FANTASTIC VOYAGE

THE LATIN AMERICAN EXPLOSION

The strength of the work of so many artists from virtually every country in the region indicates that the current heat wave will be simmering for some time

BY EDWARD J. SULLIVAN

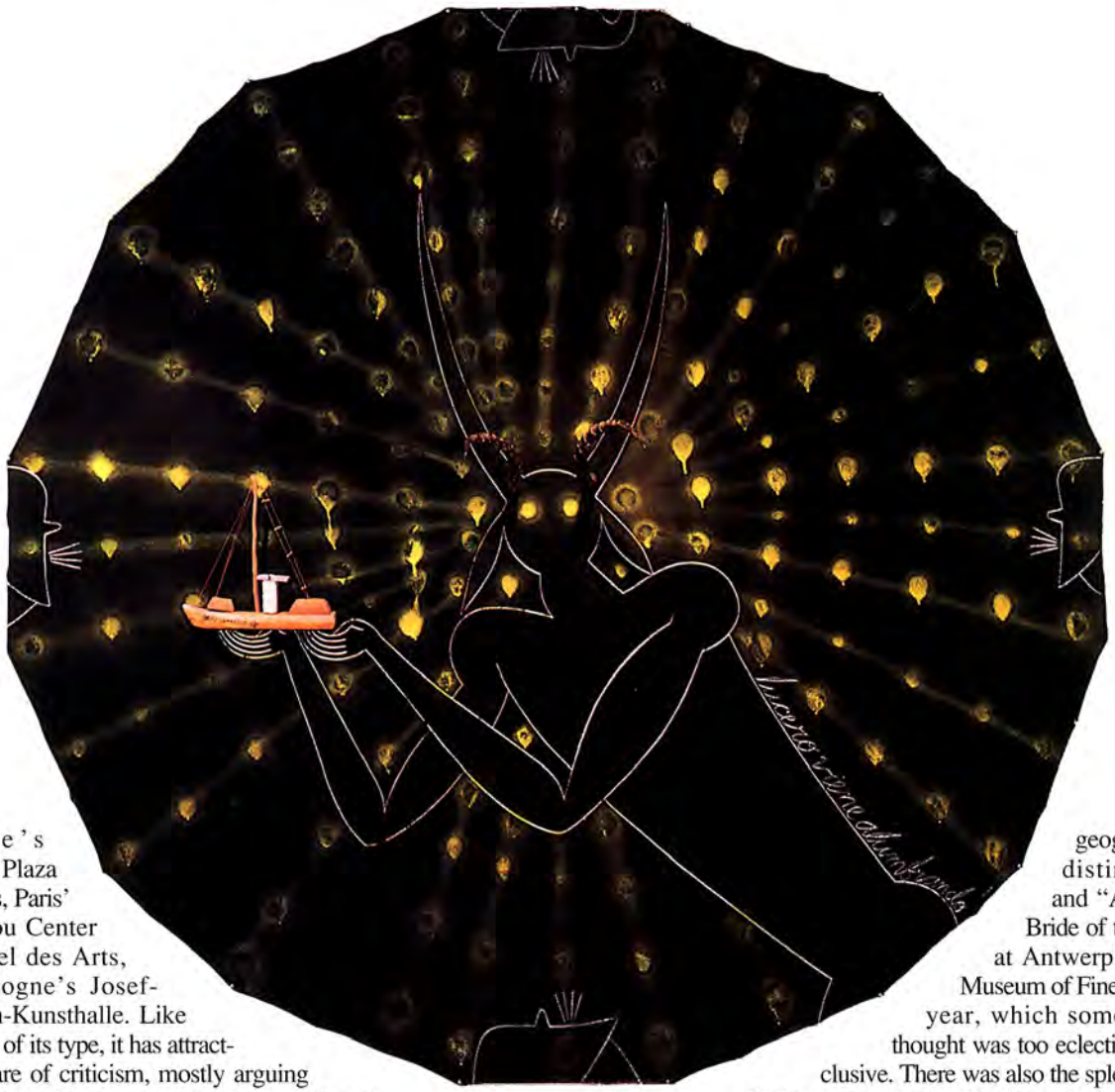
The past decade has been remarkable for Latin American art. There have been a record number of exhibitions and an unprecedented list of new publications, including an upcoming catalogue raisonné on Diego Rivera by University of California professor Ramon Favela and University of Texas professor Jacqueline Barnitz' long-awaited 20th-century history of Latin American art. In the auction rooms and galleries, there has been a succession of astonishing prices, including the record $2.97 million commanded by Diego Rivera's *Vendedora de flores*.

