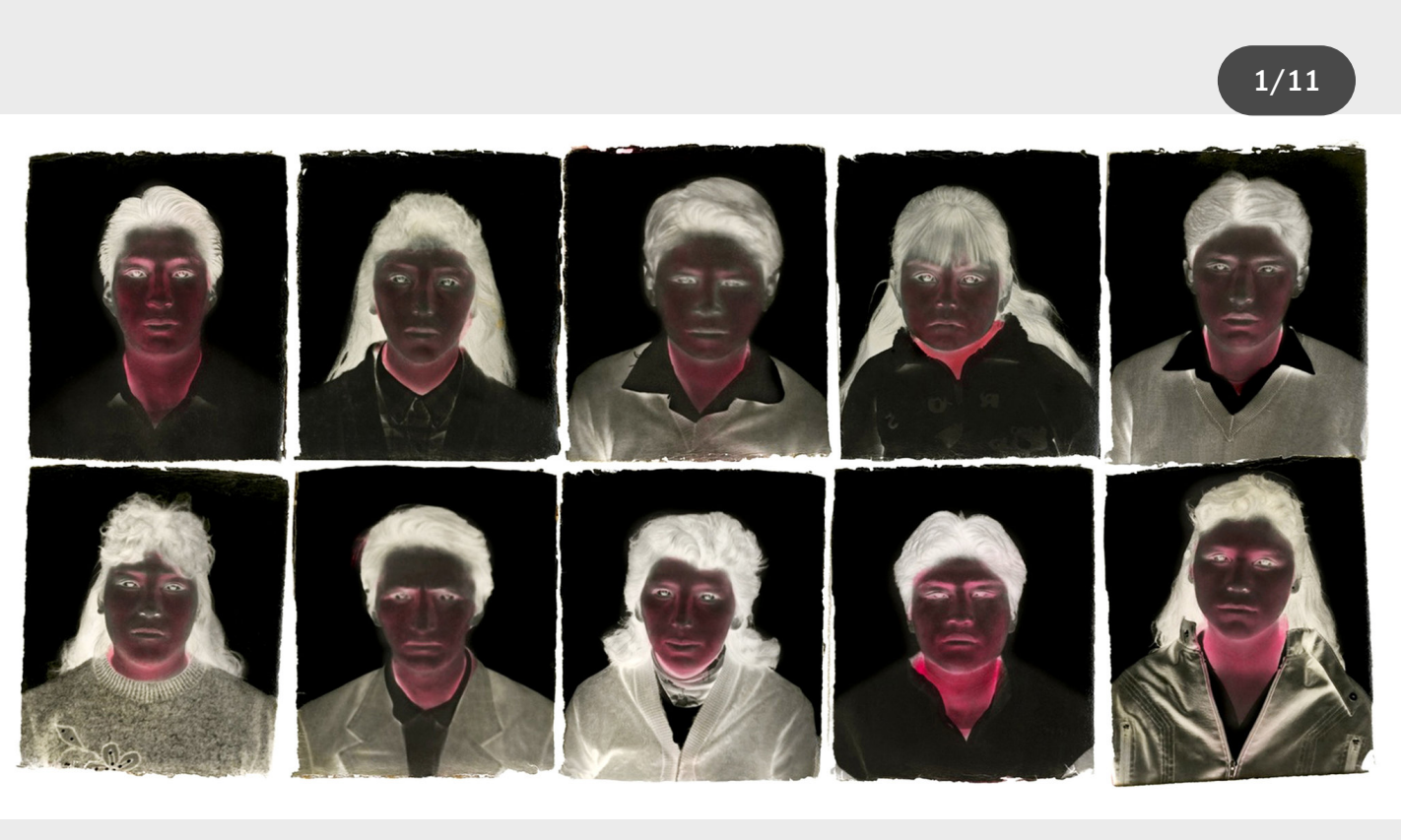
ADVERTISEMENT

ART REVIEW

In an Ironic Lens, a Latin Myth Evaporates

Share full article

1/11



Milagros de la Torre’s “Under the Black Sun,” Cuzco, 1993, one of the works in the exhibition “Urbes Mutantes: Latin American Photography 1944-2013” at the International Center of Photography. Milagros de la Torre, Collection Leticia and Stanislas Poniatowski

