

ZILIA SANCHEZ: PAINTING THE BODY AS AN ISLAND

EL Museo Del Barrio, "Soy isla",
11/20/19 to 03/22/20

Galerie Lelong, "Eros",
11/21/19 to 01/18/20

Last year, a short visit to the Chinati and the Judd Foundations in Marfa, Texas, gave me the full measure of Donald Judd's ambition for his "Specific Object" -as well as a chance to be repeatedly stopped and asked for my passport by the border patrol, and, with it, a front row view on the reality of the xenophobic paranoia induced in the country by the Trump administration. Today, with the full-size retrospective of the artist's work on view at Moma (or when the museum reopens) New Yorkers will not need to make the trip to South Texas for a while.

As an indirect homage to the power of Judd's intuition, many young painters today, even if their work has little to do with Minimalism, continue to insist on the "object" quality of their work, still placing themselves in a conceptual framework first defined by Judd.

Responses to the American Minimalist Juggernaut have come from far and wide. As a French educated painter, for example, I have long been aware of the response to Minimalism from artists of the Supports/Surfaces generation, such as painter Marc Devade (1943-83) or sculptor Alain Kirili (who showed recently at the Susan Inglett Gallery in New York).

Devade and Kirili's main argument with Judd had to do with his ideal of a disembodied literalness, with the expelling of the body's inscription in the work from the Specific Object's doctrine and generally with the evacuation of the subject (in the psycho-analytical sense) from the object. More specifically for Devade, it had to do with the repression of the subject's investment in color. In other words, what Judd's Specific Object removed from the work was the marks of its making by a subjective (subversive?) individual. Hence the minimalists' fanatic Puritanical obsession -especially Judd's- about erasing all traces of the hand and about the quality of the fabrication, most often done by others. Thanks to Judd's widespread influence on the architectural world, this fixation on the minimalist detail would quickly spill over in American Architecture and Design where it would eventually morph from a stimulating "less is more" mantra, to a stifling constraint.



Topologia Erotica, 1960-71, acrylic on canvas, 41" x 53" x 13", collection Jose Landron, San Juan, P.R.

I first stumbled on Zilia Sanchez' work at the Lelong Gallery in NY in 2014. While Artist Space had re-introduced her work to NY in 2013 and Lelong has represented her since 2014, the Museo del Barrio retrospective which traveled from the Phillips collection in Washington D.C. where it was on view from 2/16/18 to 5/19/19, is the artist's (born in Cuba in 1926) first full-fledged survey outside of a Latin American context and includes some of her early work which had not been seen since the fifties. An LGBT refugee from the Cuban revolution, her early distancing from both the European and North American art scenes – she has been living in San Juan, Puerto Rico, since 1971- was a salutary escape from a toxic Western cultural environment too often both macho and xenophobic.

At first sight her work seemed to squarely fit within the parameter of that general response to Minimalism. Her "shaped canvases" were a striking statement from a previously silent corner of the universe. But these were not really shaped canvases per se, as we understand them when we think of an early Frank Stella's painting, for example. Most often in Sanchez 'case, it is not so much the perimeter of the painting which is being shaped as the plane of its surface. The canvas is pushed away from the wall and into the room, sometimes by as much as a foot, by a contraption attached to the stretcher behind it. According to an often-quoted anecdote, Sanchez reportedly discovered that idea when her father died in 1955, as she saw the washed sheets that had enveloped his body billowing in the wind and touching a

hidden post behind them. A strong connection between Eros and Thanatos develops in her work from that moment when the power of the Eros pulsion is revealed through the acknowledgment of death.

