Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America (review)

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helpless victims of the vice trade, *Compromised Positions* makes an invaluable addition to this literature.

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Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America. By Jacqueline Barnitz. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. Pp. xxii, 400. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $70.00 cloth; $34.95 paper.

This book, intended as a text for art history courses on the twentieth century in Latin America or as reference work, will fill those functions very well. The illustrations, most in color, are copious, well chosen, and clear, and the text is excellent. Barnitz writes with a minimum of technical jargon. She does not assume that her readers have much knowledge of the history of Western art or Latin America, so she offers historical and art-historical background information as necessary. Occasional small errors creep in—the text misidentifies the widely-circulated Mexican magazine of the 1920s, *El Universal Ilustrado* as an "Estridentista journal" (p. 44) for example—but the standard of accuracy seems remarkably high given the overwhelming size of the topic.

Like many textbooks, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* makes an argument without being explicit about it. Rather, its argument lies in the shape of the book—in its omissions, inclusions, and organization of an unwieldy mass of data and imagery. Other large works on this subject have divided it up by nation, as Edward J. Sullivan did as editor of *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1996), for a more encyclopedic approach. Barnitz, by contrast, organizes the topic of twentieth century art by art movements, schools, or affiliations—modernism, surrealism, and so forth—across Latin America. In so doing, she makes two seemingly contradictory claims. First, her method of approach to the topic implies unity across a wildly diverse region, even as Barnitz writes that she sees "not a single continental identity but . . . a mosaic of distinct identities" (p. 1). Second, the organizing plan of this text supports the author's claim that Latin American painting and sculpture is "Western art" (p. xvii), part of the same visual and intellectual tradition as Western European and North American art. Thus, Barnitz argues for a single canon of Latin American art, but at the same time, avoids distinguishing it sharply from the canonical art of the rest of the world.

This has advantages and disadvantages, as any organizational schema might. Emphasizing Latin American art's place within the Western tradition does help to explain why, for long stretches of the twentieth century, the cultural centers of Latin America have been located in Paris, New York, and perhaps Los Angeles as much as Mexico City and São Paulo. The thematic focus of the book imposes a useful simplicity, too. Doing away with the national contexts for most of the artworks mentioned means that systems of patronage (a lively topic in the history of art and, in the form of "museum studies," also of interest recently to historians of Latin Amer-

ica) require little description or analysis. For similar reasons, the book looks only at European-style high art—it concentrates on painting, with some attention to architecture, photography, printmaking, and sculpture—allowing Barnitz to omit discussion of genres of image-making which have existed on the borders between high art, commerce, and folk expression. No Andean itinerant photographers, Chicano low riders, Chilean quilters, or Mexican retablo painters complicate the story.

Even within the traditional boundaries of art history, Barnitz shifts emphasis from the Mexican muralists and other political art toward abstract painters. (This perhaps explains the omission of any reference to art from Puerto Rico and the Central American nations, where politics has commanded artists' attention almost exclusively—or as Barnitz puts it, they "followed the Mexican model"[p. xvii].) The comparison between *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* and Edward Lucie-Smith's shorter *Latin American Art of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1993) is instructive. Lucie-Smith devoted an entire chapter to Diego Rivera and other Mexican muralists, with another chapter on muralists in the rest of Latin America. Barnitz, too, devoted one chapter to a single artist and his school, but she chose to concentrate on the Uruguayan painter/theorist Joaquín Torres-García, whose geometric abstractions influenced later Latin American artists precisely "because of his rejection of naturalism, narrative, and ideological content" (p. 127). In a subtle way, Barnitz is—here and elsewhere—proposing an alternative canon for Latin American art, one which places formal beauty and innovation above narrative interest or political engagement.

Of course, this is not an easy move to make in looking at Latin American art, and Barnitz does not stick with it rigidly. Rather, she is delightfully undogmatic and eclectic in her decisions about which artworks to include and how to interpret them. *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* does not ignore political content where it is unavoidably present, as in the paintings of Fernando Botero; and it has a whole chapter on political art of the 1970s. Even better, the text makes room for a few artists whose work seems to lie beyond the bounds of any explanatory or organizational scheme at all. As a non-specialist, I was delighted to discover Armando Reverón in this text: he was a Venezuelan whose work in the 1930s involved filling his isolated beach house with "life-size rag dolls he had made," which he "treated like members of his family," including posing with them for some spooky self-portraits (p. 34). This thorough, thoughtful survey is full of weird little surprises like that one; it is, all at once, an invaluable starting point for the study of modern Latin American art, an interesting intervention in current arguments about culture in Latin America, and simply a delight for anyone interested in the region or in visual art.

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