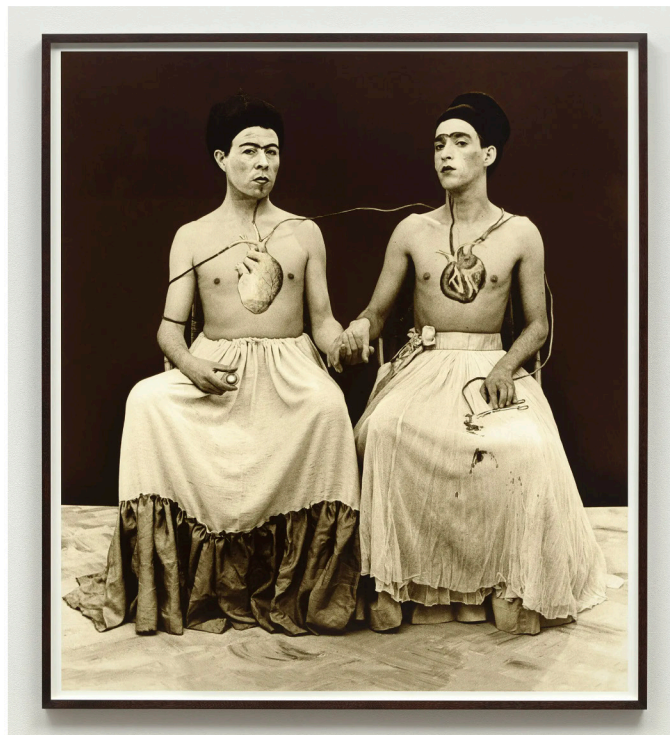


Tanya Leighton

The New York Times

Latin American Artists Reinvent Their Histories

Our critic says “Chosen Memories” at MoMA is one of the most stirring recent collection shows. The theme of change and instability is a binding thread.



“Las Dos Fridas (The Two Fridas),” 1989, by the collective Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis, an AIDS-era riff on Frida Kahlo’s famed double self-portrait, from “Chosen Memories,” at the Museum of Modern Art. D21 Proyectos de Arte, Santiago de Chile

The land of the brave and home of the free has always been bearish about borders, about who gets in, who stays out. Politically we’re feeling that tension hugely now. And it’s always been evident culturally in, for example, the kind of art our museums have brought through the door.

The New York Times, June 2023

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin

+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton

The Museum of Modern Art's [long but sporadic pattern of collecting 20th century Latin American art](#) offers a constructive gauge. Early in it favored art that it seemed to view as a species of exotica: folkloric, surreal, evidence that south of the border was wild, barely-modern terrain.

After World War II, with cultural exchange increasingly used as a diplomatic tool, MoMA wanted further engagement with new Latin American art, but now art of a kind that looked to be made by “people like us” — that is, work that appeared to carry clear evidence of European DNA, like geometric abstraction.

Then, in the 1970s came the global recession. Art markets went bust. And in the confusion, walls began to come down as the permission-giving shake-up called multiculturalism — pro-diversity, anti-essentialist — arrived.

More and more, as that initiating episode of what is sometimes called postmodernism recedes into history, it looks to be one of 20th century art's finest, most germinative hours. MoMA has taken a long time — decades — to get on board with this, but is well along to judge by [“Chosen Memories: Contemporary Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift and Beyond,”](#) one of the most stirring museum collection shows I've seen in New York in a while.

In the 1970s Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, a native of Venezuela and a longtime MoMA trustee, was already interested in Latin American art over a broad spectrum: Indigenous art; 19th-century work made by Europeans traveling there; hybrid colonial artifacts; and modernist painting and sculpture. In 2016, she gave the museum more than 100 modernist works, and there was a show. But already by then she had turned her attention to new art and in

Tanya Leighton

2019 there was an even larger gift, this one of contemporary work, including photography and video.



In the “Catherwood Series,” Leandro Katz photographs himself holding up original images from Frederic Catherwood’s first look at ancient monuments, which established a romanticized vision of the “New World,” in front of the Maya monuments they depict. Leandro Katz

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin
+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton

Some three dozen examples, most dating from the past three decades and supplemented by loans, make up the current show. And together they reflect — and critically reflect on — all the categories of Latin American art that interested her from the start.

For example, the complex history of colonialism, largely expunged from modernist abstraction, is brought into play in one of the exhibition's earliest entries, [“The Catherwood Project” by the Argentine artist Leandro Katz](#).