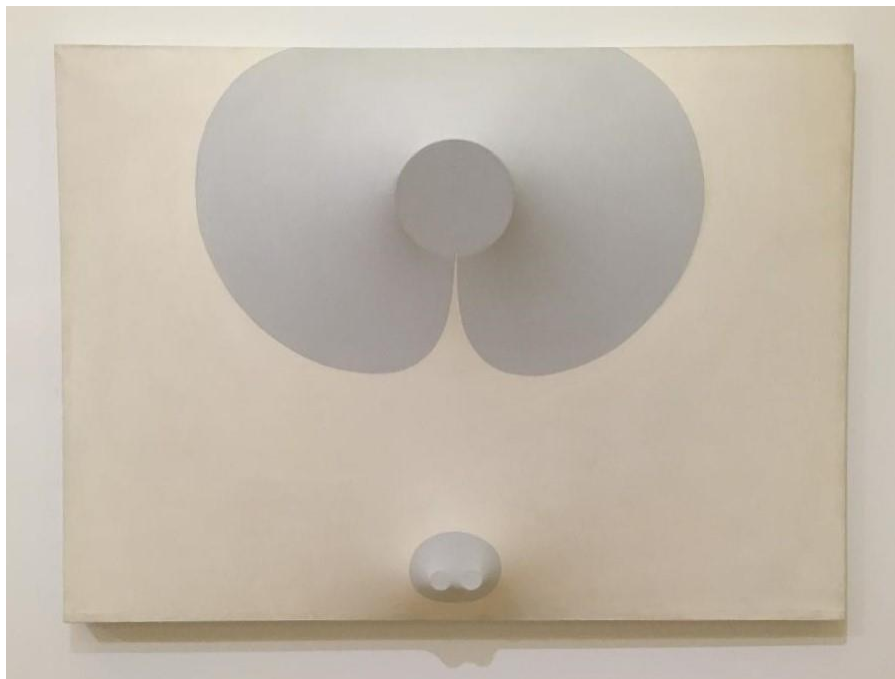


Trojanas, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 71-3/4" x 54" x 9-1/2", collection Laura Delaney Taft and John Taft.

In the U.S., in the early sixties, Charles Hinman reached a similar formal response to Minimalism's prescribed flatness. He exhibited his first reliefs at Richard Feigen in 1964-5 and also sometimes referred to them as "skin over bones". There is an interesting case of synchronicity between Hinman and Sanchez, since, apparently, they did not know of each other's work, while both speaking of "topologies" to describe it. Coincidentally, at roughly the same time as Sanchez' retrospective at the Phillips, an important survey of Hinman's work opened at the Kreeger Museum in Washington: Charles Hinman: Structures, 1965-2014, 4/18/19 to 7/31/19. Also worth noting is that Ron Gorchoff started to develop his first saddle shaped stretchers around that same time.

But in trying to relate her work to Hinman's or Gorchov's, we might just be heading in the wrong direction: In fact, perhaps even more than Hinman's, her work echoed that of some Italian painters from the European pre-Minimalist group Zero from the fifties and sixties. In the wake of Lucio Fontana's slit paintings, Agostino Bonalumi and Enrico Castellani also manipulated the support to push the canvas out from the picture plane. Bonalumi's work can sometimes seem eerily close to some of Sanchez paintings, but he still considered each painting -as did Castellani- as a monochrome wall relief, firmly connected to the kinetic esthetics of Zero.

And to remain in Italy, well before Castellani or Bonalumi, in the early fifties, Alberto Burri was already inserting objects behind the canvas to push it out from the picture plane.



Topologia Erotica, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 41" x 56" x 11-1/2", Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY.

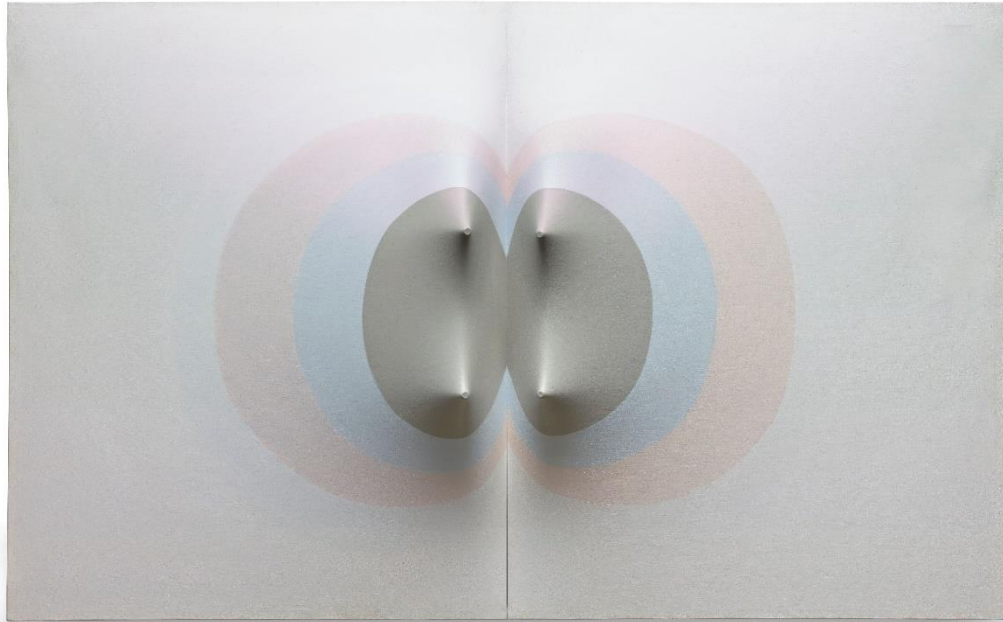
Again, as for Hinman, Sanchez biographers do not mention her having any knowledge of the Italians' work. It seems that without any apparent awareness of each other's work, a few painters on different continents, reached similar formal solutions at roughly the same time. And, since there was no contact between them, perhaps should we speak here of elective affinities or of zeitgeist (to stay within German terminology and concepts) instead of influences.

