

Title:

Damas Delante!

Ñandutí, Folk and Modern Art in Paraguay

Introduction:

This exhibition gathers works by artists including Feliciano Centurión, Olga Blinder, Ogwa, Osvaldo Pitoé, Angelica Klassen, Claudia Casarino, Livio Abramo and Josefina Plá. The title of the exhibition refers to an expression used by Josefina Plá when describing the feats of the group Arte Nuevo, composed largely by women, which launched the first week of Paraguayan Modern Art in 1953.

The connecting tissue of the exhibition is Ñanduti: the quintessential Paraguayan lace, which as its Guaraní name foregrounds (it means "spider web"), is an example of mestizaje. In the exhibition, ñanduti provides a model for understanding how the social fabric reflected in the artists' work entwines with the history of colonisation. In fact, the origin of this lace is widely contested. While it closely resembles lace made in the renaissance by the clergy in the Canary Islands, it is hard to find hard proof of missionaries from that area living in Paraguay and teaching it to indigenous women. It's reticular shape, visualises the possibility of rhizomatic connections, challenging the hypothesis of a fixed point of origin.

The works featured employ woodblock printing, embroidery, drawing, lacemaking, which blur the division of art from craft. The works help us rethink the history of modernism by dismantling, or revising, western categories to make space for what has been systematically excluded. Looking at works made across nearly 70 years, leads us towards a non-chronological narrative.

Page 1: Ogwa and Basybuky



Since the 1990s, members of indigenous communities have begun carving out a new space for drawing and painting, which did not figure in traditional culture. The first person known to become, or identify with, being an artist was **Ogwa** (1938?-2008). His Paraguayan name was Pedro Flores Balbuena, given to him by anthropologist Branislava Sušnik as a young boy. It was the same anthropologist that gave Ogwa a pencil asking him to draw pictures of the Ishir Chamacoco's, his community's, traditions. For revealing the ancient secrets of Ishir culture, which was not meant to be drawn and dispersed, to the many who sought to learn about it, Ogwa was ostracised from his community. Today, his effort to preserve and communicate Ishir Chamacoco heritage is continued by his son Basybuky (Caudelino Balbuena), who uses his artistic work to raise awareness of the lives of indigenous communities and to combat their marginalization and racism.

Continue watching this documentary about Ogwa here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-miIGjEy8Fg&t=176s>

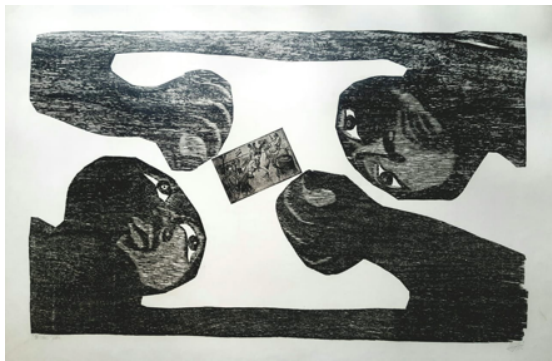
Watch the documentary about Basybuky here: <https://vimeo.com/220878924>

Page 2: Feliciano Centurion



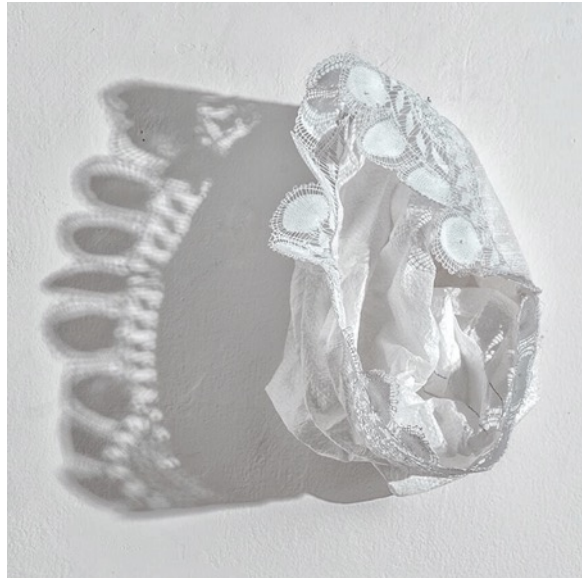
Feliciano Centurion (1962-1996) was born in the missionary territory of Paraguay, an area marked by Guarani-Jesuit past. The artist made works using mass produced objects commonly found in markets, onto which he painted, embroidered, wove and applied handmade textiles such as Ñanduti. This is a constant symbol of Paraguayan identity, which Centurion embeds in images of trees, flowers, alongside other techniques such as embroidery or crochet. The spirituality of his work is often palpable with images of crucifixes or references to catholic imagery. References to mythology also prosper, marking a path towards more pagan beliefs rooted in both Western and Guarani culture. In fact, spirituality materialises in his depiction of animals. Such works find resonance in the oeuvre of indigenous artists such as Ogwa, for whom wildlife is sacred. While resisting forms of marginalization as a gay man suffering from AIDS, Centurion's work builds bridges between binary ideas such as nature and culture, high and low art, the intimate and the collective.

