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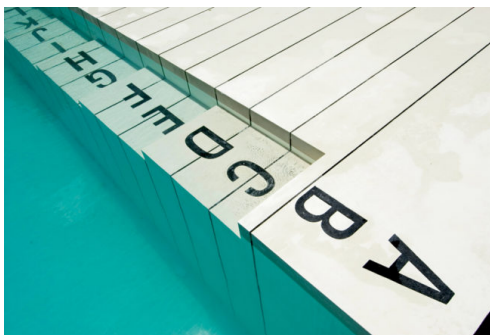
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Three Argentine Visions

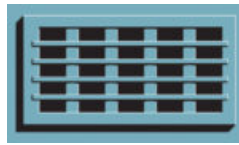
by David Ebony

Jorge Macchi:
Swimming Pool
(detail), 2009, white
concrete, stone, and
water, approx. 6 by 39
by 39 feet; at Inhotim,
Brumadinho, Brazil.
Photo Pedro Motta.



Throughout its notoriously turbulent political and socioeconomic history, Argentina has managed to sustain a vibrant cultural scene. The hub of activity has always been Buenos Aires, a vast metropolis whose languorously crumbling Beaux-Arts and Art Deco buildings evoke a far distant glory. Among the city's residents—or Porteños, as the denizens of Rio de la Plata port towns are called—have been some of Latin America's most illustrious (and infamous) figures. The nation's capital has fostered polarizing political leaders like Juan Perón and Che Guevara. On Sundays, labor groups and striking workers still march through the streets carrying banners emblazoned with Che's image; mothers of those who disappeared during the 1976–83 military dictatorship still gather in the Plaza de Mayo. Key literary legends also lived here, including Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Sabato, and Victoria Ocampo, to name just a few.

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Due to its instability, however, Argentina suffered an inordinate brain drain during much of the twentieth century. Artists, writers, and musicians who earned some level of international recognition typically chose to live abroad. Fleeing the country's extreme turbulence in the late 1960s, for instance, were major Argentine artists such as kinetic art maestro Julio Le Parc, who relocated to Paris. Performance and installation art pioneer Marta Minujín moved to New York and Paris; sculptor Liliana Porter settled in New York; and conceptualist David Lamelas made Los Angeles his home.

The emigration pattern continues today for some younger Argentine artists of note, such as Tomás Saraceno, who now resides in Berlin, and Adrián Villar Rojas, who, according to his Mexico City and New York gallery, kurimanzutto, lives nomadically. The trend, however, may be shifting for other Porteño artists with international reputations. Guillermo Kuitca, Leandro Erlich, Marcos López, Nicola Costantino, and Eduardo Stupía are among those who spend most of their time in Argentina.

On a recent visit to Buenos Aires, I met with three Porteño stalwarts, all highly individualistic yet formally like-minded artists. Pablo Siquier (b. 1961), and Jorge Macchi (b. 1963) are prominent figures on the local scene, with extensive international exhibition histories. Luciana Lamothe (b. 1975) is a protégée of Kuitca and also studied with Siquier and Macchi. Well established in Argentina, she is quickly gaining recognition abroad. In the past year, Lamothe has had shows in Paris and Chengdu, China, as well as Buenos Aires. She was also invited by Art Basel to create a large-scale outdoor installation for last fall's inaugural Art Basel Cities: Buenos Aires, the Swiss organization's ongoing and wide-ranging cultural program for Argentina.

Aside from related backgrounds—all three attended the venerable Escuela de Bellas Artes Prilidiano Pueyrredón—the artists share a certain sensibility as well as related themes centered on urban architecture and infrastructure, construction and destruction, public art, surveillance, and the stress of contemporary urban living. Coursing through their works are images of maps, building fragments, scaffolding, and other elements that suggest the circulation of people through built environments. There is also a strong interrelationship of formal concerns—experiments with unorthodox materials and processes, as well as a common interest in geometric abstraction.

Perhaps their closest interrelationship is with the ideals of the 1940s avant-garde Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención.¹ This influential group of artists proposed using geometric abstraction, or Concrete art, to counter the nation's oppressive oligarchs and military brass, who officially mandated figuration and favored various forms of saccharine realism in all the arts.