What sets Sanchez apart from the men's responses to the formal problem of pushing painting beyond its post-painterly flatness, is her clear identification of the painting's surface as body and skin and her willingness to take it further towards an eroticization of the esthetic experience.

As the arc of her development shows, she proved to be a fast learner. In the mid-fifties, her paintings displayed signs of influence of the post-cubist space of Vieira da Silva, from the second school of Paris and well before a fellowship grant brought her to Spain in 1966-7, her work already showed a strong influence from Catalan painters Antoni Tàpies and Manolo Millares (both themselves responding to Fautrier's "Hostages") in the understanding of the painting's surface as skin and a strong preference for a haptic (Catholic?) over an optical (Protestant?) approach to the surface.

In the US, as Nancy Princenthal noted in her biography of Agnes Martin, the Coenties Slip community where Agnes Martin developed her first pre-minimalist grid paintings was mostly made of protestants. Beyond the generational gap, she opposes their cultural sensibility to the Jewish sensibility that shaped and influenced Abstract Expressionism. What Sanchez' work presents in turn is a Catholic response to the protestant Minimalist reaction to the Jewish Abstract Expressionism; the reintroduction of the body, the excessive baroque body; the body as excess.

The late fifties and early sixties, is a moment in painting's history, when critically, advanced painting in Catholic Europe couldn't be good if it was not incarnated, when in protestant US, it couldn't be good unless it was disembodied and as optical as possible: irreconcilable differences. But if they were unthinkable with Minimalism, latent sensual and erotic references were not uncommon in the work of many artists associated with Zero: think of artists as different as Pol Bury or Yayoi Kusama, among others. What Sanchez' work achieved is an erotization of the pre-minimalist vocabulary of Zero in Europe and of the lifeless specific object in the US; the stretcher becoming a metaphor for a self-loving female body. What separates Sanchez from the Surrealist generation and brings her together with the Minimalist generation is the literalness of her approach, drawing out the importance of the "untold" of minimalism, the body, which would be one of the sources of the Post-Minimalist reaction in the US, from Eva Hesse to Linda Benglis.



Amazonas, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 43" x 70" x 11", Princeton University Art Museum, N.J.

Another interesting aspect of her work is how the three-dimensional element is reinforced by a painted shape, which brings the relief back into the realm of painting, contrary to Bonalumi, Castellani or Hinman, where it stays in the realm of the painting as object. Sanchez' painted shapes hover somewhere between Jean Arp's biomorphic painted reliefs from the thirties (I am still struck by own "modern" -let's say "ahead of their time", modern has become such a frayed term- some of Arp's pieces from the early twenties still look today) and Myron Stout or Paul Feeley's curvy responses to abstract expressionism of the late fifties/early sixties. Sanchez' painted shapes radiate around the relief in the canvas like ripples from the impact of a stone thrown into water -as in "Topologia Erotica, 1968", firmly establishing the relief area as the metaphorical center of the work. Coincidentally, both Stout and Feeley were interested in classical Greek culture, as is Sanchez, if her choice of titles reveals (Las Trojanas, Las Amazonas, Antigona, etc.). But more generally the subtext of their work running close beneath the surface was a latent eroticization of a formalist repertory. Most often, curved shapes with any hint of Biomorphism or of Organic Abstraction -often associated with Surrealism- will evince some kind of reference to the sensuality of the body, especially when opposed to programmatic geometry. In his saddle paintings, Gorchov's insistence on a symmetrical painted figure is also an emphasis on the symmetry of the body,

where as in Sanchez' repeated use of the diptych, canvas over stretcher is used as a surrogate for the body; each side of the diptych functioning as one side of the human body, as in "Juana de Arco", 1987.

Sanchez might have heard about the French periodical *Tel Quel's* take on Lacanian theory through her childhood Friend Severo Sarduy, a close associate of *Tel Quel's* editorial team, best known in France for "*Barroco*" (éditions du seuil, Paris, 1975), a remarkable essay on the baroque impulse, an architectural style that had a lasting impact on visual culture in Spanish and Portuguese colonized South America.

In painting, the Catholic excesses of the Baroque style, where more is never enough, are at the opposite ends of the style spectrum and over the centuries from the puritan excesses of Minimalism, where less is never enough. Sanchez' response to Minimalism is Baroque in her eroticization of a formalist vocabulary in a way that can be compared to the response of the Seventeenth century Italian artists outrageously eroticizing the subject matters of their immediate predecessors.