In the 1840s, the English artist Frederick Catherwood traveled twice to Central America and made drawings of Maya ruins there. [Published as prints](#), his images gave the European public a first look at these ancient monuments and established a romanticized vision of the “New World” that persists into the tour-bus present. In his “Catherwood” series. Katz considers the accuracy of those images through on-the-spot comparisons: He photographs himself holding up the illustrator's images in front of the Maya monuments they depict. Katz notes Catherwood's manipulations, but also understands that he is inevitably adding his own distorting 20th-century view to a layered perceptual history.

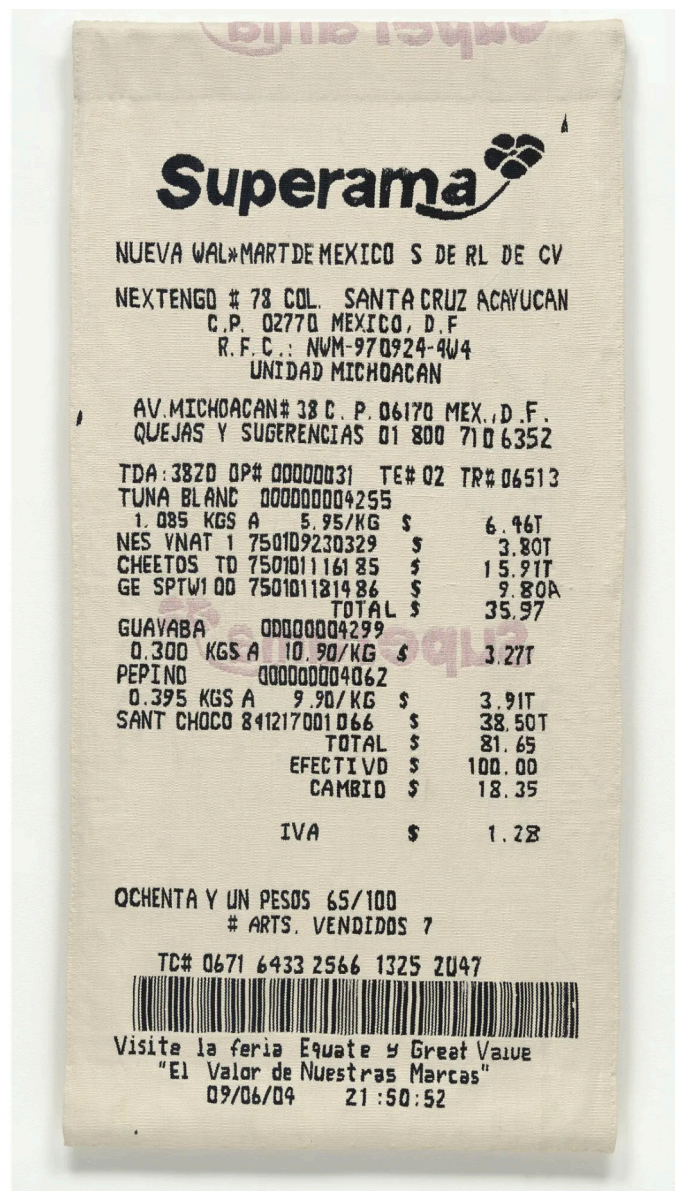
Indigenous culture, crucial to but underacknowledged by European modernism, is referred to repeatedly in the show. In 1996, the Mexican-born artist [Laura Anderson Barbata](#) spent time with [Yanomami people in the Venezuelan Amazon](#) rainforest learning, hands on, how they created their graceful canoes. In exchange for this instruction, she taught them papermaking. We see the fruits of reciprocity in the show: in a photograph, that Barbata has titled “Self-portrait,” of a hand-carved boat standing upright as if it had a life of its own; and in lissome drawings of Amazonian fauna and flora by the [Yanomami artist Sheroanawe Hakihiwe](#), all done on handmade fiber paper.

Tanya Leighton



Laura Anderson Barbata's "Autorretrato," from her series "Intercambios, Amazonas Venezuela (Exchanges, Amazonas Venezuela)," 1996–98, at MoMA. The Mexican-born artist learned from Yanomami people in the Venezuelan Amazon rainforest how they created canoes. In exchange she taught them papermaking. Laura Anderson Barbata

Some artists make a deft, playful thing of tradition. The [Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri](#) toys with notions of value, labor and consumer culture in his loom-woven image of a supermarket receipt. So does the Puerto Rico collective called ["Las Nietas de Nonó,"](#) composed of two sisters (Mulowayi Iyaye Nonó and Mapenzi Chibale Nonó) who, isolated during the pandemic, turned their daily life into a kind of back-to-basics hunter-gather picnic.