By **Holland Cotter**
June 19, 2014

A Latin American spring is about to turn into a Latin American summer in New York City art museums. Purely, it seems, by chance, a record number of institutions have recently opened significant shows of work from South America and the Caribbean. The International Center of Photography, as usual one step ahead of the curve, has two.

The larger, “Urbes Mutantes: Latin American Photography 1944-2013,” is a roomy survey of some 200 small, mostly black-and-white pictures that fit, with trimming and squeezing, into the genre of “street photography.” The second is a solo devoted to a single artist, the contemporary Brazilian photographer Caio Reisewitz, whose big color images of tropical rain forests offer a lush antidote to urban grit, Manhattan’s included.

“Urbes Mutantes” — “Mutant Cities” — comes with potential liabilities. Street photography, roughly defined as documentary-style pictures of ordinary city life, has had, by now, a long and somewhat shopworn history. It gains interest here, though, because nothing about life in the eight countries represented — Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela — seems ordinary at all, at least as seen through artists’ eyes.

The survey format can be a chore to navigate unless sharpened with a narrative or propelled by a concrete theme. Neither is in evidence here, yet the exhibition, sorted out under loose labels, works. Looseness, in this case, feels like strategy.

ADVERTISEMENT

WALLACE CHAN
TRANSCENDENCE

19 April - 30 September 2024
Santa Maria della Pietà, Venice

It encourages you to drift, take in pictures slowly, one by one, as separate events rather than parts of a scripted flow. And it accommodates images that not only move beyond genre — there’s some decidedly nonstreet photography here — but also beyond stereotypes customarily called on to package art as “Latin American.” Those stereotypes are here, but so is a whole lot else.

A section devoted entirely to images of city walls gives a sense of the variety. One of the earlier photographers here, Héctor García (1923-2012), seems to have been inspired by the revolutionary fervor of the Mexican mural painting tradition in his photographs of striking workers. But so, in a very different way, and for entirely unsentimental reasons, is one of the youngest participants, Maya Goded, in 2005.

Roberto Fantozzi finds the components of serene still life — a hat hanging from a nail, a toothbrush left on a shelf — on a shadowed wall in Cuzco, Peru, in 1979. In a 1963 photograph by Daniel González, who was at the time a member of an avant-garde Venezuelan group called the Techo de la Ballena, or the Whale’s Roof, a punched-through outdoor wall is a proscenium framing a drama: a second wall scrawled with passionate emblems (an impaled heart) and violent words (“Our hate will be implacable, and war will be carried out until death”), and, in a distance, the skyscrapers of a newly wealthy Caracas standing like targets in a gun sight.

To the Swiss-born photographer Barbara Brändli the wall, in her adopted city, Caracas, was a chaos of advertising copy and directional signage. To the Colombian photojournalist Fernell Franco (1942-2006), it was an abstract span of blistered plaster, but also a relic of a beloved city, Cali, then under demolition. And to an activist-artist like Eduardo Villanes, a wall was a political platform.

In 1992, in his home city, Lima, Peru, a military death squad abducted, tortured and murdered nine university students and a professor and buried the bodies; two years later, the remains were exhumed and delivered to their families in cartons for cans of evaporated milk. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Villanes plastered the word “Evaporados” — evaporated — in huge letters on a highly visible stretch of a Lima freeway and photographed his handiwork.

