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MOVERS & SHAKERS

After Frida

By ARTHUR LUBOW

"Inverted Utopias" — the blockbuster exhibition that, in the summer of 2004, filled much of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston with Latin American art — startled viewers as much with its omissions as with its contents. Where were the Social Realist tableaux of [Diego Rivera](#), the flamboyant self-dramatizations of [Frida Kahlo](#), the Surrealist visions of Wifredo Lam? Instead of those landmarks, Mari Carmen Ramírez, the museum's curator of Latin American art, beamed a spotlight on the less-familiar alleyways of the South American avant-garde, especially the artists working in Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela during the quarter-centuries on either side of the end of the Second World War. Visitors to the museum gazed on striated panels that seemed to move when a spectator moved, made by the "kinetic" artists Jesús Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz-Díez in Venezuela; the sinuously calligraphic drawings and vehemently left-wing sculptures of the Argentine León Ferrari; the mysterious steel-wire hangings, like sun-warped or moth-eaten Bauhaus grids, by Gertrude Goldschmidt, a wartime German refugee to Venezuela who was known professionally as Gego; and the many-faceted work of the Rio de Janeiro artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, close colleagues whose protominimalist and precociously interactive work in the '60s (like his capes to be danced in and her hinged sculptures to be reconfigured at will) exert a powerful influence today. And those are the famous ones: about a third of the artists in "Inverted Utopias" were rarely, if ever, exhibited in the United States before. "We wanted to introduce these new values into North America, since they had been overlooked," Ramírez, who is 52, said recently. "My objection to Frida Kahlo is the phenomenon of Frida Kahlo and the way it obscures Latin American art. She was a woman with an exceptional capacity to present her own suffering through an amazing and rather unique style. But she didn't have many followers. You can't use her as an emblem for an entire continent. It's absurd." Then she flashed a mischievous, gap-toothed grin. "And of course, she wasn't such a great painter either."

Led by curators and scholars like Ramírez, along with a few astute collectors, the field of Latin American art has been redefined and revitalized in the United States, with the results visible on museum walls and auction-house tally sheets. "There can be watershed moments, and for me, 'Inverted Utopias' signaled a shift in perceptions within the field," Olga Viso, an American of Cuban descent who is director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, told me. "It aggressively attacked many stereotypes of Latin American art. It was eye-opening for those who don't know and affirming for those of us who always believed these artists should get a voice." Until recently, with few exceptions, the art of every Latin American country was recognized and collected mainly within that individual country. Now the achievements of Latin Americans are

entering the universal history of 20th-century art.

Consider the world's two leading museums devoted to modern and contemporary work. Next year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York will hold a joint show of Ferrari and the Brazilian modernist Mira Schendel, and a midcareer retrospective of the Mexican Conceptualist Gabriel Orozco; while the Tate Modern in London (which currently features a jagged floor crack by the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo in the Turbine Hall) will present its own midcareer retrospective of a contemporary Latin American Conceptualist, Cildo Meireles of Brazil, that will then travel to Houston. "In this country, the history of modern art clearly needs to be rewritten," says Luis Pérez-Oramas, curator of Latin American art at the Museum of Modern Art. And, everywhere you look, it is being rewritten. Geometric abstraction, minimalism, postminimalism, Conceptualism — art movements that Americans thought unfolded solely in North America and Europe are now recognized also to have proceeded (in some cases, preceded) in Latin America. The process of inclusion is even more striking in the field of contemporary art, where Latin American artists like Guillermo Kuitca, Jorge Macchi and [Vik Muniz](#) have achieved what is retroactively desired for the modernists: acclaim unqualified by a geographical asterisk.

