

OMR

Texts and testimonials:

Olivier Debroise | Graciela de la Torre | Eugenio López | Iñaki Bonillas | Guillermo Santamarina | Edward Sullivan | Jaime Riestra | María Guerra | Ramiro Martínez | Dan Cameron | Gabriela Jauregui | Cristobal Riestra | Osvaldo Sánchez | Carla Stellweg | José Pierre | Patricia Sloane | Yishai Jusidman | Jorge Méndez Blake | Patrick Chapernel | Paul Herkenhoff | Pablo Vargas Lugo | Melanie Smith | James Oles | Daniel Garza Usabiaga | Teresa Eckmann | Rocío Maldonado | Robert Littman | Jose Dávila | Eloy Tarcisio | Rafael Lozano-Hemmer | Pia Camil | Elizabeth Ferrer | María de Corral | Sylvia Weber | Mateo Riestra | Sean Kelly | Sam Keller | Alma Ruiz-Furlan | Fernando Castro Flórez | Manuel Ocampo | Estela Hussong | Mariana Pérez Amor | Alejandra Yturbe | Sagrario Pérez Soto | Víctor Palacios | Charles Merewether | Germán Venegas | Francesco Pellizzi | Issa M. Benítez | Fernando del Paso | Manuel DeLanda | Elena Poniatowska | Aldo Chaparro | Roger von Gunten | Carlota Duarte | Georgina Quintana | Sofia Broid | Larissa Harris | Raúl Cárdenas (Torolab) | Graham Gillmore | Cuauhtémoc Medina | Rubén Ortiz Torres | Mónica Castillo | Alberto García-Alix | Patricia Ortiz Monasterio | Adolfo Castañón | Miguel Castro Leñero | Miguel Cereceda | Hedy Fischer | Randy Shull | Natalie Kovacs | Maite Garbayo Maeztu | Ella Cisneros | Óscar Roldán-Alzate | Kerstin Erdmann

Galería OMR (1983–2015): Placing Mexico in Contemporary Art's Map

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Eclipsing: Gritty and Successful

Flipping through catalogues and brochures in my library of Mexican exhibitions from the 1980s and 1990s, I found a note from Adolfo Riestra inside *La Creación según Adolfo Riestra* [The Creation according to Adolfo Riestra], a great “literary collage” by Don Alberto Gironella, the “Barón de Belteñebros,” from the Galería Sloane-Racotta. It does not have a date anywhere, but by the look of the works included I presume it was around 1979-1980. Around that time, I arranged a studio visit with Adolfo, who, according to the note inside of the above-mentioned brochure, was then living at Guanajuato 53-6, Col. Roma 00670. I arranged the visit to introduce his work to Tressa Miller, then curator of the Security Pacific Bank in Los Angeles. I don’t recall if she ended up purchasing anything by him, but she loved his work and did buy a triptych by Ismael Vargas, another artist we visited in his studio. Adolfo, Jaime Riestra’s brother, wore a bandana and *huaraches*. He was talented, perhaps beyond his own recognition, very inspiring, wild and unpredictable—everyone that knew him, loved him!

Then, one beautiful Mexican day, also in the late 1970s, Patricia Ortiz Monasterio came to see Fernando Gamboa, director of the Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM). She radiated like “Here Comes the Sun,” bright-eyed and cheerful! The Artes Visuales (AV) team at the MAM was fond of coming up with *apodosos*, or nicknames, and, together with some of our regulars like Homero Espinoza and Olivier Debroise, we alternately addressed Fernando as *El Galán del Bosque*, *El GranBoa*, *El Ser Gamboa*, etc. Soon enough, Patricia began working for *El Galán del Bosque*, frequently dropping by the MAM. Fernando liked to hire intelligent, cosmopolitan—and of course preferably very attractive—women. Moreover, he appreciated those whose lineage he considered an attribute, which he explained to me by giving me details of Patricia’s parents and family: he genuinely admired them. Thereafter Patricia would stop by our AV offices regularly, as they were always open and smack opposite Fernando’s, and I mean “opposite” in more ways than one!

