



PAUL WELLMAN/ART PHOTO

# ENCUENTROS CON GUATEMALA

**MAJOR EFFORT:** MCASB co-curators Miki García and Emiliano Valdés put together one of PST: LA/LA's biggest shows for three different venues in Santa Barbara.

**N**ews of the Getty's extraordinary *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* initiative has reached all over the world. Readers in New York, London, Paris, and beyond now know of its impressive scope and unprecedented ambition, and thousands of visitors have flocked to locations throughout Southern California to appreciate the range of exhibits on offer. This weekend, the *PST* spotlight hits Santa Barbara, as the city's art museums host three full days of activities designed to deepen one's experience of the work that's been assembled here. On Friday, October 20, scholars and artists will gather at Westmont College's Porter Theater for a day-long symposium on the art of Guatemala from 1960 to the present. The symposium, which is open to the public, promises to connect Guatemala's artistic output to broader global currents in contemporary art. Additional events taking place at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the Santa Barbara Historical Museum, and UCSB's Art, Design & Architecture Museum on Saturday, October 21, and Sunday, October 22, will feature curatorial walk-throughs, a major lecture by scholar Jens Hoffmann, and a panel discussion with Chumash artists.

In preparation for the upcoming events, I spent most of last weekend examining the vast array of work from Guatemala that co-curators Miki García and Emiliano Valdés have assembled for *Guatemala from 33,000 km: Contemporary Art, 1960-Present*. Taking the measure of this important show requires an effort; with well over 100 works on display at three separate venues, it's more than a survey. In fact, it's more of a trifurcated pop-up museum dedicated to one of Latin America's most fascinating art scenes.

Guatemalan art has it all. The high-quality abstractions by Daniel Schafer, Margarita Azurdia, Alfred Jensen, Dennis Leder, and Diana de Solares on view in the smaller of two galleries at the Community Arts Workshop (CAW) on Garden Street can withstand comparison to any geometric art from the period of the early 1960s through 2017. Then there are several arresting examples of serious, large-scale figurative painting, such as Erwin Guillermo's amazing triptych "The Conjuror" (1982) from his *Puppets* series in the main space at CAW and the shocking diptych "Just

Married" (1996) by Aníbal López, a ka A-153167, at the Westmont Ridley-Tree Museum of Art.

Contemporary artists from Guatemala like to work in multiple media. At Westmont, Darío Escobar's "Kukulcán" (2009) represents the Mesoamerican feathered serpent deity of that name through an artfully arranged mobile made of strips of bicycle tires. In the Ridley-Tree's main space, "El Chucho" (1987), a wooden carving of an emaciated dog wearing a human facemask by artist Pablo Swezey makes a powerful statement about Guatemalan cultural identity. In that same room, Ángel Poyón's elegant Mondrian-influenced alarm clocks from 2008 meditate on the "non-linear complexity of immigrant situations" under the ironic title "Studies in Failure in Time-Space."

Perhaps the most powerful, and certainly the most disturbing, strain of work produced by the contemporary artists of Guatemala is the performance art, which survives through documentation — primarily photographs, artist statements, and video. The thoughtfully chosen examples of this work included in *Guatemala from 33,000 km* demand to be seen and pondered by anyone interested in contemporary art and global politics. Hellen Ascoli's performance "Encuentro" finds her rolling across an empty landscape encased in white mesh. On the opposite panel of the same room at CAW, Jorge de León's "Study of Light and Shadow" presents video documentation of the artist in the act of inserting his entire naked body into the hanging carcass of a dead steer. The artist was influenced by a 1655 Rembrandt study called "Flayed Ox" that's on view in the Louvre.

Two works on view at MCA take similar approaches of direct physical involvement. In "Paisaje" (2012), Regina José Galindo stands naked and impassive as a gravedigger covers her with dirt. On another wall of the MCA, photos of Jorge de León (who also climbed into the flayed carcass) sewing his mouth shut send shudders through all who enjoy the right of freedom of speech. Overall this stunning exhibition is one of the most important shows to come to Santa Barbara in years and will certainly give those who attend Friday's symposium plenty to talk about and for which to be grateful. ■

MCASB's Three-Part  
Guatemala Exhibit  
Is a Revelation

by Charles Donelan