"THIS IS AN INTERESTING situation where passionate curators, passionate collectors and museums begin to understand there is a whole rich area that they have overlooked," says Robert Storr, dean of the [Yale](#) School of Art and curator of last year's [Venice Biennale](#). "Mari Carmen is part of a larger field, but in this country she is pre-eminent. And in terms of museums that are active, Houston is absolutely out front." There are many reasons that the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, became a center for elevating the profile of Latin American art. The most obvious is geographical. "We have a huge Latino community here, and Mexico is just across the border — there are about 50 flights a day, more than to Los Angeles or Miami," says Richard W. Wortham III, a museum life-trustee. (The Wortham Foundation endowed the Latin American curatorship.) As part of the identity politics and cultural-identity movements that have been gathering force in this country since the '70s, other cities with large Latino populations have also expressed this rationale for amassing significant Latin American art collections, especially the Los Angeles County Museum, the conjoined Miami Art Museum and Miami Art Central and the private Diane and Bruce Halle Collection in Phoenix. Yet the connection between the Latino community and Latin American art may be more of a notion than a fact. "The Latino agenda and the Latin American agenda are different things," says [MoMA's](#) Pérez-Oramas. "The Latino agenda is a specifically American issue that has to be understood within the question of diversity in this country." It is a point that Peter Marzio, the director of the Houston museum, readily concedes. "Our geographical situation has something to do with our getting involved, but that's oversold," he told me. "Mostly it's her. I could have been in Minnesota and I would have wanted her to come."

Although the spiky-haired Ramírez and the debonair Marzio make vividly different first impressions, they share an important trait. Both are struggling to win respect — Marzio for his institution and Ramírez for her Latin American heritage and artists. Marzio is a nationally

renowned museum director at the helm of a museum that is better known for its former directors ([Philippe de Montebello](#) of the Metropolitan Museum is one) than for its collection. “When I put on my selfish hat, I thought, This could give this institution a special role,” he told me. The only large U.S. museum with a long tradition of acquiring Latin American art is the Museum of Modern Art, which began buying it in the 1930s under its founding director, Alfred Barr, and today has the most extensive collection of it in the world. “The Museum of Modern Art, if Alfred Barr had stayed in charge of it, would have just conquered the field,” Marzio said. But Barr’s successors, especially William Rubin, considered the art of Latin America a sideshow to the linear progression of modernism, which admitted virtually no applicants from south of the Rio Grande.

Like a practitioner of martial arts, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, realized that its weakness could be a strength. MoMA is encumbered with an abundance of masterpieces that demand to be displayed; amid such riches, Latin American art is inevitably relegated to a supporting role. Say what you will for the Uruguayan master Joaquín Torres-García, who painted in Paris with [Piet Mondrian](#) and Theo van Doesburg, then returned to Latin America and incorporated pre-Columbian iconography into a modernist framework. If, like MoMA, you possess a dozen major Mondrians, how much room can you give Torres-García? Houston is free of such burdens. “We’re still in a formative stage,” Marzio told me. “The Latin American department is becoming a core of the institution. It’s not just something that we’re adding on.”

The Latin American shows curated by Ramírez have won the museum unaccustomed attention. “Mari Carmen has put this institution on the map,” Wortham told me. Several people used this phrase, in the way people proclaim that [Frank Gehry](#)’s Guggenheim has performed the same cartographical feat for the city of Bilbao. “Outside recognition is very important,” Marzio said. “Houston is used to being ignored. That recognition and money coming in has encouraged trustees to keep ratcheting it up. I don’t think the program would be nearly as successful if it were not for that.” He added, “It’s given people who support the museum, even those who don’t especially like Latin American art, the feeling that we’re on the right track.”

