Women and Migration

Responses in Art and History

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24. Making Latinx Art: Juana Valdes at the Crossroads of Latinx and Latin American Art

Arlene Dávila

Fig. 24.1 Juana Valdes, 'Redbone Colored China Rags', 2017, CC BY 4.0.

Latinx and Latin American art have been historically contingent on globalization, particularly on the US empire and its involvement in Latin America. The relevant question today is how current globalization

trends impact on our theorization of Latinx and Latin American art in relation to each other, and what are the particular challenges, openings and concerns for artists maneuvering through contemporary art world trends. In what follows I consider these issues not to reify differences between Latinx and Latin American art but to account for and appreciate the different projects and politics that are involved in their promotion. Additionally, through the work of Afro-Latinx artist Juana Valdes I discuss the importance of confronting the differential valorization of Latinx and Latin American art whenever we teach, study and exhibit these artists, and why it is so important to carve a space for the study and evaluation of Latinx art. My argument is that efforts by curators, scholars and artists in defining a space for intervention for Latinx artists need to be analyzed in relation to a global contemporary art market that increasingly exacerbates distinctions between Latinx and Latin American art and artists, at the very same time that it situationally elides the resulting hierarchies and distinctions in order to profit more ably from these categories.¹

The last decade has seen a growing consensus about the need to specify, define and promote Latinx art as a space of scholarly, curatorial concern and as a market category. Some of the key agents and spaces include the UCLA's Chicano Center's *Aver Revision Art History Project* (2002–present), and the *Latino Art Now Conference* launched as part of the *Inter-University Program for Latino/a Studies* (2005). More recently we have seen the foundation of the *US Latinx Art Forum*, by a younger generation of Latinx art historian's challenging the *College Art Association's* lack of panels and spaces devoted to Latinx art, and the *US Latinx Art Futures Ford Foundation conference* organized by artist *Teresita Fernandez* (2016) was also pivotal to the current Latinx art movement.

These spaces have been central to teasing out the relationship between Latinx and Latin American art, and to ensuring *Latino/a* artists are not easily ignored and bypassed. Rather they must be recognized as an integral component of American art, and also an important

1 This paper draws from ongoing research on Latinx art worlds, involving interviews and participation with artists, and stakeholders of the Latinx art movement and dealers, curators, gallerists and other participants of Latinx and Latin American art worlds in the United States and Latin America from 2016–18. See my forthcoming book *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets and Politics* for a larger discussion of these issues.

group constitutive of Latin American art. In particular, it is important to focus on artists of Latin American background in the US, whether they are first generation or have a longer history in the country and who work primarily in the United States, as differentiated from Latin American artists who work primarily in Latin America and who are not immersed in the US Latino/a experience. This provides a means of addressing the misrecognition of generations of US Latinx artists who are ignored both by the United States' canon and by the nation-centric biases that dominate Latin American art. There is a growing concern to recognize Latinx art as a project, not a fixed identity, a blueprint for the acknowledgment and identification of the work of artists who have been consistently bypassed by American and Latin American art history.

Advocates for Latinx art follow similar paths to those who helped to launch Latin American art, and any other specialized category. These paths also stem from institutional spaces and interests that create these categories as differentiated spheres of production, study, collection and consumption. For instance, since the late 1970s major auctions houses like Sotheby (1979) and Christie's (1977) and most recently Phillips (2009) have held regular Latin American art auctions, feeding interest in the category. Meanwhile major survey exhibitions helped to consolidate Latin American art as a fashionable subject for collectors, institutional spaces, and scholars devoted to its study, and it was marketed as such across the United States and beyond. Consequently, while still relegated below a dominant Anglo- and Eurocentric canon, Latin American art now carries weight with important institutions that create and sustain what Arjun Appadurai has termed 'regimes of value' for the evaluation and valuation of Latin American art.²

Most interestingly, the value of Latin American art is increasingly fueled by a number of global stakeholders across the world, spanning the US, Latin America and Europe. Examples of how Latin American stakeholders are intervening in the international collection practices of major museums, and hence in the overall valuation of Latin American art, include the sponsorship of a Latin American and Caribbean acquisition fund at MOMA by art collector Patricia Cisneros (2006–), the creation of a Curator of Latin American art endowed position at MOMA

2 See Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

by Estrellita Brodsky, and the rise in regional Latin American art fairs, such as ArteBA (1991), ArtRio (2010), ArtBo (2005) and Park ArtLima (2013), all modeled after international mega fairs like ArtBasel.³

In sum, the growing popularity of Latin American art shows how useful categories can be to carve out spaces in the art world; as well as their uselessness if a movement lacks the necessary capital to fund sustainable infrastructure. Such is the case with Latinx art, which grew out of the Nuyorican and Chicano art movement, as part of a demand for fair recognition and to expose, challenge and transform the whiteness and Eurocentrism of mainstream museums, which have marginalized the artistic creations and input of people of color in the art world and society at large. This arts-culture-based social movement was all about forging and validating alternative aesthetics as well as alternative spaces such as institutions like the Taller Boricua and El Museo del Barrio. As scholars and art historians of this period note, this campaign resulted in art that was connected to communities; that was informed by larger social movements around equity, anti-racism and social justice; and that was not defined by market prerogatives but by the impulse to expand Nuyoricans' symbolic and aesthetic repertoires.