We bonded immediately and it was clear from the outset that we both shared a similar passion and like-minded vocation. At that time, however, I was already beyond traditional Mexican art and was tackling conceptually-based, socially-engaged, international alternative art-making practices, like the younger generation of Los Grupos, who experimented with non-traditional, non-objective practices.

Since those days, our passion for contemporary art has continued for over three decades. As for Patricia’s partner, Jaime Riestra, I am not sure when we first met, but it must have been shortly after I met Patricia. Now, in 2018, I can with certainty say that our friendship and camaraderie will last for as long as we live!

Here is an image flashing before me: we are in New York City, decked out to the hilt, getting into the elevator of the World Trade Center’s north Twin Tower, zipping up to the Windows on the World restaurant on the 107th floor. It must have been 1978 or 1979.

Patricia was wearing a black sable mink coat of mine, while I was wearing a lynx fur coat and our men were looking like Wall Street traders!

By today’s standards, it was all very *politically incorrect*, because instead of our usual cool, downtown-loft-dwellers’ look, we appeared to be more like uptown Park Avenue Manhattanites. We checked the weather forecast to make sure we would have clear skies, as we did not want to miss out on all the Manhattan views, from way down Battery Park City and across the Hudson River to the New Jersey skyline, which the restaurant Windows on the World promised its clientele. We *were* super-prepared! And the experience was *indeed* spectacular, and all the more so as it was a freebie Patricia had been handed, after which she invited us to come along!

By the mid-1980s, the tide had turned in Mexico. There were many transformations, as the Mexican banking system was nationalized and the art market began adjusting to new economic realities, followed later by neoliberalism, the free market, and corporate takeovers: in short, big fish snorkeling up the small. Patricia and Jaime had meanwhile gotten married and were living in the Virreyes neighborhood, where they created a small gallery space downstairs. I want to say it was originally their garage, but... I believe it was around 1982-1983, and the AV magazine no longer existed when I visited their place. What caught my eye in their “venue” was the entrepreneurial artists’ postcard booklets—a lovely idea. I still own several of them.

Shortly thereafter, Patricia and Jaime opened the Galería OMR on Plaza Río de Janeiro, in a mansion on the corner of Durango, where Fernando Gamboa lived (whom the three of us would often visit). After some initial shows, they began to focus on what later was called “neo-Mexican” art. Their space was unique: it welcomed visitors, having them move from one room to the next. In the case of a group show, each room presented different moments of a particular theme and, if it was a one-person show, the rooms gradually built up to a climax. Great installation work always! When you finished visiting the exhibit, you would exit onto balconies surrounding a patio below, from where you could view the summation of the show—a grand finale from above! The floors creaked and everything was crooked and lopsided: it made you feel slightly stoked, as though you had just lit a joint.

In 1983, I opened the Stellweg-Séguy gallery on Mercer Street in SoHo, and after showing graffiti street art by artists such as Rammellzee, Blade, Quick, and Seen, I began mixing and matching a cross-generational group of artists in a program entitled *Soul Catchers*. In this program I showcased artists such as Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke, Julio Galán, Joseph Beuys, Alejandro Colunga, Dennis Oppenheim, and Vito Acconci: a dialogue and a contrast to linear Euro-American art history. The exhibition and gallery vision was largely inspired by Thomas McEvilley’s seminal *Artforum* article entitled “Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief,” which

critiqued the MoMA’s 1984 “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art* exhibition.

What struck me in “Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief” was that most of us had neglected or overlooked that part of art history which tells us how nations and civilizations were (and continue to be) significantly shaped by ideologies that arbitrate the way in which imagery is developed and perpetrated as significant representations of their cultures, as is the case of so-called Primitivism, folk art, and indigenous art-making as craft. Of course, I read Mexico into McEvilley’s script! The critique seemed to beg us to create platforms for the still unseen and underrepresented or, if you will, “outsider” art, today known as “outlier” in our hemisphere. In my case, the emphasis was again on Mexico.