When few curators specialized in Latin American art, Ramírez never voiced any doubt that she was on the right track. She is endowed with a self-confidence that her critics call grandiosity or arrogance. Maybe it stems from the defensive posture of someone who has always regarded her territory as marginalized. She grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico. “Puerto Rico is the last colony of this hemisphere, and you have to overcome that situation,” she told me. “I have a U.S. passport, but I consider myself fiercely Puerto Rican.” Her mother, who was a medical researcher until retiring to raise Mari Carmen and her younger brother (now a bank vice president), descends from a lineage of intellectuals and Puerto Rican independence advocates; her father, a civil engineer, was the first in his family to graduate from college. Following an undergraduate education at the University of Puerto Rico, Ramírez studied at the [University of Chicago](#). “It’s been one of the assets in my career, this inside-outside perspective,” she continued. “I never really considered myself an American. American culture has always been foreign to me. My roots are elsewhere. I am completely bicultural. At first it seemed a

drawback, but if you know how to deal with it, that can situate you in a position of straddling that can be a strength. It takes that understanding of the other culture to do this kind of work.”

She began her curatorial career in Puerto Rico. As the assistant director of the Ponce Museum of Art, she put together the first museum retrospective of the Puerto Rican graphic artist Lorenzo Homar. “We fund-raised \$13,000 to do the show, and the catalog cost us \$5,000,” she recalled. “The ink was coming off the catalog when we sold it — red ink was on everyone’s hands. My mother and my nanny did the catering for the opening. It was a household affair.” Having already earned her master’s, Ramírez returned to Chicago for her doctorate, writing her dissertation on the early years of Mexican muralism. Perhaps she grew convinced she was on the right track because she was on such a fast track. In 1988, shortly before she earned her Ph.D., she was appointed the first curator of Latin American art in the United States, at the art museum of the University of Texas at Austin. The [University of Texas](#) has the world’s foremost Latin American library, and its museum, which is now called the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, for many years was the only place in the United States to display a broad range of Latin American art. Soon after arriving there, Ramírez reinstalled the collection according to the categories of figuration versus abstraction. She also was a curator of an acclaimed exhibition on the “School of the South and Its Legacy,” which explored the work of Torres-García, who was relatively well known, and his students and followers in Uruguay and Argentina, who were much more obscure. The show enhanced the museum’s reputation and established Ramírez’s. “The hallmark of that show is an academic acuity, and it got her a lot of attention,” says Edward J. Sullivan, a scholar of Latin American art and the dean for the humanities at [New York University](#).

Over the 12 years she worked at the Blanton, Ramírez organized several shows that earned the admiration of other scholars in the field. She also became known for her polemical writings, which adopted a critical line deriving from the Latin American critics of the “cultural hegemony” exerted by the United States (notably Marta Traba) and the Latino identity-politics movement. In scathing terms, she lambasted curators who presented Latin American art as something exotic and folkloric. “It is important to stress that Latin American art is part of the West, it is not hanging out there as neo-Aztec or neo-Mayan culture,” Ramírez says. Later (in an exact reversal of Traba’s trajectory), her attention turned to Constructivist art in which the political content, if it exists, is far more oblique. With her husband, Héctor Olea, a Mexican poet and translator who has a reputation for being even more outspoken and confrontational than Ramírez, she curated the “Heterotopias” exhibition in Madrid in 2000 (a precursor to the “Inverted Utopias” in Houston four years later), a showcase of overwhelming evidence for the sophistication and achievement of modern Latin American art. “I had already written about going ‘beyond the fantastic,’ and I decided to put that into practice,” she told me. The show at the Reina Sofia museum caused a stir among scholars, but it was the widely publicized version in Houston that really rippled the waters. The exhibition’s ravishing display of geometric abstraction, Conceptualism and minimalism was so powerful that some scholars began to fear that the Mexican muralists — those mainstays of Latin American art history whom even Ramírez started out with academically — were now being underrated. “Figurative art, Social

Realist art, has suffered because of this great attention paid to abstraction in exhibitions like 'Inverted Utopias,' which I think is too bad," Sullivan told me. "Ten years ago students would have gravitated toward art that was figurative, probably Mexican. Now students want to do things that are monochromatic, nonfigural, conceptual and geometric or abstract. Mari Carmen has had a lot to do with that. Oiticica and Clark have replaced Diego and Frida — they are a power couple in the public imagination the way Diego and Frida were 10 years ago."

