation that prevails in many Latin American societies has contributed to the oppression of homosexuals and limited their expression in the arts.

Given a social climate that is intolerant of homosexual expression, it is not surprising that interpreting homosexuality in Latin American art is problematic. More often than not, sexuality in Latin American art is presented covertly rather than overtly. As James Saslow has observed, from Mexico to Argentina, "Visible expression of homosexuality is handicapped by social attitudes."

Thus, artists wishing to give expression to homosexual themes are obliged to be more constrained than their European and North American counterparts.

Rudi Bleys approaches Latin American art via "homotextuality," which implies the necessity of "reading" art works according to their sociopolitical contexts. This approach, he says, "allows for cross cultural comparison without falling into the trap of Eurocentric conceptualization." It allows consideration of the work of artists who did not identify as homosexuals, but whose work nevertheless somehow conveys homoeroticism.

### **Mexican Artists**

Mexico's rich traditions of folk culture, arts and crafts, and its sometimes tragic history, have yielded a fascinating legacy on which modern art has built. Significantly, the attempt to capture a national identity in murals and other art forms, often depicting indigenous peoples, has sometimes resulted in more than a tinge of homoeroticism.

The works of Alberto Fuster (1870-1922), Angé Zárrega (1886-1946), Saturnino Herrán (1887-1918), and José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), for example, all indicate a subtle appreciation of ambiguous sexuality in their human figures. Orozco's male nudes, never entirely free from erotic overtones, even became the symbols of national identity and of the trend towards *indigenismo*--the use of authentic local culture.

### **Frida Kahlo**

Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) has achieved iconic status for feminists. While the great love of her life was artist Diego Rivera, whom she married in 1929, she also had affairs with other men and women. Her paintings, mostly visually startling, quasi-surrealist self-portraits, employ the iconography of ancient

Mesoamerican cultures.

This she combined with idiosyncratic personal symbols to depict her intense suffering and to comment on the representation of women. She often depicts herself in masculine dress, using "butch drag" to suggest her independence and strength. Her hypnotic gaze has come to embody a kind of Mexican female spirit of fortitude.

Kahlo's painting *Duas desnudas en La Selva* (1939) is somewhat atypical of her work in that it suggests a relaxed lesbian eroticism. It depicts two nude women lying in front of a jungle. Embracing each other, they cross ethnic and social barriers to join in intimacy.

### **Roberto Montenegro**

Homosexual artist Roberto Montenegro (1880-1968) felt constrained by his social milieu to refrain from painting overtly homosexual works. He did, however, make sly references to sexuality. The themes closest to his heart had to be coded into his paintings and murals. For example, his *El árbol de la vida* (1922) has a scantily clad figure with a highly androgynous appearance reminiscent of depictions of Saint Sebastian.

Montenegro was highly regarded for his eclectic approach and his ability to work in several media. His drawings of the great dancer Nijinsky (1919) for London publisher Cyril Beaumont exhibit a draftsman's skill equal to that of Aubrey Beardsley whom he greatly admired.

### **Nahum B. Zenil**

Nahum B. Zenil (b. 1947) is one of a handful of openly gay artists working in Mexico. He received his education at La Esmeralda and La Nacional de Maestros. His original, highly personal style first earned him fame in the 1980s. Today, he is one of Mexico's leading contemporary artists.

Among recurring themes in Zenil's works are his relations with his family (especially his mother), his past as a schoolteacher, his ambivalent feelings about Catholicism, and the realities of being a gay man in a conservative Latin culture. Since the 1970s, Zenil has focused on a single subject: himself. Almost all of the works that he has produced in the last 20 years include at least one self-portrait.

Zenil uses himself in his art because, as a gay man in Mexico, he feels marginalized and, therefore, experiences a great sense of solitude. Through self-analysis in his work, he desires to accept fully himself and his lifestyle.

He sees art as a way to purge his mind of some of the pressures he felt growing up gay in a small Mexican town and, later, living in the relatively conservative society of the Mexican capital, where he never feels truly at ease with most of the people around him. He hopes his artwork effects communication between himself and other members of society.

Zenil's works discourage passive viewer interaction. Through painted images of himself, the artist fixes his gaze on those who attempt to penetrate his world; indeed, he seems to challenge and goad the viewer. To underscore the specificity that the artist wishes to convey, he often inscribes the scenario represented in his works with his own handwriting. Overall, Zenil uses his art to remind viewers that he--no matter his ethnicity or sexual preference--is human just like them.