Will it all last? In the wake of the events surrounding last year's commemoration of "the contact of the two worlds," critics, art historians, museum professionals, and dealers are tentative. They're voicing concerns that the current heat wave of interest in Latin American art is headed for a rapid cooling. Some of them are thinking back to the popularity it enjoyed in the 1930s and '40s—which quickly waned when Abstract Expressionism burst onto the scene after World War II.

But that was then. Given the strength of the work of so many contemporary artists from virtually every country in Latin America, things look as if they will be simmering for some time. The current emphasis on multiculturalism is compelling many to take a closer look at the contributions of artists from places previously given little coverage. Judging by the large number of exhibitions planned for the next several years, Latin American art stands to keep the heat up, receiving well-deserved attention.

Through September New York's Museum of Modern Art has its vast, sweeping "Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century" on view. Curated by Waldo Rasmussen, head of the museum's International Program, it is the latest and largest of the ambitious surveys that have been mounted in this country and abroad in recent years. Before arriving at MoMA, it was seen at

OPPOSITE Cuban artist José Bedia's *Lucero viene alumbrando* (Star Comes to Light the Way), 1992, is currently on view at New York's Museum of Modern Art in "Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century."



COURTESY FRUMKIN/ADAMS, NEW YORK

Seville's Estación Plaza de Armas, Paris' Pompidou Center and Hôtel des Arts, and Cologne's Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle. Like all shows of its type, it has attracted its share of criticism, mostly arguing over who has been included, who hasn't, and why. There are too many Mexican artists, some complain, while a number of countries aren't represented at all. On the other hand, a few of the most important Mexicans, including Nahum Zenil, curiously aren't in the show. Other key figures, such as Argentina's Emilio Pettoruti, a leader of the Latin American avant-garde during the '20s, '30s, and '40s, haven't made the roster either.

Nonetheless, with a group of Latin American experts advising (including this writer), Rasmussen gives us an intelligent overview based on achievement rather than quotas. The historical section provides a panorama of most of the major figures of modernism, including Rafael Barradas and Pedro Figari of Uruguay; Lasar Segall, Tarsila do Amaral, and Vicente do Rego Monteiro of Brazil; Mexico's Diego Rivera; and Argentina's Alejandro Xul Solar. Other sections of the show are devoted to social realism, geometric art, Surrealism, New Figuration, Minimal and Conceptual art, and a group of recent works, including installations by the Brazilians Jac Leirner, Cildo Meireles, and Tunga, as well as Eugenio Dittborn and Alfredo Jaar from Chile and José Bedia from Cuba.

MoMA's big survey is in the Latin American spotlight now. But there have been other large-scale, noteworthy shows covering the field before it. There was "Art of the Fantastic," a traveling exhibition organized by the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 1987, which was criticized for presenting the art stereotypically, without geographical distinctions, and "America: Bride of the Sun," at Antwerp's Royal Museum of Fine Arts last year, which some critics thought was too eclectic and inclusive. There was also the splendid "El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy," put together by the Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery at the University of Texas, Austin, for a tour that included various venues in the U.S. and Mexico. The show looked closely at one of Latin modernism's most compelling figures and his influence—the artist's return to his native Montevideo from Paris in 1934.

In the last several years, New York museums have been particularly rich in Latin American shows. Aside from the Metropolitan Museum's overwhelming 1990 exhibition "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries," more recent offerings have included a moving view of the career of Argentine painter (and New York resident) Liliana Porter at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Porter is also in MoMA's exhibition, represented by, among other pictures, *The Simulacrum* (1991), a remarkable acrylic and collage piece that mixes references to politics and popular culture—a hallmark of Porter's work. Marysol Nieves, the Bronx Museum's recently appointed curator of Latin American art, says that upcoming shows for the museum include one on the work of Cuban painter Gladys Triana, planned for next year, and a critical look at Latin America's Conceptual art movement, scheduled for '97.