155 X CÂMARA INSTAMATIC
Kodak
TEATRO
CACILDA BECKER

Paolo Gasparini’s “This Sky We See Here” (1972). Paolo Gasparini, Collection Leticia and Stanislas Poniatowski

As different as they are, all the pictures in this section share one notable feature: They are practically empty of street life. The human figure, the standard vehicle for stories and emotions, not to mention cultural clichés, is missing. Possibly this reflects balances in the source from which the show is drawn. Everything comes from a single private collection, owned by Leticia and Stanislas Poniatowski.

More likely, the choice is deliberate. The playing down of the human presence here, and in another section devoted to architecture, is in line with the clear aim of the exhibition’s organizers — Alexis Fabry, curator of the Poniatowski collection, and María Wills, a curator at the Museo de Arte del Banco de la República in Bogotá, where “Urbes Mutantes” originated — to break with an ethnographic view of Latin America as poor, backward and regressively religious that is fixed in North American minds.

And when figures do appear — they dominate much of the rest of show — they come in hard-to-pin-down varieties: politicians, pool players, office workers, lovers, prostitutes, prisoners, students, athletes, peasants, soldiers, revolutionaries, children. There’s a sprinkling of V.I.P.s. Frida Kahlo shows up, courtesy of Lola Álvarez Bravo. So does Fidel Castro, though secondhand (on the cover of a book). But the most alluring celebrities are those that photographers help create: the Chilean cross-dresser named Evelyn in Paz Errázuriz’s portraits; Armando Cristeto‘s Mexican bodybuilders; the tenderly kissing couple shot by Roberto Fontana in a psychiatric hospital.

Images of poverty and violence are here, too, many and moving. Indigenous peoples, at the bottom of the economic heap, look stranded and lost in cities, judging by the too few pictures of them. By contrast, documents of the political terrors of the 20th century are everywhere. In a 1986 picture by the Chilean photographer Claudio Pérez, an exhausted anti-Pinochet protester leans his head on the arm of a riot policeman who’s pulling him into van to an unknown fate. Thirteen years earlier, Christián Montecino (1946-73) had documented just such arrests before being kidnapped and killed.

These events and visual records are the meat of a continent’s history, though that history has other facets, too. It’s there in Paolo Gasparini’s shots of shop windows, as packed with period information as Warhol’s time capsules; in Luis Molina-Pantin‘s photos of narcotectural mansions built by Colombian drug lords; in Milagros de la Torre’s hand-tinted “racially improved” versions of Cuzco street portraits; and in Alexander Apostól’s 1994 self-portrait as a skinny, wedge-headed Latin American punk backed into a corner and ready to pounce.

Mr. Apóstol has newer work of a very different kind, in “Beyond the Supersquare” at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, a fascinating meditation on the complex relationship between Latin American design and Modernism. And that connection also turns up in the International Center of Photography’s Caio Reisewitz show, organized by Christopher Phillips.

Mr. Reisewitz’s pictures, with their visions of dense subtropical growth and extravagant colonial church interiors, seem to project exactly the exoticized Latin-Americanness that the large show tries to avoid. Yet his images of fecund wilderness are not what they seem. In reality, the jungle he photographs is a last stand of Atlantic rain forest under continuing siege. In one picture of just-cleared land, smoke is rising from the earth; in another, an exposed patch of the area’s famously fertile orange soil looks fire red.

The forest itself is only about 100 miles from São Paulo, which, architecturally, with its Oscar Niemeyer designs, is a Modernist city par excellence. You see it rising, blinding white, in the distance, and its edges are spreading, the way European culture and religion spread unstoppably over the centuries in the so-called New World. He gives the invasiveness visual form in digital collages that splice together country and town. In them, police with shields march the forest floor; the slums of Rio de Janeiro hang from trees. Eden is diseased.

Yet in one 2010 photograph, the energy is different, calm. It’s a straightforward shot of the Casa das Canoas, the house that Niemeyer built for himself in the hills of Rio. He walled it almost entirely in glass and surrounded it with high bushes and trees. He wanted to have the effect of vegetation entering the rooms, and that’s the illusion captured in Mr. Reisewitz’s picture.

