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Art Review | 'Nexus New York'



Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis

“La Cama” (“The Bed”), by Pepón Osorio, is part of “Voces y Visiones,” a display of the permanent collection at El Museo del Barrio, which has reopened with an exhibition chronicling the Latin American presence in New York.

Art Currents Flow Two Ways in Pan-American City, U.S.A.

By HOLLAND COTTER

Some museums pull us in with familiar beauties; some send us out with new ideas. The best do both, which is why it’s so great to have the lights back on and the art back up at El Museo del Barrio on upper Fifth Avenue.

A year and a half ago El Museo, now four decades old, closed for a makeover. It was a modest one by many standards, but a big deal for an institution that started life in a public school classroom and, though now in grander quarters, still gets by on a tight budget with a tiny staff.

Its current home, the multi-tenant, city-owned and somewhat forbidding Heckscher Building, a former orphanage, has been spiffed up with a street-level glass facade by Gruzen Samton Architects. A curious, quasi-sculptural steel upright suitable for banners now frames the entrance courtyard. And there’s a new cafe. But most important, the museum’s galleries have been reconfigured and slightly expanded.

What was once a choppy lineup of odd-size spaces has some flow and sweep, just what’s needed for an inaugural exhibition called “Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis,” a crowded, episodic but absorbing chronological history of the Latino art presence in this city in the first half of the last century. In addition, the slight gain in floor space has allowed the museum to create a permanent-collection gallery, and its symbolic weight is significant. Packed floor to ceiling with political prints, abstract paintings and religious images, many by artists of Puerto Rican descent, it directly links the museum to the East Harlem barrio a few blocks away, just as “Nexus New York” links Latin American art to the larger history of the city.

That show, conceived by El Museo’s director, Julian Zugazagoitia, and organized by its chief curator, Deborah Cullen, starts around the turn of the 20th century and ends with World War II. As much an archival display as a standard art exhibition, it revolves around a handful of artists and institutions that helped bring Latin American culture to the city.

The Art Students League, with its low, pay-by-the-class fees, was an ideal resource for painters in transit. As early as 1892, the Uruguayan painter F. Luis Mora was studying there; by 1907 he was teaching, with Georgia O’Keeffe among his students. His brushy, umber-rich pictures of urban laborers open the show in a classic academic realist style that would characterize paintings of Miguel

Pou y Becerra, who arrived from Puerto Rico in 1919 for classes with Robert Henri; and Celeste Woss y Gil, who came from the Dominican Republic to work with George Luks.

Woss y Gil's dark-skinned female nudes caused a sensation when she returned to Santo Domingo. And she used her fame to become an influential teacher and to establish a start-up version of a national school of fine arts. Her paintings look tame now, but remind how much a knowledge of context and timing can affect our understanding of art from the past that would otherwise be lost to the ranking systems of history.

Other institutions, particularly the New School for Social Research, were also émigré homes away from home. But what makes "Nexus New York" come alive is its focus on individual personalities who served as two-way transmitters for cultural energy.

One, at the turn of the century, was the Mexican-born Marius de Zayas, a dapper and tirelessly networking artist-impresario, who teamed up with Alfred Stieglitz to bring the first Picasso show to New York, and on his own introduced Diego Rivera to the city. Zipping back and forth between Manhattan and Paris, de Zayas contributed mightily to New York Dada and was one of several Mexicans — Miguel Covarrubias was another — to gain attention for satiric cartooning, a popular art genre highly valued in Latin America.

Joaquín Torres-García, another Uruguayan, came to the city in 1920 and saw proto-Pop Art everywhere: his New York paintings are buzzy compilations of Manhattan signage, aptly complemented in the show by Stuart Davis's famous 1921 "Lucky Strike," on loan from the Museum of Modern Art.

Inevitably, the Mexican muralists of the 1930s, who tramped around town trailing bands of acolytes, play a major role in the show. A couple of small paintings by David Alfaro Siqueiros demonstrate the impact that his splatter-and-drip experiments had on the young Jackson Pollock. And a tiny pencil drawing on a scrap of paper by Rivera is a potent reminder of the political storms these figures could raise.

Rivera's original studies for a utopian 1932 Rockefeller Center mural passed muster with the center's commissioning patrons. But when Rivera, without telling them, painted a different design, incorporating a portrait of Lenin, all hell broke loose, and the mural was destroyed. The little pencil drawing is Rivera's off-the-cuff sketch for the offending version.

His wife, Frida Kahlo, was with him in the city and chafed at being left out of the spotlight. But who could possibly ignore this magnetic being, dressed in ribbons and Mexican finery, the artist who painted "The Suicide of Dorothy Hale," which shows her both leaping from a Central Park South window and sprawled on the pavement, as blood trickles over the picture's frame.

By the time Kahlo finished this painting in 1939, she and Rivera were headed for divorce. Troubled relationships, intercultural and otherwise, are threaded through the show. Near the beginning we see portraits of two painters, the American Alice Neel and the Cuban Carlos Enríquez, who met in art school, married, and lived in Havana and Manhattan before a bitter separation in 1930. Neel acknowledged that this early immersion in Latino culture shaped her later politics and art.

And a mural-size painting by the Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta dates from 1944, the year he became infatuated with Arshile Gorky's young wife, Agnes. Their brief affair four years later was undoubtedly a factor in Gorky's suicide. And before that, in 1942, the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins had moved to the city and begun an affair with Marcel Duchamp, during which she was both muse and model for his grand, clandestine erotic tableau, "Étant Donnés."

Their liaison ended when she moved back to Brazil. Duchamp stayed in New York. Neel stayed in the city too, living for some 30 years in East Harlem, leaving the neighborhood just seven years before El Museo was started by yet another culture-crossing artist, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, a Bronx native of Puerto Rican descent.

An ashen little 1962 assemblage of found objects by Mr. Montañez Ortiz is prominent in a permanent collection display, "Voces y Visiones." That piece represents a distinct break in form and sensibility from the art in "Nexus New York" yet picks up on the show's demonstration of the dynamic presence of Latino art in the city's fabric.

A year after El Museo opened in 1969, a grass-roots collective called Taller Boricua, or Puerto Rican Workshop, formed as a support system for local artists excluded from mainstream institutions. It still exists, housed in the Julia de Burgos Cultural Arts Center, a former public school at East 106th Street and Lexington Avenue, where it presents regular exhibitions. Its artist-directors, Marcos Dimas and Fernando Salicrup, both have work from the 1970s in the permanent gallery.

Since the 1970s, though, the ethnic makeup of the barrio itself has become more diverse, and the museum has too. Most of what's in the permanent-collection display is by Puerto Rican or Nuyorican artists. But there's also painting by Carmen Herrera, who was born in Cuba; photography by the Chilean-born Alfredo Jaar; an embroidered banner by Antoine Oleyant from Haiti; print work by the Chicana artist Ester Hernández; and drawings by the Florida-born William Villalongo, a young artist who plays with Latino identity, taking it off, putting it on.

El Museo's real expansion is cultural rather than architectural. The museum is a work in progress and surely always will be, like the Latino neighborhood it sprang from, like the Latino city it is so vital a part of, like the Pan-American nation it increasingly represents, like the very definition of Latino itself.

More immediately, though, beginning at 11 a.m. on Saturday, the museum will hold a celebration, an all-day, lights-burning-into-the-night fiesta, free, open to everyone, a beautiful idea.

"Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis" opens on Saturday and continues through February 2010, and "Voces y Visiones" opens on Saturday at the Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street, East Harlem; (212) 831-7272, elmuseo.org.