TO FREE HERSELF for the herculean organizational labors of "Heterotopias" in Madrid, Ramírez decelerated her duties at the Blanton. Having been there for 12 years, she says that "the whole experience exhausted itself." But instead of fizzling out, her career at the Blanton ended with a sulfurous bang. Ramírez, who believed that Latin American art should be the central mission of the museum, suddenly felt marginal. Discovering that another curator, Jonathan Bober, had received a substantial salary increase, she angrily confronted the museum director, Jessie Otto Hite. When Hite said the university matched another job offer to Bober and she would try to do her best for Ramírez as well, Ramírez was not appeased. "She literally banged her fists on the table," Hite told me. Ramírez harbored another resentment. Cultivating both private donors and the university president, Bober helped engineer a stupendous coup — the acquisition at a cost of about \$17 million of the so-called Suida-Manning collection, which comprises 250 paintings, 400 drawings and 20 sculptures of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque. In Ramírez's view, this purchase constituted a betrayal. "Even if they didn't think they were abandoning Latin American art, all their efforts were going toward that old masters acquisition," she told me. She was ready to move on; and when Marzio, who worked with her in the past, learned that she was unhappy, he offered her a position.

That might have been the end of it — except that when Ramírez announced her impending departure, Hite told her to stop work on a catalog of the Blanton's collection of Latin American art. "I said, 'Mari, I don't feel comfortable with you continuing to do the catalog,' " Hite recalled. "I felt this was a carrot that would attract the next curator." Ramírez was outraged. Furious at Hite, Ramírez encouraged a campaign by prominent Latin American artists and academics, who barraged Hite with e-mail messages and letters of disapproval. Hite recalled: "She said to me, 'You are going to be undesirable in the world of Latin American art,' I got horrible, bitter letters. I heard she told people I had not been supportive of Latin American art and that once she was gone, there would be no Latin American art program here. I was appalled. I can't conceive of anybody coming here and not understanding how important Latin American art is to our mission. It was too ugly and very mean. I really didn't deserve that." Explaining her motivation, Ramírez told me: "It was a complete disrespect for the intellectual work I had been doing there. I had put in all this time and effort. It was my vision of the collection, and I wanted to conclude it." To let the acrimony dissipate, Hite waited a year before hiring a new Latin American curator, Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro.

In the new building, Pérez-Barreiro integrated the Latin American collection with the museum's American modern and contemporary art. "Thank goodness the Blanton has stopped trying to be the encyclopedic Latin American institution from A to Z," he told me. "We can't do that."

Nobody can.” In contrast to Ramírez, who concentrated on groundbreaking group exhibitions, he has greatly expanded the museum’s acquisition of Latin American art, with an emphasis on more affordable contemporary work. “Mari Carmen did not build this collection,” Hite told me. “Mari Carmen did a lot of good things, but she did a lot of good things for Mari Carmen.” (The museum’s outstanding piece of contemporary Latin American art, however, is a legacy from Ramírez, purchased with an award for her curatorial work: a room-size installation by Cildo Meireles that consists of a floor covered with copper pennies, a narrow pillar composed of communion wafers and a canopy of bleached cattle bones.)

There is no communication between Houston and Austin. “Mari Carmen won’t speak to me,” Pérez-Barreiro says. “She has never even spoken to me to tell me why.” Ramírez’s antipathy for the Blanton, forged in the heat of her departure, has hardened into a contemptuous disapproval of Pérez-Barreiro’s approach to the collection. She suggests that his decision to integrate Latin American art into the broader context of Western art is premature and intellectually dishonest. “He had to build a position against me to establish his own position, so he has been speaking against the specificity of Latin American art,” she said. “People still don’t know who these artists are, they don’t know the difference between Mexico, Brazil and Peru. They think everything south of the border is Frida Kahlo. Until this art is validated at the intellectual level, there is no point in talking about the ‘delusion’ of the specificity of the field. It’s not just one more expression of everything that happened in the United States or Europe. It has its own specificity.”