Also, around 1983 the raw, wild-style, expressionist painting from Europe and New York was catching everyone’s attention, as it effectively displaced conceptual art. It was a very exciting moment in New York City: the Italians, who were called “espresso expressionists,” and the German “neo-expressionists” were at the epicenter, receiving tons of media attention, as well as institutional, gallery, and art market representation. They brought bedazzling bravura, coupled with paintings packed with amazing historically relevant narrative imagery.

Simultaneously, in Mexico, a group of younger artists returned to painting and seemed to echo what was going on in Europe and New York, even though their work was anchored in a whole other set of traditions, the popular or indigenous roots of Mexican art-making. Those were the younger neo-Mexican painters (as they were later called) who, instead of continuing the lyrical and other abstract modalities of the previous La Ruptura generation, favored full-fledged representational, screaming in-your-face works. Patricia, Jaime, and I were turned on and inspired by what seemed to be a momentous coincidence or a spontaneous parallel of contemporary European art versus indigenous and contemporary Mexican art.

During the Stellweg-Séguy Gallery years of 1983-1985, I was invited to join and served on the Latin American exhibition committee of the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art (MoCHA). While on the committee I presented a proposal to host an exhibition of neo-Mexican art from Mexico. Once the Stellweg-Séguy Gallery closed its doors and MoCHA’s curator Susana Torruella Leval resigned to become the director of El Museo del Barrio, I was appointed MoCHA’s chief curator and immediately began submitting applications to the National Endowment for the Arts and AT&T for a Mexican art exhibition. Both the NEA and AT&T awarded us funds to organize and curate an exhibition of neo-Mexican artists. Many of them were represented by Jaime and Patricia at the Galería OMR, while others were already in the Francesco Pellizzi collection in New York City. The 1988 exhibition, entitled *Rooted Visions: Mexican Art Today*, was accompanied by a fully illustrated bilingual (Spanish-English) catalogue. Then, in 1987,

MoCHA was awarded another grant for which I had applied to the New York Council for the Humanities to stage a one-day symposium (which turned into a weekend affair!). The funds gave me the opportunity to invite the Mexican anthropologist Gobi Stromberg to collaborate and organize the symposium. The guidelines of the grant specifically required that we create a platform of exchange between Mexican artists, critics, and curators and their New York City counterparts. Given these guidelines, we of course invited Thomas McEvilley, who presented a talk spinning on his “Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief” paradigm and its possible Mexican connections. It was a truly memorable encounter. Other moments that stick out in my memory are when Carlos Monsiváis delivered his version of a sermon entitled “El Nuevo Evangelio del Arte Mexicano” [The New Gospel of Mexican Art]; when Raquel Tibol talked about *Slackers* and Mexican art across borders; and when the noted anthropologists Francesco Pellizzi and Michael Taussig discussed the exhibition from an anthropological perspective, one that should have as its principal concern a critique of Western (specifically, capitalist) culture, whereby those living on the periphery of the global capitalist economy bring a critical vantage point and articulate their critiques (of capitalism) in terms of their own cultural idioms. Some prominent Mexican and Latin American artists who were in New York at that time, such as Leonora Carrington, Brian Nissen, César Paternosto, Ray Smith, Adolfo Patiño, and José Luis Cuevas, arrived as well. A video of the symposium can be consulted at the Stanford University Library’s Special Collections, where my forty-year archive lives, along with another part of my archive at the MoMA. The weekend ended with a social gathering and Mexican food at the Pellizzi Collection uptown, to which Francesco Clemente and Saint Clair Cemin, among others, had also been invited. It was one of the greatest encounters between Mexico and New York that I can remember!

