



On Representation, Appropriation, and Everything in Between

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It is a laudable risk to present at a major American art museum a show that deals with Latinx and Indigenous identities.¹ *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art* at the Whitney Museum presented seven artists born outside of the United States (in South America, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, and Mexico) who explore practices “inherited from, and also still alive in, Indigenous groups in Mexico and South America.”² Laudable because—still in 2018—some might question the “Americanness” of the works, dismiss their themes (among them, migration to the United States) as “too remote,”³ or simply misconstrue them (as a well-intended *New York Times* reporter who claimed that the show featured “indigenous groups”).⁴ Risky because claiming to represent Latinx and Indigenous cultures is to enter a heated debate about where those identities end and where appropriation begins.

To complicate matters more, the exhibition’s stakes were remarkably high. This was the Whitney’s first show explicitly branded as Latinx and the first curated by Puerto Rican assistant curator Marcela Guerrero—hired to improve representation of Latinx art.⁵ Further, it inaugurated the use of bilingual wall texts in Spanish and English and of a title in Quechua (an Indigenous language-family from South America).⁶ Clearly, “representation” (to portray *and* to champion a constituency) was central to the show’s

¹ Latinx is the gender-neutral term for people of Latin American descent. The term was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary on September 2018. “Latinx,” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed on September 17, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-history-latinx>.

² “Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art,” The Whitney Museum of Art, accessed on August 31, 2018, <https://whitney.org/Exhibitions/PachaLlaqtaWasichay>.

³ Marcela Guerrero, personal communication, August 10, 2018.

⁴ Robin Pogrebin, “Museums turn their focus to U.S. Artists of Latin Descent,” *The New York Times*, last modified April 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/24/arts/latinx-museums-artists.html>.

⁵ Robin Pogrebin, “With New Urgency, Museums cultivate Curators of Color,” *The New York Times*, last modified August 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/08/arts/design/museums-curators-diversity-employment.html>.

⁶ The Quechua terms *pacha*, *llaqta*, *wasichay* do not have precise translations to Spanish or English. Per the show’s webpage, “*pacha* denotes universe, time, space, nature, or world; *llaqta* signifies place, country, community, or town; and *wasichay* means to build or to construct a house.”

discourse (on social media one found comments such as “The Whitney is brown now!”). What is less clear is who exactly the exhibition represented. Guerrero, along with project assistant Alana Hernandez, did an excellent job at identifying formal echoes between artists evoking notions of Indigeneity through modernist aesthetics (the real unifying thread of the show).⁷ Such “family resemblances,” I argue here, obscured important differences in the artists’ distinct political and identity claims.



Installation view of *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, July 13-September 30, 2018). From left to right: Clarissa Tossin, *Ch'u Mayaa*, 2017; Ronny Quevedo, *Errant Globe*, 2015; Ronny Quevedo, *ULAMA-ULE-ALLEY OOP*, 2017. Photograph by Ron Amstutz.

⁷ In this review, I use “modernist aesthetics” as a blanket term to describe the use of abstract, geometric, color-saturated forms and structures. Twentieth-century artists from different generations working in Europe and the Americas associated their use of such aesthetic with pre-Columbian notions and images. See, for example, *Josef Albers in Mexico*, edited by Lauren Hinkson (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2017); and Robert Kett, “Monumentality as Method: Archaeology and Land Art in the Cold War,” *Representations* 130-1 (Spring 2015), 119-151.

Brazilian artist Clarisa Tossin's video *Ch'u Maya* (2017) illuminated the show's first corridor.⁸ In it, dancer Crystal Sepúlveda (b. Puerto Rico) performs an elegant choreography that evokes Maya iconography in front of Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House—iconic example of Mayan Revival. Labeled by Tossin as a “re-appropriation” of pre-Columbian sources from a US [white male] architect, the video and the abstract sculptures next to it made use of the most stereotypical images of Maya art (the glyphs, the jaguar, the quetzal), conveying a sense of parody.⁹ Importantly, the installation's playfulness distinguished it from the solemnity of twentieth-century modernisms—responding thus not only to US visions of the “south of the border,” but also to the prominence of modernist architecture in Brazil, where the artist grew up and exhibits. To be sure, references to modernism and Indigeneity are common in contemporary art from South America and Mexico, where *indigenismo* (the appropriation of Indigenous practices by non-Indigenous artists) had and still has a central role in the artistic mainstream for more than a century.¹⁰