Ramírez, before moving to Houston in May 2001, negotiated with Marzio to create a research center there to gather and disseminate information on Latin American artists. “I realized the need for research,” she said. “This is a field that has not been taught, has not been systematized, has not been collected, and you can’t embark on a serious effort unless you have the research being done. And I thought that coming here without there being a real collection wouldn’t make sense otherwise.” The International Center for the Arts of the Americas (I.C.A.A.) initiates collaborations with Latin American organizations, like one with the Fundación Gego and the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas that led to the first U.S. retrospective of Gego’s work in Houston in 2002; holds symposiums that result in publications; and sponsors research. Most ambitiously, it is organizing a long-term project of locating and digitizing primary documents in seven Latin American countries and the United States and posting the scanned material on a database and Web site, with synopses and annotations in three languages. The Web site is scheduled to go live at the end of next year. While similar projects exist within individual countries (notably Fundación Espigas in Argentina and Itaú Cultural in Brazil), the I.C.A.A. Web site will cross national boundaries. In addition to building the Web site, the plan is to publish a 13-volume abridged version of these documents in English translation.

The museum has also purchased land for a building for art of the 20th and 21st centuries, which now has no dedicated space. “With the new building, the idea is to really show not just Latin American art but also European, North American and Asian contemporary art all

together," Ramírez told me. "We want to have a general narrative of modernism. Not necessarily the narrative you would find in New York, because it will depend on what is in our collection. And then you would have offshoot galleries with periods of density." A room could exhibit the delicate line drawings and wire constructions of Gego, whose rigorous, sensual art evolved until her death in 1994. Another room might be devoted to "dialogues" — for instance, a paired display of the optically dazzling works of the Venezuelan kinetic artists Cruz-Díez and Soto, who emerged in the late 1950s. Curiously, this scheme echoes the ambitions of the painting and sculpture curators at MoMA, at the time of the reinstallation for the museum's reopening in 2004. The fact that it has never quite come off that way is an indication that (as Marzio kept emphasizing) it will be a challenge for Houston. The Museum of Fine Arts has committed to spending at least \$80 million over 10 years on its Latin American programs.

"The museum has been very clear that Latin American art will have a big role in the new building," Ramírez says. To that end, she has been hunting down iconic works. In an exhibition of recent Latin American acquisitions held in late 2005, a wall label and the museum Web site proclaimed that the pieces in the show constituted "the core of what the M.F.A.H. envisions will one day become the most important collection of Latin American art in the United States." Marzio agrees that this is an audacious claim — the Museum of Modern Art, to take the most obvious contender, began collecting Latin American art decades ago — but he stands by it. "It sounds arrogant, but you have to have goals, and that's our goal," he told me. For her part, Ramírez said, "We are using 'Inverted Utopias' as a kind of blueprint for the artists and works that we aspire to."

Even before arriving in Houston, she demonstrated the effectiveness of her partnership with Marzio by setting her sights on an important wire-web tapestry that Gego produced for a textile show in Lausanne in 1975. A Venezuelan curator, Iris Peruga, who was preparing a large Gego retrospective in Caracas, traced the work to the AT&T corporate collection in New Jersey, but her letter there went unanswered. Peruga mentioned this to Ramírez, who was planning "Heterotopias" in Madrid at the time. Ramírez contacted AT&T and obtained the piece on loan for the exhibition, having it restored at the Reina Sofia Museum. "When Peter came to see the show — I already knew I was coming here to Houston — I said: 'Do you know anyone at AT&T? I think it would be great to have this in our collection,' " Ramírez told me. "He said, 'Of course.' So when he got back, he wrote a letter." With the passionate support of AT&T executives in Houston and New York, Ramírez and Marzio persuaded the corporation to donate the work to the museum. "That was the first piece to enter the new Latin American collection," Ramírez says proudly.