In a 1968 article on Larry Bell for *Tel Quel*, Sarduy sketched out Sanchez' dilemma in a few lines: "A persistent bias of our culture wants that in any art production the support needs to be hidden. In painting, this tenacious censorship applies against the canvas, the presence of the fabric...It is because civilization -but particularly Christian thinking- has condemned the body to forgetfulness, to sacrifice. It follows that everything that refers to it, one way or another, falls under the category of transgression. The underlying structure of our knowledge is designed to perpetuate this omission, this sacrifice. Canvas considered as material support and body of the tableau (in painting), and in sculpture the armature, must disappear and make place for spatial illusion..." (translation by the author)

But Sanchez manages to stay clear from the American Formalist Modernism, as much as from the European Post-War Reconstruction/Deconstruction speculations.

She also departs from either American or European narratives in her use of color. In her color choices; whites, black, light blues, pale beiges, shades of greys, etc., more than to anybody else, she seems to respond to Agnes Martin's palette -another painter who isolated herself early from the Art World, in order to avoid its distractions. Even if their reasons for that color selection are fundamentally different: Mind over matter, or rather spirit over body for Martin, body and mind together for Sanchez. Instead of the jubilant Pop colors of unbridled consumerism, instead of the optical excess, what her work displays is a resurgence of the Thanatos side, through the subdued colors of mourning.

And perhaps this is the place to return to Sanchez' work latent connection to Surrealism and to the unconscious, which, even as her work seems to position itself formally as a response to Minimalism, allows her to conceive of the blank canvas as a figure, and specifically as a female figure, or rather of the cotton canvas as a surrogate for clothing covering a female body. After all, is not painting a feminine gender word in most European languages (die Malerei, Pittura, la pintura, la peinture, etc.), except in the English language where it is neutral? The wood devices under the canvas surface are just the way to bring out that subconscious revelation: the practice of painting as the continual mourning reenactment of the primal scene of the father's death interiorized by a female subject shrouding herself in her father's deathbed sheets.

More than just a critical reading of Minimalism, her work seems to bridge the gap between Surrealism and Minimalism, a space rarely explored in our usual narrative, which has Surrealist influences disappearing with the advent of Abstract Expressionism.



Juana de Arco, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 97-1/2" x 73-3/8" x 13", collection Mina and Cesar Reyes, San Juan, P.R.

When André Breton, escaping from the German invasion of France, stopped in the French Caribbean island of Martinique in 1941 on his way to New York with André Masson, he experienced colonialism firsthand and discovered a new world - unsuspected until then by his Euro-centrist vision, that seemed to strangely agree with his Surrealist intuitions. A book ("Martinique, charmeuse de serpent" - Martinique, Snake Charmer) came out of this cultural encounter, which sums up the impact of the Caribbean culture on the bard of Surrealism. Despite the predictable misunderstandings, for Breton, Caribbean culture seemed to be a living embodiment of his theories. The affinities between both are still easy to find today and, in many ways, still tie them together.

If there was a last word to have, I would like to leave it to great Martinican poet Edouard Glissant and to his theory of the archipelago. Glissant's major intuition is of the inevitable cultural "creolization" of a more and more archipelagic world. To which Sanchez responds by calling herself an island and a "mulata minimalista". In both Glissant and Sanchez cases there is a claim by the "periphery" (here Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, Latin America) to sit at the center of the table for a chance to inflect our main cultural narrative, as it becomes more and more tentative with time.

The current discourse on Sanchez' oeuvre places her, quite predictably, within the parameters of the discourse on the female body in Latin America's LGBTQ art practices. But there is another dimension to her work which absorbs, confronts, and impacts the male dominated European and North American formalist discourse. As a white male European living and painting in North America, I cannot help but be interjected by her work both on formal and symbolic terms. I suspect that the strength of her work comes from having been able to negotiate successfully that cultural chiasm. Sanchez' example is particularly relevant today because, from her isolated vantage point, she offers a well-articulated response to Minimalism's limitation. She positions her work in an improbable space equidistant from the pathos of the European approach of "surface as skin" and from the American coolness of the object as pure optical commodity. Her response echoes the European (mostly Spanish and Italian) latest contemporary developments of her time, which was not an option for American painters. In his efforts to establish a new starting point for his "American Type Painting", Clement Greenberg had made sure that door was closed to them. It would have been interesting to know, for example, what someone like Elizabeth Murray would have made of Sanchez' work.

Nonetheless, in my view, Sanchez holds her spot with the "Big Boys" of her time in that her response to Minimalism is contemporary to theirs, often better articulated and goes further. What

separates her from them is that her work also shows how it is possible to move forward in art without necessarily subscribing to a dominant or mainstream narrative.

Together with other very late in life retrospectives, at the Whitney for Carmen Herrera in 2017 and more recently at the Serpentine in London for Luchita Hurtado, this milestone exhibition of another major under recognized female figure from Latin America, which clearly should have been hosted by the Whitney Museum, makes us wonder how many more happy surprises of this kind we should really be expecting. Quite a few, I should hope.

Gwenaël Kerlidou