Independent curator Julia Herzberg, whose expertise includes artists from Cuba to Chile, collaborated with Lowery S. Sims, associate curator of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan, and Giulio Blanc, an expert on Cuban modernism, on a recent exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which was devoted to

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Cuban artist Wifredo Lam. The show featured paintings not only by Lam but by his Cuban, European, and North American contemporaries, including Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, with whom Lam had close contact. It seemed to be Lam's moment in the sun, since another show, this one focusing on his works on paper, was mounted several months earlier by New York's Americas Society. The exhibition was part of an ambitious schedule dedicated to Latin topics organized by the society's gallery director Fatima Bercht, a Brazilian. She and Uruguayan curator Alicia Haber are currently at work on a major retrospective of the 19th-century painter Juan Manuel Blanes, whose academic-style canvases illustrate life on the South American pampas. Blanes' era is one of the least understood in Latin American painting, so this ought to be a particularly fascinating show.

KEN COLLINS/COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NY

ABOVE Curator Waldo Rasmussen says he chose to include artists in the MoMA show because of their talent, not set quotas. BELOW Argentine artist Emilio Torti's moody painting *Cuchillo* (Knife), 1992.

Of course, historical exhibitions aren't the only lively front. The Museo del Barrio's acting director Susana Leval recently curated a couple of excellent contemporary shows that covered installations by Pepón Osorio and Antonio Martorell of Puerto Rico. Leval has an energetic program for her institution, emphasizing a dialogue between the museum's collection and the contemporary arts in general when the museum reopens, after extensive renovations, next year. She's also working on a number of collaborative projects with other New York–area museums, bent on making the Museo del Barrio a more vibrant cultural player in the city than it has ever been.

COURTESY LINDA MOORE GALLERY

Among other exhibitions to watch for elsewhere will be "Cartographies," a survey of 14 contemporary artists from Latin America, organized by Brazilian curator Ivo Mesquita. Having opened in March at the Winnepeg Art Gallery, it will tour Canada, Colombia, and Venezuela before arriving at the Bronx Museum in September '94. Mesquita talks about the show's new approach to exhibiting Latin American art: it doesn't present artists by their country of origin. Latin American artists are *not*, he argues, intimately and exclusively linked to the cultural life of their native lands—they ought to be considered in a broader international context.

One of the most stimulating museum events this year will be the arrival in the U. S. of "Ante America," a brilliant survey of work by artists from the Spanish, French, and English-speaking Americas. Several pieces about the ravages of AIDS and political oppression by Cuban-born painter Luis Cruz-Azaceta, Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar, and Colombian artist Doris Salcedo are in the show. It was organized by Colombian curator Carolina Ponce de León and critics Gerardo Mosquera from Cuba and Rachel Weiss from the U.S. Another noteworthy survey, "South of the Border," which focuses on the U.S.–Mexican interchange from the 1920s through the '40s, put together by Yale graduate student James Oles, will arrive at the Phoenix Art Museum in December, where Clayton Kirking was recently appointed curator of the museum's new Latin American art department.

Who are the critics covering the field? A distinguished group of international writers includes Shifra Goldman, recent prizewinner for criticism from the College Art Association; Paris-based Damian Bayon and Roberto Pontual; and critic Olivier Debroise, working in Mexico, who contributes intelligent, acerbic critiques of the current scene there. Among the sharpest of the younger critics is Brazilian Berta Sichel, who writes for the new Latin American art publication *Art World/Mundo Arte* and the well-regarded Bogotá-based *Art Nexus* (published in both Spanish and English). In Argentina Carlos Basualdo is becoming one of Latin America's most insightful contemporary-art critics.

While these writers are helping to establish artists' reputations, there are a number of prominent dealers who have played an equally major role. Among them is the influential Buenos Aires dealer Ruth Benzacar, who counts Luis Benedit as one of her more renowned artists. Since the mid-'30s Mexico City's Galería de Arte Mexicano, owned by Mariana Perez Amor and Alejandra Yturbe, has been instrumental in shaping the careers of such enormously celebrated artists as Rufino Tamayo, Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo. The gallery also handles the work of the young Mexican realist painter Elena Climent, who portrays the banal realities of daily life in Mexico's capital. Avoiding nostalgia or the picturesque, she's more likely to paint, as in *Kitchen Cupboard* (1991), objects made of cheap plastic than the typical Mexican props depicted in the past in the still lifes of the Mexican School.