Ramírez is building the Houston collection with swashbuckling — some say piratical — flair. When she acquired two major watercolors by the mid-20th-century Argentine painter Xul Solar from the Buenos Aires foundation (and museum) that administers the artist's estate, some curators of Latin American art were startled to learn that the pieces were available for sale. They weren't. "Xul Solar is an artist who has had some degree of visibility outside Argentina, but not a great deal," Ramírez told me. "No U.S. museum had organized a major exhibition."

She met with the foundation's director to discuss staging a retrospective (eventually, Houston took a show that originated at a Buenos Aires museum). She also discussed the possibility of acquiring significant paintings. "He said it was very important that we have really good work, even if it meant selling us two works from this collection, because it would do more good for Xul Solar than they could do," Ramírez told me.

With Marzio's active involvement, Houston also purchased a unique holding of Brazilian Constructivist geometric art from a São Paulo collector, Adolpho Leirner, who was trying without success for a decade to sell the intact group within Brazil. "I decided for Houston because, first, of the seriousness of Mari Carmen in looking toward Latin American art," Leirner told me. "The museum is studying Latin American art. They want to publish books, they hold seminars, they are sending collections abroad. They are very serious." Marzio and Ramírez also promised that the collection would be kept united under his name, and much of it would be on display in the new building. "I didn't have any other serious offer that I bothered about, because I didn't like the philosophy behind them," he said. "They didn't have the background to give the collection the importance it deserves."

Among the would-be buyers who approached Leirner was Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, who has assembled the leading private collection of Latin American art. The fanfare accompanying the Houston initiatives contrasts with Cisneros's methodical, below-the-radar activity. Starting in the 1970s, when she had scant competition for the geometric abstractions that she particularly loves, Cisneros did something that was very unusual — she bought art from the entire continent, not just from her native land, Venezuela. She told me that her approach was "totally the influence" of her husband, Gustavo Cisneros, the Venezuelan telecommunications and media billionaire, who has "always looked beyond the borders of Venezuela in his business and in our travels." She began the collection slowly. "I had a very strict limit on what I was spending at that time, and it really was very small," she told me. "I was just lucky. It was my aesthetic." That aesthetic was imprinted in the Venezuela of her youth, when large public projects in Caracas by kinetic artists like Soto and Cruz-Díez became the progressive emblems of a short-lived liberal democratic regime. As she investigated, Cisneros felt a rapport for the avant-garde artists in other South American countries. Hiring curatorial consultants, she made careful selections, based on each work's inherent value and historical significance. "Patty was buying mostly out of the artists' studios, so the impact on the art market was minimal," says Pérez-Barreiro, who is about to leave Austin to become director of the Cisneros collection in New York. "She was buying very quietly, with professional curators out doing it. That all changed when the Museum of Fine Arts started throwing money at it. At the art fairs, the dealers say, 'Houston has been looking at this.' They only have to breathe on it for the prices to go up." Paulo Herkenhoff, a prominent Brazilian curator who was instrumental in assembling the Cisneros collection, told me: "Mrs. Cisneros was very discreet. She was dealing with three or four dealers. She did not want to disturb the market. She did it very calmly. She never said, 'This is very cheap, let me buy a dozen.' "

ONCE HER COLLECTION was essentially constituted, Cisneros — who has homes in

Venezuela, New York and the Dominican Republic — toured portions of it in well-thought-out exhibitions that were supported by scholarly catalogs. Educated here (her mother was American), Cisneros says: “The entire continent has always been on the back burner in the United States. The ultimate goal is to have Latin America be part of the universal lexicon of art.” A longtime trustee at the Museum of Modern Art, Cisneros is succeeding in getting major works from Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina (many were her gifts) onto its walls. Both [Glenn Lowry](#), the museum’s director, and John Elderfield, the chief curator of painting and sculpture, have endorsed that mission. (In the tightly overlapping circles of the art world, Elderfield is married to Cisneros’s press representative.) Although Cisneros told me she is not ready to announce the ultimate disposition of her collection, there is a widespread assumption that, at the very least, a great portion of it will wind up at MoMA. “She always had in mind MoMA for this collection, from the beginning,” Herkenhoff says. “MoMA is manifest destiny.”