Pablo Siquier

I became aware of Siquier's work firsthand in the mid-1990s, while lying on a psychotherapist's couch in New York. I was there not as a patient but as a writer. The couch belonged to Josefina Ayerza, an Argentina-born Jacques Lacan specialist and the editor of *Lacanian Ink*, a journal of psychoanalysis and art, to which I contributed over the years. I was instantly drawn to the mysterious shallow space that

Siquier presented in the handsome, medium-size painting hanging above the couch. A striking, flat, monochromatic turquoise composition with planes as deep shadows and hard-edge black lines, the work suggested an architectural detail. It is part of a series of works that includes more recent examples like *0916* (2008) and *1508* (2015). The images allude to the ornate facades on some of Buenos Aires's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century buildings. Siquier's rather eerie faux-relief images bear comparison to Roy Lichtenstein's "Entablature" paintings from the 1970s as well as to actual 3D relief paintings created in the 1960s and '70s by Cuban artist Zilia Sánchez. Siquier featured this series in his first New York solo show, presented at Annina Nosei Gallery in 1997.

By the time I saw his 2005 solo museum exhibition in Madrid, at the Palacio de Velázquez venue of the Museo Reina Sofía, Siquier had abandoned color altogether. The show's black-and-white hard-edge compositions, some mural-size, retained the illusion of shallow depth, with the help of drop shadows, but the emphasis was now on the sweeping movement of countless lines and on dense concentrations of patterning that resemble maps, aerial views of cities, and the linear arabesques of Islamic art. The crisp geometry and elegant line in some of these works recall classic examples of Concrete art, such as Tomás Maldonado's painting *Development of a Triangle* (1949), in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Employing the computer design program Illustrator, Siquier has since produced increasingly intricate compositions. His Buenos Aires studio is located in a building complex he shares with Macchi and the artist Carlos Huffman in the Villa Crespo district. The rather gritty but soon-to-be-gentrified neighborhood is home to some of the city's trendiest galleries, such as Zmud, Revolver, Ruby, and the long-running Ruth Benzacar. There is not much to see on Siquier's walls these days; in recent years, he has become increasingly preoccupied with large-scale public works. He has also been engaged with sculpture, producing elaborate room-size enclosures made of clusters of steel rods, reminiscent of certain works by the late Argentine artist and activist León Ferrari (1920–2013). Siquier's completed public commissions include the vast exterior murals of the mixed use tower Los Molinos (2008) in Buenos Aires. His murals for the Carlos Pellegrini subway—or Subte—station, completed in 2009, are potent visual statements, full of movement reflecting the city's manic urban energy.

Jorge Macchi

In his cerebral and visually compelling works, Macchi constantly challenges the viewer. For *Parallel Lives* (1998), he smashed a piece of plate glass and then meticulously created a duplicate of it using stencils and precision glass-cutting equipment. This might seem like a neo-Dada gesture, but the labor-intensive piece is a tour de force of vitreous craftsmanship. Recently on view in New York in a 205 Hudson Gallery show drawn from the Cisneros Collection, the work defies the viewer to distinguish between the shattered glass and the replica.

Similarly disorienting, *Piscina* (Swimming Pool, 2009) is one of Macchi's most iconic works. Based on an earlier watercolor, the site-specific installation at Inhotim, the vast sculpture park near Belo Horizonte, Brazil, is a pool designed to resemble an address book, with

granite letters embedded in underwater steps corresponding to alphabetical tabs. In its lush, verdant setting, the work appears somewhat unnerving and intrusive rather than seductive, as a swimming pool ought to be. Approaching the pool on a hot summer day, one might at first want to jump right in; but as any splash would disrupt the uncanny spectacle, as well as the Pop-art perfection of the piece, most prospective swimmers refrain.

After extended stays abroad—in Holland, France, and elsewhere—Macchi returned to Buenos Aires in 1998. Once his son was born, he decided to settle in his hometown for good. The sculptures, installations, paintings, and photographs he produces there often correspond to poetic devices of Argentine writers such as Borges, Cortázar, Sabato, and other early contributors to the Latin American literary phenomenon known as magic realism.