Other Latin American artists making a name for themselves include Antonio H. Amaral, 58, of São Paulo, where he shows regularly at the Montesanti Gallery. In the U.S. he's represented by Elite Fine Art in Coral Gables, Florida. Amaral often includes bananas in his paintings as a symbol of his homeland during the political repression by military dictatorships. Now he has turned to ecological issues. The destruction of the rain forest and other natural resources is the subject of such vital canvases as *Smoke and Clouds* (1991). Amaral isn't alone in addressing the problems of widespread waste and gross irre-

sponsibility toward the environment. Last year several exhibitions in Brazil, mounted at the same time as the ecological summit meetings in Rio de Janeiro, showed artists from all over Latin America who are preoccupied with environmental problems. Forty-nine-year-old Rimmer Cardillo, for example, a Uruguayan artist currently residing in New York and represented by San Diego dealer Linda Moore, employs wood, metal, and natural substances to powerfully evoke environmental destruction. His 1989 installation *Amazonia Skin and Iron* juxtaposed forms reminiscent of jungle life threatened by extinction with enclosures suggesting enslavement and colonization.

In fact, as with much of contemporary art, work from Latin America is often politically charged these days. One of the installation artists to first address the theme of oppression in Latin America, Luis Camnitzer, 56 (who has lived in New York since 1964), doesn't hesitate to shock his audience with images that capture pain and fear. Consider his photographs—which are liberally employed in his conceptual pieces—of a hand with burn marks or a finger around which electrical wire is wound.

The Chilean Alfredo Jaar, who is 37 and works in New York, takes up politics in works like *(Un)-framed* (1987–91), whose subject is Brazil's Serra Pelada, or Naked Hill, up which thousands of men trudge daily in a desperate search for gold nuggets. In *Untitled (Water)* (1990) we're confronted with images of Vietnamese boat people. The viewer is put directly into the subject's space by the way the artist ingeniously manipulates photographs, using light boxes and projectors. The effect is to poignantly emphasize the juxtaposition of the museum- or gallerygoer with the suffering groups of destitute emigrants.

One of the most interesting younger Colombian artists, María Fernanda Cardoso, 30, participated in last summer's "Colombian Contemporary Images" show at New York's Queens Museum and is featured in "Ante America." A graduate of the Yale School of Art and a current California resident, she recently showed her installation *Gold* at New York's Nohra Haime Gallery. Inspired by objects in Bogotá's Gold Museum, it's a rumination on themes of poverty, colonialism, and neo-colonialism throughout Latin America. While the gold objects at first glance seem attractive and could even be considered decorative, they become sharp comments on the commodification of art, the expropriation of resources, and the stripping away of the sacred objects of native populations.

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ABOVE Antonio H. Amaral, whose work has focused on ecological and political issues. BELOW María Fernanda Cardoso's *Gold*, a rumination on poverty and colonialism.

Painting is just as lively among younger Latin American artists. Mexico City's Dulce María Nunez, 43, deals with a combination of Mexican kitsch and national icons (political heroes and other symbols of Mexican patriotism) to make ironic, sometimes biting, comments on contemporary political and moral stances. Chilean artist Jaime Palacios was born in Beijing, China, in 1963 and currently lives in Brooklyn, where he creates his mixed-media pieces and paintings that often display hearts, nerves, veins, and other body parts, inside and out, and altogether gripping. Palacios' work was seen last year in the confusing and rather unfocused exhibition *The Bleeding Heart*, shown at a number of U.S. venues.

Among Argentine artists, 32-year-old Guillermo Kuitca is perhaps the most internationally known. His paintings were shown last year at the Museum of Modern Art's Projects Room, and there's a major retrospective of his work on now at the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno in Valencia, Spain. In Buenos Aires Kuitca is something of a guru to a group of exciting young painters who have formed an artists' collective around him. Also working in Buenos Aires is Emilio Torti, 35, who began to paint only about five years ago. In his mazelike studio in the old section of the city called La Bocá, he creates images that, while preserving the figure, project a moody melancholia and introspection that he achieves through the use of monochrome tones. Torti's paintings have recently been shown at the Linda Moore Gallery in San Diego.