Compared with the soft-spoken Cisneros — who, after all, has little to prove — Ramírez makes lots of noise. “Mari Carmen is not a quiet person, and she is not shy,” says Sullivan of New York University. “If she were, she would probably never have accomplished what she has.” Pérez-Barreiro told me that a Gego drawing that less than a decade ago would fetch \$6,000 now goes for \$150,000, following the Gego retrospective in Houston. Virgilio Garza, head of Latin American pictures for Christie’s New York, said the Oiticica show in Houston contributed to a similar phenomenon: an Oiticica work on paper would go at auction five years ago for \$14,000, but the last one Garza saw, in a Brazilian gallery, had an asking price of \$140,000. Not just Ramírez’s exhibitions but also her acquisitions draw attention. In a constant crunching of gears, the desire of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, to establish its reputation strips away its means to build the collection. “She makes a purchase, and then three other people buy the same artist, and the prices go way up,” Marzio told me. “That certainly happened with Gego. She was worried about it. But I said, ‘Hey, there’s nothing you can do about it.’ ” That is especially true since the affirming din of publicity is, in one sense, useful: it encourages Houston donors to finance additional purchases.

Among the other public institutions that are actively acquiring Latin American art, the Blanton under Pérez-Barreiro is one that focused on contemporary art, which was within his budget and to his taste. (As both Pérez-Barreiro and Hite, the director, have just stepped down from their positions, the Blanton’s future course is uncertain.) The Tate Modern has also been buying contemporary Latin American art. “The Tate is not looking for the art object,” says Cuauhtémoc Medina, the Mexico City-based Tate associate curator of Latin American art. “Artists are bought on the basis of their importance, but also on the basis of their interactions with other works in the collection. You are trying to locate ways of practice that have an interaction with the way in which contemporary art is moving forward.” The Tate curators — and, in a more dilute way, their colleagues at MoMA — like to cross geographical and chronological lines to highlight kinships: a Hélio Oiticica painted box filled with colorful fabric and dirt, next to a stone-and-mirror sculpture by Robert Smithson; a sagging net of woven rice-paper made by Mira Schendel and a rope piece by Eva Hesse; a Madi Group artist’s shaped canvas and one by [Frank Stella](#).

At Houston, Ramírez is trying on a larger stage what she began in Austin: to study and publicize Latin American artists who have been underappreciated or misunderstood. Her emphasis on the need for “specificity” as a prerequisite to full integration recalls the arguments of some feminists for the virtues of single-sex education: a full mixing is the ultimate goal, but there is much preparation needed beforehand. At other institutions, you get the sense that Latin American art has arrived, but in Houston, the battle is still being lustily waged.

“Obviously, in my case I have been operating from the margins, whether in Puerto Rico or in Texas,” Ramírez told me. “And I also have been representing or standing for artists who have been marginal until very recently. I used to keep a file, which I have somewhere, of all the institutions that turned down the exhibitions I proposed while I was working at the Blanton, exhibitions that they turned down because they had not heard of artists like León Ferrari and Gego, who are now the artists everyone is fighting for.”

At the outset of her career, Ramírez favored overtly political artists and adopted a critical line that was deeply influenced by the Latin American New Left and the Latino movement. Later, she widened her embrace to include abstraction. Despite this shift, her personal strategy would be readily comprehensible to both schools. The center will always exert a pull; but each time you come close to the center, you must remember: never stop thinking about the edges.

Arthur Lubow is a contributing writer for the magazine. His most recent article was about the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang.

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