It’s a picture of a perpetually mutating house. Indoors becoming outdoors. Culture becoming nature. Old becoming truly new. Hope — maybe hope against hope — is the takeaway from this lovely picture and show, as it is from the rich, unspectacular, evenhanded survey. To the “Latin America” our museums have long given us, we say goodbye.

“Urbes Mutantes: Latin American Photography 1944-2013” and “Caio Reisewitz” run through Sept. 7 at the International Center of Photography, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, at 43rd Street; 212-857-0000, icp.org.

A version of this article appears in print on June 20, 2014, Section C, Page 21 of the New York edition with the headline: In an Ironic Lens, a Latin Myth Evaporates. Order Reprints | Today’s Paper | Subscribe

Share full article

Art and Museums in New York City

A guide to the shows, exhibitions and artists shaping the city’s cultural landscape.

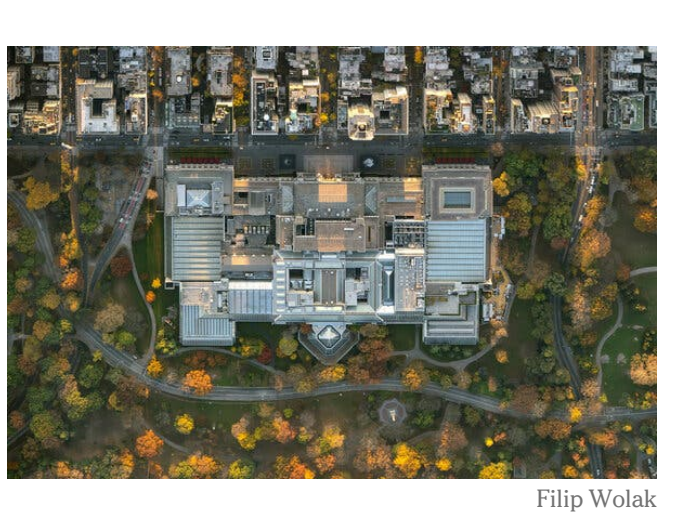
- At the Shed, this year’s edition of Frieze New York welcomes an international survey of painting, textiles and collage to its galleries. Here are our critic’s 23 favorite booths.
- The Kosovar artist Petrit Halilaj began drawing as a child in the Balkans during a violent decade. His world of childhood innocence and adult experience comes to the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- As his bullet-riddled panels go up at Gagosian, Maurizio Cattelan, in a rare in-person interview, tells why he turned his sardonic gaze on a violence-filled world.
- In his biggest exhibit since a 2013 retrospective at the Guggenheim, Christopher Wool has created his own show in an uninhabited office in Manhattan’s Financial District.
- Looking for more art in the city? Here are the gallery shows not to miss in May.

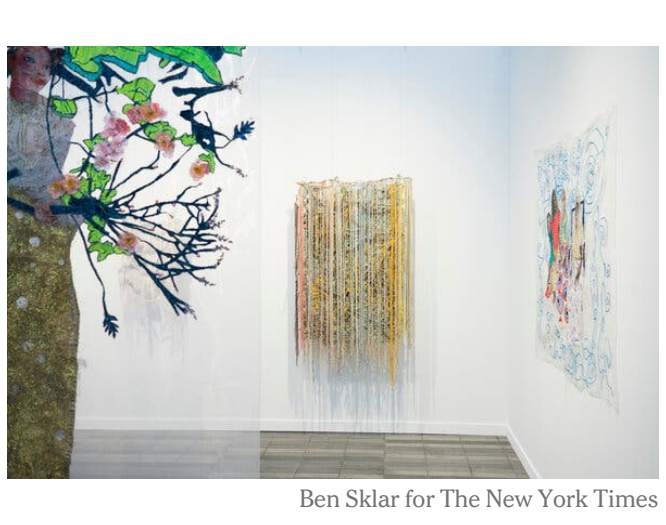
More In Art & Design

Jeenah Moon for The New York Times
Standouts at NADA New York, the Fair for Up-and-Comers

Mario Tama/Getty Images
Court Says Italy Is Rightful Owner of Bronze Held by Getty Museum

Ahmed Gaber for The New York Times
Where Are Young Art Collectors and Museum Donors?