In a similar vein, William Cordova (b. Peru) and Claudia Peña Salinas (b. Mexico) employed geometric forms for their post-minimalist evocations of pre-Columbian monuments. Ronny Quevedo (b. Ecuador) and Guadalupe Maravilla (b. El Salvador), for their part, added autobiographical perspectives that underscored their experiences of migration. Maravilla, who crossed the US border as child, intervened with undocumented immigrants a contemporary version of the colonial Nahuatl-language manuscript *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*.¹¹ In *A Requiem for my Border Crossing* (2018), the resulting series of drawings, participants traced lines that resembled geometric glyphs, Fred Flintstone, and immigration routes. Here is where things get complicated. Creative appropriation of pre-Columbian forms has different implications depending the artist's background. Tossin's elegant deconstruction of modernism contrasts with Maravilla's more personal “rituals,” which merge “his pre-colonial ancestry, fiction, and autobiography” in the context of “the ongoing U.S. immigration crisis.”¹² The artists' distinct backgrounds are

⁸ Cinematography by Jeremy Glaholt.

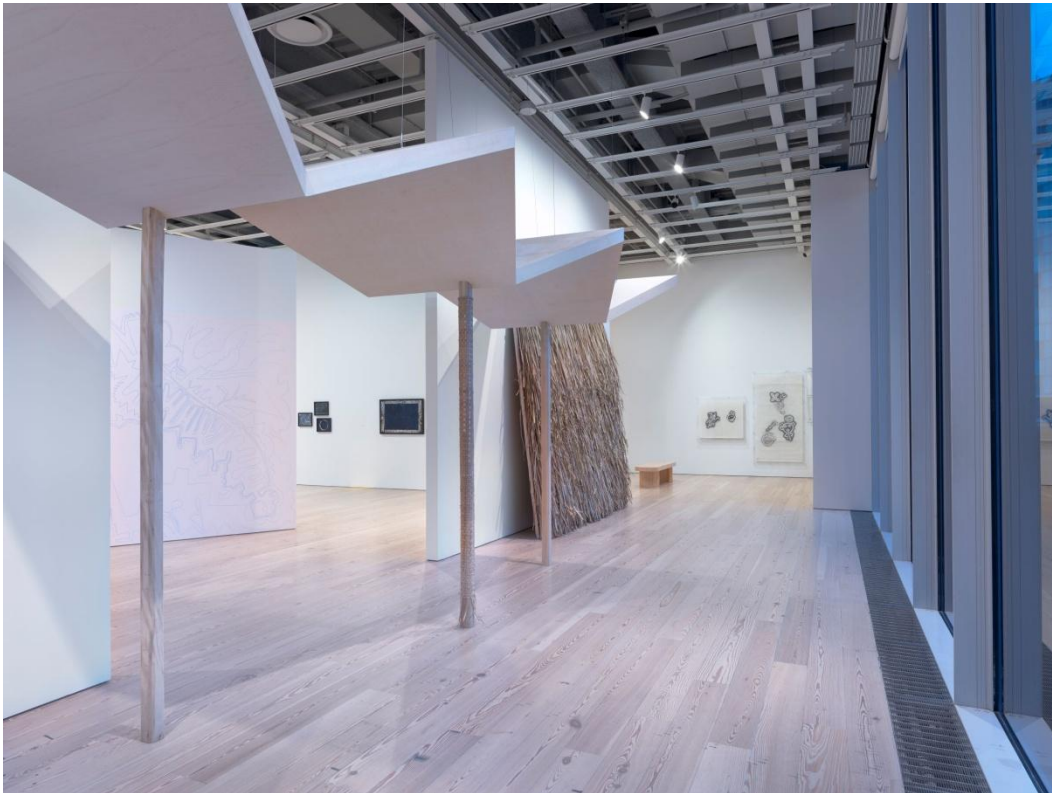
⁹ See Clarissa Tossin's webpage, accessed on August 31, 2018, <https://clarissatossin.net/Ch-u-Mayaa>.

¹⁰ For example, the recent show *desMarcados: Indigenismo, Arte y Política 1917-2017* surveys the long history of *indigenismo* in Ecuador from the 1910s to the present. The show was curated by Alexandra Kennedy, Trinidad Pérez, Pilar Estrada, Malena Bedoya, and Lucía Durá, and was held at the Centro Cultural Metropolitano de Quito and the Museo de la Ciudad from December 2017-May 2018. Artist and art historian Mariana Botey is leading a transnational exhibition and publication project *Indigenisms: Amerindian Imaginaries in the Avant-Garde and the Modern Era, 1800-2015*. See Mariana Botey, “INDIGENISMS: Amerindian Imaginaries in the Avant-Garde and Modern Era, 1800-2015,” CIMAM 2015 Annual Conference, Tokyo, Japan, November 8, 2015, video of lecture, <https://vimeo.com/151680653>.