The mixed media work *Esperar la hora que cambiará nuestra costumbre ne es fácil* (*Waiting for the Time When Our Customs Change Is Not Easy*, 1984) functions as a social commentary on Zenil's status as a gay man living in Mexico. The artist sits nude on a chair in a protective pose: he pulls his knees to his chest and crosses his arms over them.

Although he tries to safeguard himself, he is nevertheless vulnerable; his flaccid penis is visible between his ankles. The artist literally imprisons this picture of himself; knotted twine attached to the surrounding matte crisscrosses the image many times.

Two other mixed media works from the 1980s directly address the oppression of gay men. *Dos Personajes* (*Two Persons*, 1984) shows Zenil and his long-time companion Gerardo Vilchis from the waist up dressed in suits. Rope tightly binds each of their bodies. Two strips of pink cloth, which match the men's ties, cover Vilchis' eyes and Zenil's mouth. *Suicides* (1987) again represents Zenil and Vilchis wearing suits. This time, a double noose is wrapped around their necks.

Zenil also depicts Vilchis in *Tengo una muñeca* (*I Have a Doll*, 1979). Vilchis is nude except for the woven *rebozo* (a shawl commonly worn by Latin American women) draped over his shoulders. He sits on a chair cradling a doll in his lap. The work's title refers to the doll, the sitter's penis, and the relationship between artist and sitter. Because in Mexico a "real" man must be dominant and macho, Zenil blatantly flouts national gender norms by eroticizing the penis.

Zenil has long been an ardent supporter of gay rights in Mexico. He plays a prominent role in the *Círculo Cultural Gay*, an organization active since the early 1980s. Although there are few direct references to the wider issue of lesbian and gay rights in Zenil's art, an exception is *En el Zócalo frente al Palacio Nacional* (*In the Zócalo in Front of the National Palace*, 1992). In this work, the artist represents himself many times holding various banners with slogans such as "Respect for Human Rights," "Peace," and "Love."

Religious subject matter often appears in Zenil's art. The Virgin of Guadalupe maintains pride of place in the artist's symbolic vocabulary. She often appears above Zenil and Vilchis, blessing their union or casting a protective aura over them. In *Virgen de Guadalupe* (*Virgin of Guadalupe*, 1984), for example, an apparition of the Virgin appears above the two men, who are in bed.

### **Julio Galán**

Although he emerged from a more privileged background than that of Zenil, Julio Galán (b. 1959) has also made a mark among contemporary Mexican artists. He painted himself semi-naked, as a young boy, as a witchdoctor, or with Aztec headdresses, adding a Baroque kitsch tone that has become his trademark. This style is melodramatic and might be called high camp.

Galán shares with many Mexican artists an obsession with self-portraits, ambivalence, and doubling. His personal symbolism, which mixes religious elements with cinematic ones, is frequently cryptic, much like that of Kahlo. He is known especially for his critiques of the social construction of gender in such works as *Donde ya no hay sexo* (1985), which depicts the artist as having an ambiguous sexuality, and *Niños con muchos huevos* (1988), which shows two boys kissing.

### **Roberto Márquez**

Roberto Márquez (b. 1958) is noted for his smooth, polished style. He has made a name for himself with dreamlike, revealing self-portraits and contemplative, humanistic nudes of both sexes. His mood-filled paintings are highly accessible and easy to assimilate, but contain disturbing elements that question gender and other boundaries in the manner of Julio Galán. For example, one of Márquez's portraits shows himself as Christ with stigmata, thus appropriating religious iconography and suggesting his own identification with Christ.

### **Carla Rippey**

Although born in Kansas, Carla Rippey (b. 1950) has made Mexico her home. She is one of the few creators

of specifically lesbian art in Latin America. Some of her paintings, especially her sensitive female nudes, bravely explore such themes as female narcissism. Bleys describes her painting *Quisiera ser como tú* (1989) as "inscribed with a lesbian *imaginaire*."

Other openly homosexual artists in Mexico include Manuel Rodríguez Lozano (1896-1971), who illustrated Federico García Lorca's poem *Oda a Walt Whitman. El Pensador* (1936), and the brothers Emilio Baz Viaud (1918-1991) and Ben Hur Baz Viaud (b. 1906), who are best known for their portraits. Among lesbian artists must be included Elena Villaseñor (b. 1974), whose work has an erotic flavor; and Patricia Torres (b. 1963), who depicts lesbian sexuality using cartoon imagery and monochromatic surfaces.