Of course, the art scene in the region is vastly complex. But the proliferation of activity, the huge range of exhibitions, hints at the fantastic, endlessly surprising voyage Latin America art continues on today. ■

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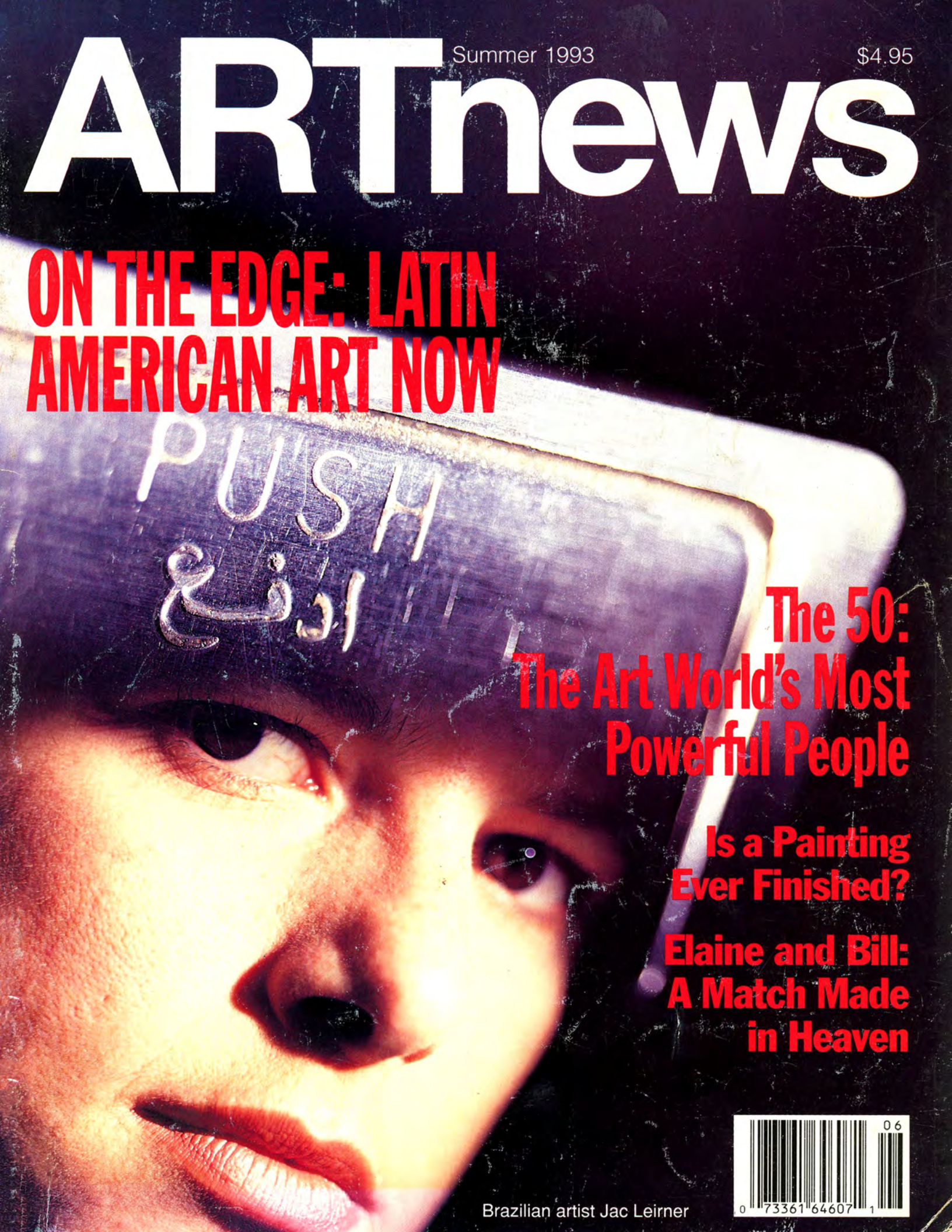

Brazilian artist Jac Leirner

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