¹¹ Formerly known as Irvin Morazán, the artist recently readopted his birth name “Guadalupe” and his undocumented father's pseudonym “Maravilla” as his last name “to show solidarity during these challenging political times.” See Guadalupe Maravilla's webpage, accessed on August 31, 2018, <https://www.guadalupemaravilla.com/contact>.

¹² See “The OG of Undocumented Children,” The Whitney Museum of Art, accessed on August 31, 2018, <https://whitney.org/events/og-of-undocumented-children>.

certainly not a problem but a sign of the diverse experiences that are labeled as “Latinx” in the United States today. It could have been productive, however, to evidence these different places of enunciation in a show that posited identity debates at its core—especially considering that the Whitney’s interest in representing Latinx art was the outcome of recent conversations on how United States-born Latinx artists are systematically overlooked in favor of their colleagues from Latin America.¹³



Installation view of *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, July 13-September 30, 2018). From left to right: Guadalupe Maravilla, *Tripa Chuca*, 2018; Ronny Quevedo, *every measure of zero (Nazca beyond the plain)*, 2017; Ronny Quevedo, *every measure of zero (errantry)*, 2017; Ronny Quevedo, *every measure of zero (periphery)*, 2017; Ronny Quevedo, *(lyra)*, 2017; Jorge González, *Ayacavo Guarocoel*, 2018; Monica Flaherty, *Petroglyph studies at Coabey River, Jayuya, Puerto Rico*, c. 1957. Photograph by Ron Amstutz.

¹³ Maximiliano Durón, “News Study: Latino Art Underrepresented at College Art Association’s Annual Conference,” *Art News*, last modified September 20, 2016, <http://www.artnews.com/2016/09/20/study-latino-art-underrepresented-at-college-art-associations-annual-conference/>.

Similarly, the show missed the opportunity of underscoring the different ways in which young Latinx artists establish relationships and *responsibilities* with the Indigenous groups in which the practices they “inherited” are “still alive in.” In her review of the show, art historian Ananda Cohen claimed that to frame the works as appropriations does not make justice to the fact that many Latin Americans and Latinx identify as “*mestizo*”¹⁴—an ambiguous term used to suggest diverse racial backgrounds. Many scholars have noted, however, that the discourse of *mestizaje* (of colonial origin but championed by modern politicians) is a fertile terrain for racist practices, as it flattens differences and obscures discrimination against people that are read as more black or more Indigenous.¹⁵ Importantly, historians have identified a tendency to conceal such discriminations by evoking Indigeneity through pre-Columbian images while leaving unattended contemporary problems of land ownership and/or economic inequalities.¹⁶

Aware of these contexts, artists such as Livia Corona Benjamín (b. Mexico) and Jorge González (b. Puerto Rico) foregrounded not the pre-Columbian past but the contemporary lives of underrepresented (and racialized) constituencies. In her abstract photograms and documentary video *Nadie Sabe, Nadie Supo-Graneros del Pueblo*,¹⁷ Corona documented the “the people’s granaries”—pyramid-like silos that the Mexican government constructed since the 1960s in rural areas. Local farmers adapted the government’s designs (made with *indigenista* undertones by star architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez), making them examples of vernacular architecture. The video captured their current users’ voices but, cleverly, not their faces, breaking our expectation of visualizing (and racializing) “the people.” González’s site-specific installation *Ayacabo Guarocoel* (2018), on the other hand, inserted walls and roofs made following vernacular techniques in the galleries. While this strategy might have felt *too literal*, it was significantly framed as a collective learning experience from traditional artists such Fernando Torres Flores (b. Puerto Rico) and Alice Chéveres (Borikén)—a powerful gesture considering that in several countries their art would still be reduced to “*artesanías*” (*handicrafts*). Finally, Maravilla organized collective performances that directly addressed the United States government’s role in the migration of Central American people. This gesture gained a new layer of meaning when it was revealed (after the show ended) that the Whitney’s vice chairman is complicit with the Trump administration’s border policies.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ananda Cohen-Aponte, “Latinx Artists are Highlighted for the First Time in a Group Show at the Whitney,” *Hyperallergic*, last modified August 28, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/456710/pacha-llaqta-wasichay-indigenous-space-whitney-museum/>.

