



**Smithsonian Institution**

*Archives of American Art*

## **Mel Casas papers: Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1988-1989**

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as their own remain rich, complex sources. Their challenge lies rather in translating their ingrained culture into viable, relevant, expressive artistic terms.

A further challenge faces Latin American artists working in the United States, recently lumped together under the term "Hispanic". Transplantation brings the exciting yet often difficult "aculturación", the adjustment to and absorption of a different culture. This process prompts a rethinking, if not a rediscovery, of the original cultural orientation, as it is compared to, or even threatened by, the new one. Though not as intensely, this process also applies to the small group of participating artists born in the United States whose ties to the culture of their parents remain strong.

For cultural transplants, disentangling who they were from who they are becoming assumes crucial importance. The observation of the inner self in transition serves as a mode of adaptation, of self-centering, even of self-protection. The ultimate challenge, then, lies in retaining the vital, irreducible parts of the hereditary identity while projecting a new, independent one into the future.

The artists in this exhibition are engaged in meeting both these challenges. They have undertaken what critic Marta Traba described as a healthy "mestizaje cultural" (cultural cross-breeding whereby they accept influences from a different culture without being assimilated by it. Whether inclined towards abstraction or figuration, the real or the imagined, each draws from the old and adds from the new to express their changing selves.

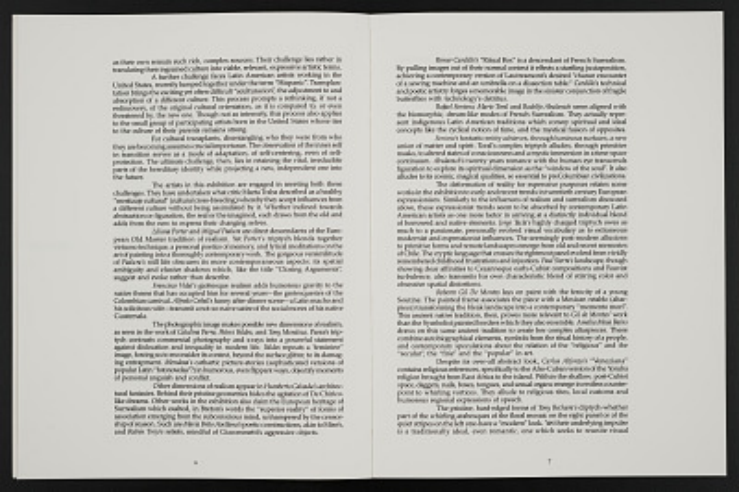
Francisco Vidal's giottesque realism adds humorous gravity to the native theme that has occupied him for several years—the grotesqueries of the Colombian carnival. Alfredo Ceibal's funny after-dinner scene—a Latin macho and his solicitous wife—transmit a not-so-native satire of the social mores of his native Guatemala.

The photographic image makes possible new dimensions of realism, as seen in the work of Catalina Parra, Patssi Valdes, and Tony Mendoza. Parra's triptych contrasts commercial photography and x-rays into a powerful statement against dislocation and inequality in modern life. Valdes repeats a "feminine" image, forcing us to reconsider its context, beyond the surface glitter, to its damaging entrapment. Mendoza's cathartic picture-stories (sophisticated versions of popular Latin "fotonovelas"?) in humorous, even flippant ways, objectify movements of personal anguish and conflict.

Other dimensions of realism appear in Humberto Calzada's architectural fantasies. Behind their pristine geometries hides the agitation of De Chirico-like dreams. Other works in the exhibition also claim the European heritage of Surrealism which exalted, in Breton's words the "superior reality" of forms of association emerging from the subconscious mind, unhampered by the censorship of reason. Such are Maria Brito Avellana's poetic constructions, akin to Miro's, and Rubén Trejo's reliefs, mindful of Giacometti's aggressive objects.

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Rimer Cardillo's "Ritual Box" is a descendant of French Surrealism. By



pulling images out of their normal context it effects a startling juxtaposition, achieving a contemporary version of Lautreamont's desired "chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table." Cardillo's technical and poetic artistry forges a memorable image in the sinister conjunction of fragile butterflies with technology's detritus.

Rafael Soriano, Mario Toral, and Rodolfo Abularach seem aligned with the biomorphic, dream-like modes of French Surrealism. They actually represent indigenous Latin American traditions which convey spiritual and ideal concepts like the cyclical notion of time, and the mystical fusion of opposites.

Soriano's fantastic entity achieves, through luminous surfaces, a new union of matter and spirit. Toral's complex triptych alludes, through primitive masks, to altered states of consciousness and a mystic immersion in a time-space continuum. Abularach's twenty years romance with the human eye transcends figuration to explore its spiritual dimension as the "window of the soul." It also alludes to its cosmic, magical qualities, so essential to preColumbian civilizations.

The deformation of reality for expressive purposes relates some works in the exhibition to early and recent trends in twentieth century European expressionism. Similarly to the influences of realism and surrealism discussed above, these expressionist trends seem to be absorbed by contemporary Latin American artists as one more factor in arriving at a distinctly individual blend of borrowed and native elements. Jorge Tacia's highly charged triptych owes as much to a passionate, personally evolved visual vocabulary as to extraneous modernist and expressionist influences. The seemingly post-modern allusions to primitive forms and remote landscapes emerge from old and recent memories of Chile. The cryptic language that crosses the rightmost panel evolved from vividly remembered childhood frustrations and injustices. Paul Sierra's landscape, though showing clear affinities to Cezannesque early-Cubist compositions and Fauvist turbulence, also transmits his own characteristic blend of stirring color and obsessive spatial distortions.

Roberto Gil De Montes lays on paint with the ferocity of a young Soutine. The painted frame associates the piece with a Mexican retablo (altarpiece) transforming the bleak landscape into a contemporary "memento mori". This ancient native tradition, then, proves more relevant to Gil de Montes' work than the Symbolist painted borders which they also resemble. Amalia Mesa Bains draws on this same ancient tradition to create her complex altarpieces. These combine autobiographical elements, symbols from the ritual history of a people, and contemporary speculations about the relation of the "religious" and the "secular", the "fine" and the "popular" in art.

Despite its over-all abstract look Carlos Alfonzo's "Veneziana" contains religious references, specifically to Afro-Cuban version of the Yoruba religion brought from East Africa to the island. Within the shallow, post-Cubist space, daggers, nails, boxes, tongues, and sexual organs emerge in restless counterpoint to whirling vortices. They allude to religious rites, local customs and humorous regional expressions of speech.

The pristine, hard-edged forms of Tony Bechara's diptych-whether part

of the whirling arabesques of the floral mosaic on the right panel of of  
the quiet stripes on the left one-have a "modern" look. Yet their  
underlying impulse is a traditionally ideal, even romantic, one which  
seeks to reunite visual

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