

Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art

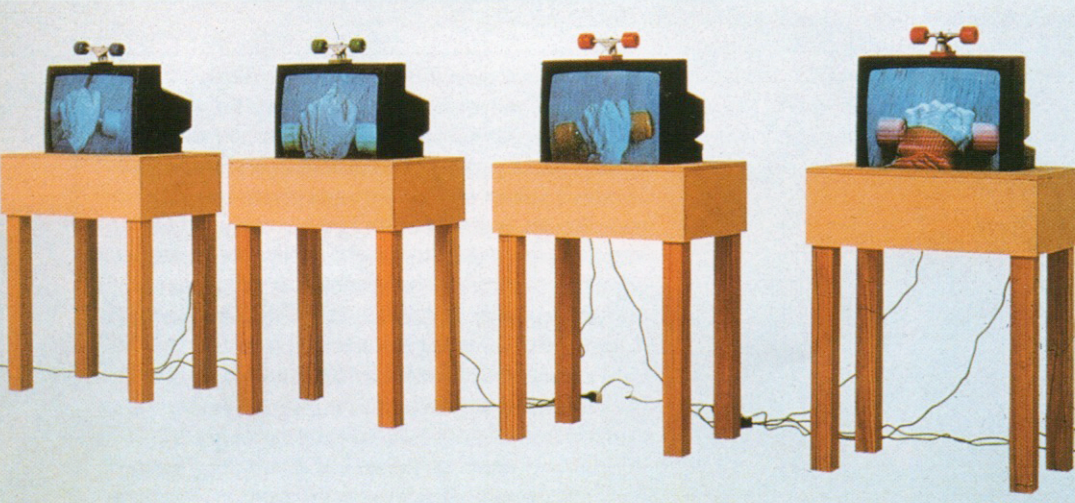
John Ewing

Originating at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art* brings sixteen artists and much of the Western Hemisphere under one theoretical umbrella. Applying *baroque* historically and aesthetically, this ambitious exhibition argues that the styles and mores imposed on the Americas by colonial Europe have resurfaced in contemporary Latin American art as tools for resistance, self-definition, and experimentation. Winking with subversive humor, “*Ultra*” implies that the extravagance associated with the word baroque is now serving the complex sensibilities of an increasingly global, mestizo culture. Organized by Elizabeth Armstrong—MCA Senior Curator—and Victor Zamudio-Taylor, *Ultrabaroque* might have collapsed under the weight of its potentially arbitrary premise were it not for the artists’ exuberant range. Steps ahead of existing categories, they inspire the coining of a new term, “Post-Latin American,” which elides postcolonial and postmodern into a distinctly Latin hybrid. Miguel Calderón and Adriana Varejão invoke baroque traditions in order to make biting social critique. In his 1998 series of photographs *Employee of the Month*, the Mexico City-based Calderón asked guards and



Above: **Franco Mondini Ruiz**, *High Yellow* (detail), 1999, mixed media, 244 x 183 x 274 cm.

Left: **Jose Antonio Hernandez-Diez**, *Indy*, 1995, skateboard wheels, television monitors, 4 tables/stands, 70 x 46 x 50 cm each. Courtesy Isabella Prata & I. Aruschin.

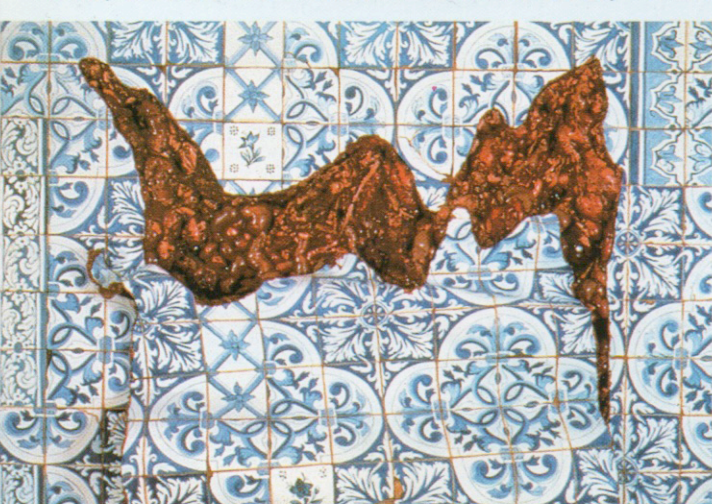


maintenance workers at the National Museum of Art to recreate scenes from old master paintings in the Museum’s collection. Posed with mops, buckets, and vacuum cleaners on the museum roof, these mocking *tableaux vivants* accentuate the gaping divide between institutions of high culture and the surrounding society. Varejão’s allusions to baroque oppression are more explicit, likening cultural appropriation

to cannibalism. The Brazilian artist’s *Meat à la Taunay* (1997) refers to the exotic misrepresentations of Brazil by the seventeenth century French painter Nicolas-Antoine Taunay. In a gesture of Grand Guignol horror, chunks of canvas have been torn from the surface of a Taunay copy to expose the ravaged “flesh” made of foam and pigment beneath. These gruesome chunks, with their skin-like patches of painted landscape, are portioned out to decorative china plates mounted on the wall around the picture frame.

Franco Mondini Ruiz, Rochelle Costi, and Arturo Duclos take a wider view of Latin American culture, allowing baroque-style patterns to rise from complex mixtures. In his installation *High Yellow*, Mondini Ruiz, a native Texan from San Antonio, arranges thrift store trinkets, perishable foods, and religious paraphernalia into precise symmetries, creating a synthetic and beautiful order out of conflicting cultural dichotomies: high art/kitsch; Latino/Anglo; rich/poor; homemade/mass-produced. Enlivening this ephemeral sculpture with performances, he sells the eccentric objects to visitors in a self-styled *botanica* operated in the museum gallery. In her “Rooms – São Paulo” series, Brazilian artist Rochelle Costi documents this same cross-cultural *mélange* with photographs of bedrooms, both elaborate and makeshift, while a cultural codex may be necessary to translate Arturo Duclos’ conceptual wall hangings. The Chilean artist layers text, maps, cartoons, found photographs, and symbolic emblems on patterned brocade in formally cogent but deliberately ambiguous narratives. If the couture turkeys by Venezuelan artist Meyer Vaisman are the most delightful of *Ultrabaroque*’s cultural hybrids, the extravagant works by María Fernanda Cardoso and Nuno Ramos are surely the most unsettling. Cardoso’s large installation *Cemetery – Vertical Garden*—a field of

artificial lilies rooted in massive clusters across a wall—uses disorientation to transform a baroque cliché into a modernist elegy. The Colombian artist installs the piece with a faint wall drawing of arches, row upon row, behind the lilies. This monumental tracing suggests innumerable crypts and, considering the history of the artist’s homeland, perhaps the role of government in personal suffering as well. Brazilian artist/poet Nuno Ramos creates looming abstract paintings that combine wood, glass, fur, mirrors, and precarious metal armatures that reach out from the picture surface. A catalogue quotation from Ramos illuminates his own work and poses a challenge to the other artists in *Ultrabaroque*—“The unformed ends up being organized by its borders.” Following its stint in Texas, *Ultrabaroque* will make stops in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Miami Art Museum, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.



Adriana Varejão, *Carpet-Style Tilework in Live Flesh*, 1999, mixed media, 150 x 190 x 25 cm.