¹⁵ Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 94.

¹⁶ Among others, Cecilia Méndez, *Incas sí, indios no: Apuntes para el estudio del nacionalismo criollo en el Perú* (Lima: IEP, 1995). The title broadly translates as “Yes to the Incas, no to the Indians.”

¹⁷ A previous version of this installation was shown as *Nadie sabe, nadie supo* at Parque Galería, Mexico City, from September 2016 to January 2017.

¹⁸ More than 100 staffers at the Whitney, including curator Marcela Guerrero, signed a letter opposing the institution’s defense of vice chairman Warren B. Kanders, who owns Safariland, LLC, a manufacture of the tear gas and smoke grenades hurled by United States border agents at asylum-seekers in Tijuana, Mexico in

In an interview, Guerrero told me that she did not want to curate a survey in which the only similarity between artists was the label “Latinx.” Instead of cramming together a larger roster of artists, works, or texts, she chose to give each artist an individual gallery to breathe. Her curatorial strategy was at its strongest when it visually shown how Indigeneity is imagined vis-à-vis modernism by young Latinx artists. By displaying this association, she aimed at countering the stereotype that Latinx art is *exclusively* figurative or social, as well as to make viewers aware that modern art was and



Installation view of *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture*, New Art (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, July 13-September 30, 2018). From left to right: Livia Corona Benjamín, *Infinite Rewrite VI*, 2016; *Infinite Rewrite LIII*, 2018; *Infinite Rewrite LVI*, 2018; *Infinite Rewrite LII*, 2018; *Infinite Rewrite L*, 2018; *Infinite Rewrite XXXI*, 2016; *Graneros del Pueblo / Nadie Sabe, Nadie Supo*, 2016; *Infinite Rewrite LV*, 2018; *Infinite Rewrite LIV*, 2018; *Infinite Rewrite LI*, 2018; *Infinite Rewrite XVIII*, 2016. Photograph by Ron Amstutz

late November, 2018. See Zachary Small, “Artist Mounts Guerrilla Art Exhibition at Whitney Calling for Removal of Vice Chairman,” *Hyperallergic*, last modified December 11, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/475476/artist-mounts-guerrilla-art-exhibition-at-whitney-calling-for-removal-of-vice-chairman/>.

still is enriched by Indigenous traditions.¹⁹ The trade-off of her well-paced, visually alluring installation is that it left unpacked the projects' distinct political frameworks. Hence, inattentive US viewers were led to believe that the show featured "indigenous groups."

Ultimately, to frame the works as "preservations" and not as "appropriations" needed further justification. It is understandable that the word "appropriation" was avoided considering that the museum recently faced (and tried to come to terms with) such allegations for the cases of African American and Native North American identities.²⁰ Further, the word might have been awkward in a show that celebrated (as it should!) that the Whitney and the country "are brown." But appropriation has roots (and legs) almost as long as the concept of Indigeneity itself. To ignore that would be to create double standards—one for Latin American art and another for United States-based art, one for Latinx culture and another for African American—in the global conversation on the politics of representation. *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay* offered a relevant (and, alas, still rare) public space to reflect on how young artists explore representation and appropriation, and to note that they come not in binaries but in a complicated spectrum.

The exhibition Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, July 13 to September 30, 2018.

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¹⁹ Marcela Guerrero, personal communication, August 10, 2018. She mentioned in our interview that she wanted to "nuance" the image of Latinx art beyond works more commonly associated with the label, such as Pepón Osorio's *En la barbería no se llora* (1994), as well as to respond to recent New York-based shows of Latin American architecture, art, and design that privileged modernist aesthetics over Indigenous traditions. On this, see Marcela Guerrero, "Conceptual Blueprints: Artistic Approaches to Indigenous Architecture," The Whitney Museum of Art, accessed on August 31, 2018, <https://whitney.org/Essays/Pacha-Llaqta-Wasichay>.

²⁰ I am talking about the Dana Schutz controversy at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, and the Jimmie Durham retrospective of the same year. For an overview that makes references to both contexts, see Julia Halperin, "How the Dana Schutz Controversy—and a Year of Reckoning—Have Changed Museums Forever," *Artnet News*, last modified March 6, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dana-schutz-controversy-recent-protests-changed-museums-forever-1236020>.