Page 3: Olga Blinder



Olga Blinder (1921-2008) is a figure of reference in Paraguayan XX century art. Together with Josefina Plá, Lili del Mónico y José Laterza Parodi she founded the Arte Nuevo Group in 1954, which held the First Week of Paraguayan Modern Art: an exhibition installed in store windows on one of Asunción's main streets, featuring the work of over twenty artists most of whom were women. Arte Nuevo marked the desire to establish art as a meaningful form of expression for Paraguayan identity. For Blinder, and many in the group, understanding Guaraní identity was of paramount importance and she co-organised amongst the first exhibitions of Hispano-Guaraní art, notably for the 6th Bienal of São Paulo in 1961. Together with Livio Abramo, she directed a printing workshop in Asunción that formed generations of artists. Her woodblock prints, integral within her practice, represent archetypes of femininity such as mothers embracing their children and labourers, recording some of the prevalent aspects of Paraguayan life.

Page 4: Claudia Casarino



In many ways, **Claudia Casarino** (1974) has forwarded Olga Blinder and Josefina Plá's enquiry into the history of women in Paraguay, a country that survived the XX century thanks to those remaining after the bloody War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870) that wiped out an estimate of 90% of the male population excluding children. Their practices engage with the labour of women and how that has been articulated and historicised. Like Blinder, Casarino often inserts small details in her works that homage ñanduti, which becomes the symbol of female hardship, while activating a critique of this fine textile, which was promoted as a symbol of Paraguay during the military dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) as a means to homogenise the Paraguayan and indigenous citizens under a unifying effigy.

Page 5: Livio Abramo



Paraguay left a lasting mark on the life and practice of the Brazilian modernist printmaker **Livio Abramo** (1903-1992). Starting in the mid-1950s he travelled from São Paulo to Asunción upon invitation of the Brazilian Cultural Mission. With this diplomatic initiative, Brazil sought to counter the economic prowess of Argentina by tightening relations with its so-called client states: Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay. Integral to the Brazilian Cultural Mission's success was cultural exchange. In 1956 Abramo had his first solo show in Paraguay, and the following year he opened the Tallér de Grabado Julián la Herrería – named after Josefina Plá's late husband, considered amongst the foremost ceramicists of in the country. After returning to São Paulo and founding the Estúdio Gravura with former pupil Maria Bonomi, Abramo moved permanently to Asunción where he coordinated the Visual and Plastic Arts Section of the Brazilian Cultural Mission from 1962 until his death.

Page 6: Josefina Plá



Printmaker, painter, potter, dramaturg, historian, poet, novelist, pedagogue, **Josefina Plá** (1903-1999) was a woman of many talents. Co-founder of the Arte Nuevo group, she proceeded to historicise it, offering texts and perspective on the newest artmaking in Paraguay, which she made sure was not a reiteration of European tendencies. Throughout her work, she sought to give visibility to the work of women and to be an advocate for their active role in shaping Paraguayan culture. “Damas delante” she proclaimed in her writing about Arte Nuevo, which she characterized as being propelled by the virus of dissidence. Though she was a native of the Canary Islands and not Paraguay, her enthusiasm for learning about its harsh colonial history and indigenous heritage brought her to learn Guaraní and to adopt a literary style as well as an aesthetic that could express the innermost secrets and nuances of the country.

Page 7: Oswaldo Pitoé, Angelica Klassen, Florinda



Artists in the region of El Chaco in occidental Paraguay have begun portraying their surroundings, their legends and history in ballpoint pen drawings – the same pens given to them by anthropologists and missionaries eager to learn about indigenous culture. **Pitoé, Klassen and Florinda** are amongst those living among indigenous communities in occidental Paraguay. Traditionally, the realm of the aesthetic – materialised in utilitarian disciplines such as weaving and pottery – was a female prerogative. Since the 2000s, many men have started selling drawings to make ends meet alongside their main occupations. Though Ogwa came from a completely distinct region and ethnicity, the betrayal perceived by his peers was shared by multiple communities, which hesitated to relate to (non-utilitarian) artmaking as a profession. Yet, over the past decade a new generation including women has turned to art as an instrument to create awareness about indigenous culture and to preserve its memory.

If you have a few minutes, see this documentary about Oswaldo Pitoé and others here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzASMayGB5E&feature=youtu.be>