Gabriel Kuri's "Untitled (Superama II)," 2005, a loom-woven image of a supermarket receipt, critiques ideas of labor and value, tradition and consumer culture. Gabriel Kuri

What's taken seriously is something that most mainstream Western art doesn't know what to do with anymore, but which multiculturalism notably respected: spirituality. In a 2020 painting by the Dominican-born artist [Firelei Báez](#), a powerful Afro-Caribbean female deity dances across and dominates a 16th-century European map of the Atlantic Ocean.

Tanya Leighton

And in pencil drawings, the Colombian-Korean artist [Gala Porras-Kim](#) documents hundreds of textile fragment left, centuries ago, as temple offerings to the Mayan rain god and now preserved in an ethnological museum at Harvard University. Included in the show is a letter the artist wrote to the museum's director asking her to release the offerings from their archival prison and permit them to turn to dust as their givers intended. Their perishability, she argues, is what made them powerful.

The theme of change and instability, here often framed as loss, is one of the show's binding threads, and a complicated one. Historically, loss can be violent, as suggested in a fierce work by the always astonishing, go-for-broke Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo. For a 2010 work called "Looting," which addresses the extractive depredations of European colonialism on her mineral-rich homeland, she had a dentist in Guatemala fit eight of her teeth with fillings made of locally mined gold, and then asked a second dentist, in Europe, to remove the fillings, which are displayed as art in a vitrine.

Several works about loss are, like hers, politically loaded. A short video titled ["Black Anthropology II" from 2014 by Paulo Nazareth](#) is one. In it, the artist lies half-buried under piles of human skulls and bones, the remains of Afro-Brazilian prisoners that he found stored in a police museum in Bahia.

In a 1989 photograph titled "The Two Fridas," the Chilean gay activists [Francisco Casas Silva](#) and [Pedro Mardones Lemebel](#) (1952-2015) pose, bare-chested and skirted, their bodies connected by IV tubing, in an AIDS-era riff on Kahlo's famed double self-portrait.

Their picture can be read as a tribute to partnership, artistic, or affectional, or both. So can a jaunty little sculpture assembled from

Tanya Leighton

a music stand, a pair of garden shears, and a single rose, dedicated to a friend — a lover? — by the elusive Venezuelan polymath [Claudio Perna](#) (1938-1997).



Still from Paulo Nazareth's video "Antropologia do Negro II (Black Anthropology II)," 2014, in which the artist lies half-buried under the remains of prisoners that he found stored in a police museum. Paulo Nazareth

There's a memorial vibe to this piece, as there is to a 2009 video that was actually conceived as a gesture of mourning-in-advance by the Uruguayan artist [Alejandro Cesarco](#). Titled "Present Memory" (2010) it's a silent filmed portrait of Cesarco's father, a doctor, made soon after he'd received a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer. We see the older man, with his elegant suit and extravagant mustache, sitting impassively in his office and being viewed repeatedly from various angles, as if to fix his features in our minds. Then the camera travels round the room, now empty. He's gone.

Some fundamental tone of the show — organized by Inés Katzenstein, curator of Latin American Art at MoMA, and director of the Cisneros Research Institute, and Julia Detchon, a curatorial assistant — is distilled here: a kind of uneasy, ironic, reality-check melancholy that feels very different from the utopianism often attributed to Latin American art on the basis of the geometric

Tanya Leighton

abstract painting that has, until recently, defined it in many North American museum collections.



Regina José Galindo's "Looting," 2010, eight gold fillings. The artist had a dentist in Guatemala fit eight of her teeth with fillings made of locally mined gold, and then asked a second dentist, in Europe, to extract the fillings. Regina Jose Galindo

Actually, geometric abstraction has a presence, though an ambiguous one, in "Chosen Memories," in the form of a site-specific mural painting by the Brazilian artist [Iran do Espírito Santo](#). Composed entirely of vertical lines in subtly varying shades of gray, the painting is hard to see it first, like a passing shadow, or a dark smudge. It seems both to soil the white gallery wall and to dissolve it, to be either a meditational aid or a mistake. Titled "En Passant" and commissioned for the occasion, it will physically disappear when the show is done, but stay vivid as an idea, like much of the rest of what's here.

By Holland Cotter