



Latino art: more questions to answer
A survey that is sometimes contradictory and confusing

By Sophie Davis. From Frieze New York daily edition
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The Miami-born sculptor Teresita Fernández is one of the artists included in the survey. Photo: Adam Golfer

In one of the introductory essays in *Our America: the Latino Presence in American Art*, the curator E. Carmen-Ramos explains that the book begins from the “simple assertion” that Latino art is an integral part of the art of the US. But the more one reads this ambitious book, the more dissatisfied one becomes with the very term “Latino art”—which is precisely, it would seem, the aim of the authors.

This survey, which was published to accompany an exhibition of the same name that closed in March at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, is an overview of so-called Latino artists working in the US from the mid-20th century to the present day. It begins with a two-pronged, seemingly contradictory claim: that Latino art is already integrated into the art of the US, but also that the authors wish to “support the meaningful integration of Latino art into American art”. Which raises the question: is Latino art integrated into the art of North America or not?

This is a difficult question to answer. It is this grey area that the book explores, and its attempt to change perceptions about an under-represented artistic form is a noble one. What’s more, with more than 50 million people in the US identifying themselves as Hispanic or Latino, surveying Latino artists in this way is a challenge—but one that needs to be undertaken (there are frequent complaints that Latino artists are under-represented in major American museums). More challenging yet, a number of Latino artists working in the country in the 20th century showed no interest in asserting their ethnic identity. Rather, they worked within mainstream contemporary traditions and some even pioneered new movements.

Arguably, this is where the book becomes more interesting. Of the 72 artists covered, only some of them are concerned with so-called Latino themes. Others were distinctly unpoliticised in their approach to art. Take, for instance, the Miami-born sculptor Teresita Fernández, who creates immersive works, often using processed materials that suggest natural forms. Her work is said to build upon the tradition of Minimalist sculpture, and the book cites artists such as Richard Serra and Robert Morris as her predecessors.

Fernandez, however, does not link her artistic practice to her Latino origins, and the book does not attempt to either. She is already a lauded artist, having received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2003 and the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2005. She was appointed to the US Commission of Fine Arts in 2011. The danger here is that the authors are appropriating a successful artist, whose Latino “credentials” are unclear, to make a point about the integration of some artists into American culture. With the authors pushing their argument to its limits, one occasionally feels that they are stretching their definition of Latino art too far.

This also helps to shake the foundations of the book itself, which are already precarious. At no point do we feel relaxed about what the term “Latino art” is meant to describe. Given the authors’ endless questioning of what the phrase actually means, the book can, at times, feel like a dry academic exercise.

It might have been more useful to focus the book, and duly the exhibition, on several smaller movements or periods within Latino art. The Chicano Movement, fighting for Mexican-American civil rights, which emerged in the 1960s, would be an obvious choice. The book weaves this politicised movement into its overall narrative, but its insight is limited, presumably because the authors did not want to prioritise one movement or artist over any other. Unfortunately, this means that we are in danger of finishing the book knowing everything, and nothing, about Latino art. We have a very good notion of the number and diversity of Latino artists working in the US, but it is hard to see how they fit together. The term “Latino” also starts to seem slippery and evasive.

What we do know is that there are no easy answers to the question “what is Latino art?” This book is an extensive inquiry that is as fascinating as it is confusing. It lacks uniformity and cohesion, and does not create an easily digestible definition of Latino art—but in the end, this is perhaps the book’s greatest strength. In giving a broad and diverse account of the different individuals of Latino origin at work in the US, the book challenges preconceptions.

By the end, we have a true sense of the movement and diversity that characterised the latter half of the 20th century, politically, socially and artistically. For those interested in a realistic picture of artistic diversity, this is a worthwhile, if at times arduous, read.

Our America: the Latino Presence in American Art

E. Carmen-Ramos; introduction by Tomás Ybarra-Fraustro

Dan Giles, 368pp, £40 (hb)