This history has shaped debates over the recognition of Latinx art from the beginning, both its racialization and its connection with a racial minoritarian status, and the 'assumptions that it is monolithically concerned with identity politics and/or is lacking in aesthetic and conceptual experimentation.'⁴ Similarly Latinx art and artists have historically lacked patrons, while their typical omission from the market means that their work is rarely assigned economic value, making it impossible to be prized. This represents a circular and self-perpetuating problem: lack of access to the market hinders the evaluation of work by Latinx artists, and hence their future ability to enter the market.

The result is that even within Latino/Latin American art spaces there's a lot of reluctance to identify as a Latino/Latin American artist, — in itself the greatest indication of the whiteness of the art market, and the immediate devaluation of any artist that cannot come across as 'unmarked' and hence white. Most Latin American artists

3 See Giuliana Borea, 'Fuelling Museums and Art Fairs in Peru's Capital: The Work of the Market and Multi-scale Assemblages' *World Art*, 6:2 (2017), 315–37.

4 Adriana Zavala, '2015 Latin@ Art at the Intersection', *Aztlan*, 40:1 (2015), 125–40 (p. 125).

don't want to be identified as such because it compromises their ability to enter the 'white world' of contemporary art markets, even when most Latin American art dealers recognize that the label, together with the institutional structures in place to promote Latin American art, have formed the platform to build these artists in the first place. If any identity is to be claimed, it is demonstrably better to select the more appreciated category of 'Latin American art', never that of a 'Latino/a'. The representation of Carmen Herrera is a good example: even though she's lived in the States for over fifty years, she is always described as Cuban-born, never as a Latina. Yes, some artists have roots and connections with home countries, yet at the root of Latinx identity is the 'Neither here or nor there effect' that distinguishes Latinxs from Latin Americans, who are most often also shunned from their heritage countries.

In sum, when grappling with Latinx artists we must confront the lack of institutional structures and market interests invested in this category, and the fact that they lack the nation-centric references and connections that have provided value for Latin American art, among other issues. Ultimately we have to grapple with racism in the art world, and how it affects artists of color and the lack of institutional spaces promoting, and ultimately valuing their work.⁵ The recognition and evaluation of Latinx art therefore depends on US-based curators, scholars, museum professionals and art stakeholders finally turning their eyes to these artists, and understanding the multiplicity of experiences that shape and enrich Latinx art, and all types of 'contemporary American art'.

Take for example multidisciplinary artist Juana Valdes, an afro-Cuban artist who came to Miami as a young child, and who, like most Latinx artists I spoke to, has had a lot of experience navigating the cultural politics of Latinx art. Valdes was one of the speakers during the 2016 Ford Foundation US Latinx Art Futures symposium, after which I asked her more about her experiences in the contemporary art world. In particular, Valdes has long been confronted with the need to navigate

5 See James Case-Leal, 'Art Statistics 2016–2017', produced for Arts in NYC course taught at CUNY Guttman College by James Case-Leal, Spring 2017, <http://www.havenforthedispossessed.org/>; Maximiliano Duron, 'Latino Art Underrepresented at College Art Association's Annual Conference', *Art News*, 20 September 2016, <http://www.artnews.com/2016/09/20/study-latino-art-underrepresented-at-college-art-associations-annual-conference/>

her experiences as an immigrant, a Cuban artist, a Latinx and Caribbean artist, a woman and foremost a Black woman, which is what people immediately see in the white spaces of the art world where she's often the only Black person in the room.

Valdes's work is geared to ensuring the totality of her experience is not compromised and that her Caribbean, Cuban and Hispanic immigrant experience and her Blackness are recognized in simultaneity, fully aware that often these categories (Caribbean, Cuban, Black and Hispanic) are often considered in isolation or even held to be total opposites of each other. Her work is all about addressing this complexity head on, although there are some categories that are easier for her to navigate than others. I was not surprised that, for her, the most challenging category is Latin American art: As she tells; 'my work does not fit the visual demands. It's not colorful, it's not dealing with history of Latin America [...] or does not scream to you Latin America.' In fact, Valdes has purposefully reduced the amount of color in her work, seeking to distance herself from what she saw as the stereotypical colorful aesthetic associated with Latin American art in survey shows, similar to the dominant aesthetic of Hispanic art in the United States in the 1980s. Most of her works, from sculpture and ceramics to prints, are created in shades of white, beige and black, playing with neutrality and translucency. This is especially the case in her use of bone china, a material she works with in *Colored China Rags* (2012) and as the basis of some of the decorative objects in *An Inherent View of the World* (2015) to evoke questions of value, race, commodity and trade. One of the first commodities to be globalized, bone china was brought in from China through Europe, and then exported as a highly sought commodity in the Americas and the Caribbean, where it is still a sign of prestige that conveys an aesthetic of middle class respectability. Valdes recalls it adorning living rooms in Cuba, where it was displayed as a prized object and a marker of dignified status. With this material she foregrounds colorism and questions of value, and its creation in the Americas invokes the commodity fetishism that is at the root of both the Caribbean slave trade, and the making of luxury items. *Colored China Rags* depicts cloth rags commonly used for housework and domestic work, but made in bone china, which involved coloring and altering a material known for its whiteness and pureness with shades that evoked human skin.