Filip Wolak
Met Museum Reaches Fund-Raising Goal for New Modern Wing

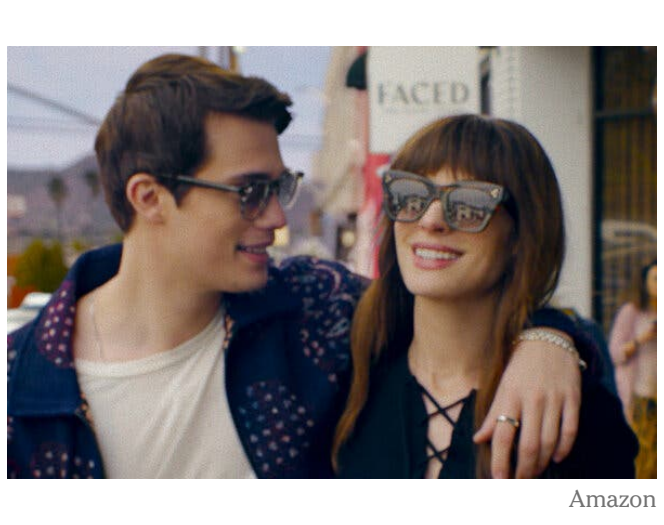

Ben Sklar for The New York Times
Frieze New York Brings a Rich, Cross-Cultural Mix

George Etheredge for The New York Times
Going to TEFAF New York? Here are 4 Shows You Can Walk to.

Editors’ Picks

NBCUniversal
‘Saturday Night Live’ Welcomes Dua Lipa and Jerry Seinfeld

Maria Magdalena Arrellaga for The New York Times
Madonna Brings Massive Free Concert to Rio, Capping Celebration Tour


Amazon
8 New Movies Our Critics Are Talking About This Week

Trending in The Times

How Bad Are Ultraprocessed Foods, Really?
Book Review: ‘Tits Up’ Aims to Show Breasts a Respect Long Overdue
Opinion: I’m a Doctor. I Was Unprepared When I Got This Disease.
The Loneliness Curve
How Do I Know if My Untucked Shirt Is Too Long?
Airline Agrees to Pay $79 Million After Selling Tickets for Canceled Flights
These Couples Survived a Lot. Then Came Retirement.
How to Know When a Good Dog Has Gone Bad
Opinion: Trump Knows Dominance Wins. Someone Tell Democrats.
Condé Nast Employees Threaten to Walk Off Job on Eve of Met Gala

The New York Times
Go to Home Page »

NEWS
Home Page
U.S.
World
Politics
New York
Education
Sports
Business
Tech
Science
Weather
The Great Read
Obituaries

ARTS
Books
Best Sellers Book List
Dance
Movies
Music
Pop Culture
Television
Theater
Visual Arts

LIFESTYLE
Health
Well
Food
Restaurant Reviews
Love
Travel
Style
Fashion
Real Estate
T Magazine

OPINION
Today's Opinion
Columnists
Editorials
Guest Essays
Op-Docs
Letters
Sunday Opinion
Opinion Video
Opinion Audio

MORE
Audio
Games
Cooking
Wirecutter
The Athletic
Jobs
Video
Graphics
Trending
Live Events
Corrections
Reader Center
TimesMachine

ACCOUNT
Subscribe
Manage My Account
Home Delivery
Gift Subscriptions
Group Subscriptions
Gift Articles
Email Newsletters
NYT Licensing
Replica Edition
Times Store

Enjoy unlimited access to all of The Times.

6-MONTH WELCOME OFFER
~~€3~~ €0.50/week
Learn more