## **Argentina**

Although she worked mainly in Paris and was directly connected to the Surrealists, Argentine-born Léonor Fini (1908-1996) resisted labels of all kinds. She set out to be a new type of completely autonomous woman. Although she was largely self-taught, she was brought up in Trieste and thus exposed directly to European influences and was influenced by artists such as Aubrey Beardsley.

Fini's work is finely crafted and dream-like, containing recurring imagery such as rotting vegetables, masks, drapery, and provocative nymphets. In this sense her paintings have the flavor of the visionary work of the Symbolists, though she is often categorized as a Surrealist.

According to Emmanuel Cooper, Fini's work has a "cruel kindness." A fine example of this quality is her painting *Le long du chemin* (1966), which depicts two women, one of whom is about to disrobe the other while she is reclining passively in a trance. The atmosphere is charged with sexual tension.

## **Chile**

Chilean Alvaro Guevara (1894-1957) came to England in the 1920s and found himself closely allied with Duncan Grant's Bloomsbury circle and Roger Fry's Omega workshop artists. Guevara's tall, handsome demeanor attracted many people of both sexes. Though he was not open about his male lovers, he often painted male nudes in a style similar to that of Grant and other modernists.

## **Colombia**

Another Latin American artist who was influenced by English and European art was Luis Caballero (1949-1995), who was born in Colombia. Caballero, like many in South America, was an ardent admirer of English neo-figurative painter Francis Bacon. His skilled draftsmanship reveals the influence of Spanish painting.

The prime subject of Caballero's work is the nude male body, in various contorted, ecstatic reclining poses. His declared aim was "to show but not to relate." Some of his larger works have a Romantic excess worthy of Géricault. This excess was subsequently toned down, yet there remained in his figures an unusual force and energy. He once declared that they were painted "with semen, not turpentine."

## **Brazil**

As in Mexico, in Brazil muralism was valued as a public art. Most muralists conveyed a nationalist, socialist, anti-bourgeois sentiment in their murals.

Such was the case with Candido Portinari (1903-1962), yet he also painted laborers with a decidedly sensual feel. Little is known of the artist's sexual interests, yet his work is decidedly homoerotic. His *O, Mestizo* (1934), for example, portrays the rich brown flesh tones and full lips of his local model.

Likewise, nothing can be gathered about the sexual orientation of Hugo Adami (b. 1900), but his painting *O Fugitivo* (1934) dwells lovingly on the perspiring flesh of a reclining black male.

### **Hélio Oiticica**

In Brazil evolved a Neo Concretism that paralleled the conceptual art movement in Europe and the United States. Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) was influenced by the abstract work of Russian painter Casimir Malevich and signed the Neo Concretists' manifesto in 1959. He traveled to England, but settled in New York.

He became a master of Samba and created works that viewers had to experience physically, such as his *penetráveis*, suspended fabrics that revealed spatial relationships and encouraged spectator awareness. He created *bolides* (fireballs/nuclei), comprised of rocks, crystals, and soil in glass boxes. His use of inexpensive materials anticipated the "povera" movement in Italy.

He also created *paragoles* (relating to the joy of putting on clothes). These *paragoles*, which looked like body wraps, were designed in order to play with the boundaries of form and content and often provoked new modes of thinking about how clothes signal the gender of the wearer.

Other significant Brazilian artists in whose work there is significant gay content include Darcy Penteadó (1926-1987), a book illustrator, fashion designer, and society portraitist, who devoted himself to the gay cause. Glauco Rodriguez (b. 1929), Geraldo Porto (b. 1950), and Edilson Viriato (b. 1966) have also created work with a gay sensibility.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past few decades, interest in Latin American art has increased dramatically. Critics have attempted to assess the artistic impact of multiple social realities, including especially the potent African influence as filtered through Catholic culture.

While Latin American art was formerly alleged to be derivative or stereotyped as full of magic, mystery, and sensuality, it is now clear that Latin American art is in fact refreshingly diverse, highly personal, and very vibrant. The "hybrid" energy of this art is especially evident in the work of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual artists discussed above.

Notwithstanding advances in recent years, however, homosexuality remains almost invisible in many Latin American cultures. Artworks such as those discussed above lend much-needed insight into the social, political, and psychological lives of gay Latin Americans. One of the most powerful messages implicit in their work is the need to counteract the destructive impact of *machismo* and to embrace and celebrate diverse sexualities.

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