Valdes foregrounds race, color and empire in most of her pieces as the formative experiences that are central to her Cuban identity off the island, and the reality of what it is to live as a Black person in America. In her view these topics find little room within the category of Latin American art, which tends to embrace a whiter South American version of identity and does not highlight Latin America's African roots; she has therefore found it less welcoming to her work. In particular, Valdes has identified the lack of conversations about color and race to be most oppressive for her and other Latinx artists. They can experience and talk about racism more openly than in Latin America, where these topics are still largely considered taboo and are often drowned out by nationalist ideologies that disavow the very existence of racism. In fact, it was not a Latin American art museum or collector who first acquired Valdes' work, but the Perez Museum in Miami through its African-American and African Diaspora Acquisitions fund. The museum purchased *An Inherent View of the World* (2014–15). This installation of decorative objects made of porcelain, bone china, glass, and wood, set atop a large wooden table, builds on her desire to tease out a relationship between identities and objects against the backdrop of a long history of colonialism, trade and capitalism.

One would think that, as a Cuban American, Valdes would have benefitted from the growing popularity of Cuban art among collectors of Latin American art. Cuban art has been given more attention than most other Latin American countries and the rest of the Caribbean, due to the state funding and infrastructure that Cuba provides for artists particularly through the celebration of Havana's Biennial (1984) and the consistent patronage of wealthy Cuban collectors in exile, together with Cuban arts and humanities foundations such as CINTAS (1957–). Boundaries between Cuba and the US are always shifting, although the fetishizing of a reified isolation and the exoticism of a socialist country remains a source of validation and value. Yet Valdes' engagement with the booming category of Cuban art is highly complex.

One of the ironies of the growing economic relationships between the US and Cuba is the budding fetish for Cuban art 'discovered' and purchased on the island. A gallerist representing Cuban artists described this trend as voyeuristic: 'They think it's very sexy to go to Cuba, and they want to be seen as ahead of the curve.'⁶ He described how young

6 Conversation with the author.

Cuban artists have become a brand, whereas Cuban artists in the US are seemingly more accessible and known; they have trajectories that can be read in terms of 'quality' recognized by the art market, signs that are lacking or less marked among younger unknown artists. This Cuban art fetish has been reinforced by the increased ease of travel to Cuba, which has launched a whole subsector of art tours, such as 'Cubanartours' to expose participants to 'one of the most exciting and thriving art scenes of the world.'⁷ Cuba's 'thriving Contemporary art scene.' More than one Cuban gallerist in the US or abroad described bringing work to Cuba to sell, either through the biennial or through local art entrepreneurs, because collectors prefer to buy in Cuba rather than in the US or Europe. As he tells me: 'It's the same work, the same artists, but collectors won't buy it in the States, but they'll gobble it in Cuba.' Valdes is fully aware of this trend. In her words: 'they want to buy that story, they don't want to buy the American story. It's part of the exoticness to say I saw the studio and the artists, and we had this amazing experience in Cuba [...] and that's part of the value and the script and what gives it value.' In this way, the popularity of Cuban art has also helped to reinforce national boundaries, or as Valdes put it: 'If you're in Cuba, you're IT. If you're in Miami, then you're one of the many.'⁸ This phenomenon also affects other US Latino/as, who are similarly unrecognized or at risk of losing any recognition within their countries after they have migrated. However, these tensions affect Cuban artists in particular, given that Cuba's political situation has placed greater constraints on artists' movement, migration and return, and hence their ability to maintain links to Cuba once they leave.

In particular, Valdes regrets this trend because the popularity of Cuban art has neither helped Caribbeanize Latin American art, nor raised awareness of the African diaspora in Latin America. This is yet another reason why the category of Latinx art seems to be a space where all that she values as central to her identity is at least recognized, and not seen as contradictory. 'I don't think the art world knows what Latinx art is, they just figure out what Latin American art is and what Mexican art is. They're catching up [...] It brought something that is happening out in the street and in practice, out there into the institution [...] and said to the people, you need to look at this.'⁹

7 <https://www.cubartours.com>

8 Conversation with the author.

9 Ibid.

In sum, artists like Juana Valdes are producing rich work that transcends categories. It is a possibility both poignant and revealing that it might require the promotion and elevation of yet another category — one that confronts and challenges the art world to see Latinx artists — that helps us finally to take note of their work.

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