I believe it was around then that Patricia, Jaime, and I toyed with the idea of opening a New York City gallery together. Sadly, or fortunately (it’s hard to know what the outcome would have been), it never panned out. After I had begun to prep the collaborative effort between MoCHA, the New Museum, and The Studio Museum in Harlem to stage *The Decade Show*, I resigned. Jaime and Patricia were also aware that these genuine community efforts to examine “parallel cultures” obscured by traditional aesthetics, going against the patronizing patterns of the art of others or of “exotica,” whether motivated by philanthropic goodwill and/or the high-art-world curiosity of a few white curators, was a New York trend that was not going to stop, but to intensify. The Decade Show was the first attempt to construct institutionally a multi-vocal art world, which is what we were aiming to do in our joint New York gallery that never came to fruition. At any rate, after already having had a gallery in the early 1980s, I opened my own space in 1989, first in the loft and then on Broadway in SoHo.

Irony would have it that some years later (in 1990 I believe), in anticipation of the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Mexican government of President Salinas de Gortari decided to win over the American vote by staging a multi-city exhibition of *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries*. Very astutely, the OMR gallery, together with the Galería de Arte Mexicano and the Galería de Arte Actual Mexicano, designed their *Parallel Project*, which opened first in New York City and then went on to San Antonio, Texas, before ending in Los Angeles. It essentially accompanied the same thrust of “goodwill” toward Mexico’s peddling for NAFTA between Canada, the United States, and Mexico, which is today a hemispheric disaster. Curiously, in hindsight, the *Splendors* show essentially followed Fernando Gamboa’s proven curatorial script of Mexican art, which ran from pre-Columbian art, through viceregal and folk art, to modern Mexican masters.

Another flashback has me and some artists from Mexico and California in a SoHo coffee shop having breakfast, when we spotted Patricia and Jaime dashing by on their way to open the *Parallel Project* space at 112 Greene Street. They were impeccably attired (expensive briefcases included), and we decided they were the Mexican Barbies of the season, both very handsome and cute! I reminded them that Jaime, who lived on the Lower East Side back in the 1970s, had posed for a Mapplethorpe portrait...

Given what *Splendors* represented, the *Parallel Project*, by contrast, showcased a series of very exciting exhibitions by young painters and sculptors, all looking at Mexico from more personal perspectives, including gay and feminist, with a mix of indigenous and modern motifs, and often—as a central protagonist—the *body*. Again, irony would have it that these artists, whose intentions and works were anything but celebratory of nationalist prerogatives, were later, together with their representatives, blamed for being “politically incorrect,” a result that was largely due to the Mexican government’s sanctioning and co-opting their work. As though they were in collusion with neoliberal policies and corporate power in Mexico or the western hemisphere! In hindsight, these artists, such as Germán Venegas, Nahum Zenil, Javier de la Garza, Arturo Marty, and Ismael Vargas, along with women artists associated with the neo-Mexican movement, such as Sylvia Ordóñez, Mónica Castillo, Dulce María Núñez, and Rocío Maldonado, reaped no benefits. They were strange bedfellows of Mexico’s neoliberal system.

In sum, the story of Galería OMR from the 1980s until today is a fascinating journey, which began as an “alternative” to the traditional Mexican art scene of the time, which focused for the most part on the generation of La Ruptura. By contrast, the OMR in those early years was at the forefront of showing the new and untested art of the time, long before Mexico City’s (now) independent art spaces, such as Biquini Wax, Lulu, Carta Blanca, and Casa Maaquad,

by building on the experience of La Panadería and Temístocles 44. Whenever there is a crisis in Mexico, and everything is collapsing, alternative spaces pop up, showing a DIY creativity in a period of institutional and market failure, just as the OMR used to do.

After thirty-five years or more, the OMR Gallery has become a Mexican mega-gallery, with a roster of internationally renowned artists who all have New York or European mega-gallery representation. I miss the early years, before progress and perseverance would turn the grittiness into success. In the end that is what *this* story is about!

CARLA STELLWEG
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