In a recent series, Macchi incorporates antique books on Argentine history, political science, and ecology into an intricate network of wooden slats resembling architectural scaffolding. *Esquema* (Schema, 2016), for instance, features a vintage Argentine copy of H.G. Wells's 1920 book *The Outline of History*. The work resembles a maquette for a monumental public sculpture. The elaborate structures, Macchi explained when I visited his studio, represent the shadows cast by influential scholarly texts. A snuffed-out candle placed in front of the construction refers to the book's initial luminosity. He created this series in preparation for his recent show at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano, Italy. Macchi's wide-ranging experimentation with materials, image-making, and spatial relationships corresponds to the work of the Madí Group, launched in the mid-1940s by the Czechoslovakia-born Argentine artist and poet Gyula Kosice and others.

Other recent Macchi works include large watercolors and a wooden model showing what appears from a distance to be the readout on a digital clock—20:18. On closer inspection the numbers prove to be buildings laid out in a plan for an internment camp for immigrants. A series of large-scale paintings and works on paper feature pixelated images of disintegrating military compounds and other institutional structures. For Macchi's most recent New York show, at Alexander and Bonin in 2017, he created a series of large, oil-on-canvas compositions that incorporate images of his studio and ambiguous architectural spaces. In *The Space in Between* (2016), for example, a rendering of a white modernist scrim or grating of repeated elliptical shapes covers the surface of the large canvas. Based perhaps on the safety netting or barrier at a construction site, it partially obscures one's view of the building's facade.

Luciana Lamothe

"I don't like 'gender'!" Lamothe remarked when we met at a Buenos Aires café. She was responding to my query about her situation as a woman artist in Argentina, where she is known for imposing sculptures, industrial materials, treacherous and sometimes dangerous installations, and ultra-aggressive performances—all of which are more commonly associated with male artists. "In my work, there may be a dialogue with feminism because I use hard materials. But these are often transformed into something soft. I don't like the stereotypes about

gender, the codes, the rules,” she added.

Lamothe’s most recent Buenos Aires solo show, at Ruth Benzacar last spring, featured a stunning array of recent abstract works made of twisted and shredded iron pipes; sometimes batches of the metal tubes are bound together with galvanized steel scaffolding clamps. Up close, the objects seem a bit foreboding—evoking the quills of angry porcupines or the spikes of medieval torture devices. But from a distance, works such as *Flancito* (Little Flan, 2018) and an untitled circular piece from 2017 convey an easy, organic grace and unexpected sensuality. The recent pieces also recall the iconography of sculptors such as Eva Hesse, Lygia Clark, Doris Salcedo, Lynda Benglis, and Lee Bontecou, whom Lamothe counts among artists who inspire her.

One of her earliest projects, which brought some notoriety, is a photo series documenting various clandestine, subversive actions. For *Slashed Chair* (2004), she attacked the fancy seat cushion of an overstuffed chair in the lounge area of a four-star hotel. The picture shows a plush chair with its stuffing bursting out. While the action was intended to confound and harass the bourgeoisie, it also makes a savvy reference to Destructive Art, the Argentine neo-Dada movement of the early 1960s.²

Lamothe’s more recent large-scale sculptures are architectonic forms that require audience participation. They correspond to works from the ’60s by GRAV, the Paris-based street action group, led by Le Parc, whose motto was “It is prohibited not to participate; it is prohibited not to touch.”³ Lamothe’s *Metasbilad* (2015), for instance, is a long, trestled, precarious-looking ramp that bounces under pressure when someone walks on it, rather like a diving board. Created for the exhibition “My Buenos Aires” at the Maison Rouge in Paris, the piece generates a feeling of tension and insecurity about its construction, as the whole thing is held together by scaffolding clamps.

Lamothe’s largest and most ambitious outdoor sculpture to date, *Starting Zone* (2018), created for the Art Basel Cities project, features a circular tower—more than twenty feet high and twenty feet in diameter—composed of metal pipes. Viewers can mount a spiraling plywood staircase that has been clamped to the side of the tower. Reaching the top, they can then descend a staircase that runs along the inside of the structure. As Lamothe notes in a press statement, the piece offers viewers either a bird’s-eye view of the surrounding park or a crippling sense of vertigo as they make their way along the rickety stairs. The work could be viewed as a droll metaphor for the precariousness of everyday urban living at the mercy of an unstable infrastructure.

Lamothe, like Siquier and Macchi, uses architectural forms and geometry in myriad ways, conveying everything from tension to outright menace to order, symmetry, and balance. Constantly alluding to Argentina’s avant-garde past, this Buenos Aires trio collectively contributes to the art world beyond the Rio de la Plata a subtly subversive but ultimately hopeful vision of an ad hoc future.

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