

HYPERALLERGIC

The Playful, Feminist Sculptures of a Member of the Peruvian Avant-Garde

By Julia Friedman — July 17, 2017



All images courtesy SculptureCenter

Left: Teresa Burga, “Mano mal dibujada No. 1 – 9” (2015-17), steel, varnish, approximately 16.5 x 14.2 x 3.3 inches, installation view, SculptureCenter (image courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin, photo by Kyle Knodell)

Right: Installation view, Teresa Burga: Mano Mal Dibujada, SculptureCenter (photo by Kyle Knodell)

Teresa Burga: *Mano Mal Dibujada* (Badly Drawn Hand), the Peruvian artist’s first solo museum exhibition in the United States, presents a selection of her work from the 1960s to the present that does not neatly fit within the outlines of modern and contemporary art genres. At times Burga’s style seems akin to Brazilian Constructivism, at others a play on the conceptual underpinnings of naïve art; some of her work looks like Pop Art. Finally, because Burga probes themes of childhood and domesticity — realms of stereotypically female interest — it’s hard not to see feminist undertones in her work.

Educated in Lima and later at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago as a Fulbright scholar, Burga returned to live and work in Peru. Before her time in Chicago, she was part of the group *Arte Nuevo*, which was instrumental in introducing Op Art, Pop Art, and Happenings to the Peruvian avant-garde scene, while also questioning art-world hierarchies. Miguel A. López, chief curator at the contemporary art institution TEOR/ética in San José, writes in his SculptureCenter catalogue essay on Burga that during the leftist dictatorship of Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968–75), some former *Arte Nuevo* artists, like Burga, found themselves out of favor “under a nationalist military regime that privileged representations of indigenous aesthetics as a form of social vindication.” This Peruvian avant-garde therefore existed in a political no-man’s land, out of favor with both the right and the left.

It’s often hard to grasp the amounts of sincerity and irony in Burga’s work. For example, the 2012 *Mano mal dibujada* series is based on traced drawings of her own hand and painted nails, mini self-portraits that wink at the notion of “the artist’s hand.” The sculptural versions, standing over one foot high and tipped with bright red nails, have a Pop Art feeling; the nails evoke the consumerist impersonality of Oldenbergs’ bright red lipstick tube. But the red flourishes seem more positive than Oldenbergs’; perhaps they are an I’m-here-take-notice feminist statement. Or maybe they suggest serialization and a confining, consumerist



Left: Teresa Burga, “Sin Titulo” (1967), acrylic, lace, paper, canvas on plywood, 72.4 x 27.6 inches, installation view, SculptureCenter (image courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin, photo by Kyle Knodell)

Right: Installation view, Teresa Burga: Mano Mal Dibujada, SculptureCenter (photo by Kyle Knodell)

femininity. In the context of the United States, it would be safe to assume the latter, but in Peru a critique of capitalism and consumerism is more complicated, as a brutal Communist insurgent group, the Shining Path, controlled and terrorized large swaths of Peru throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. So a critique of American-born capitalism — the values satirized by American Pop Art and seen in the United States as both an offshoot of, and a distraction from, a military-industrial complex — is not as easily read as negative in a Peruvian context.

Burga’s work also engages with the deliberate vagaries of conceptual art. As she explains in a 2014 interview with López in *Manifesta Journal*: “I wasn’t a person to look for one story or one single course of work to follow as a reference, more relevant to me are ideas at a given moment. Like what for example the Surrealists propose: drop a sentence haphazardly and let that sentence take you to produce a work.” Prismas, a series of movable, sculptural shapes, is an example of this creation by chance. The Prismas are accompanied by a series of drawings by Burga that show small images of the works’ sides; these one-dimensional markers of three-dimensional objects categorize, catalogue, and hint at possible shape arrangements. And yet, these shapes also evoke both naïve art and the movable pieces of Brazilian Constructivist Lygia Clark; they possess the simple, brightly colored appeal of children’s blocks — a concrete appeal that is strikingly material.

Burga’s conceptualism explores both mathematical systems of organization and subjective values in art. For example, her practice of noting the exact date and time of a drawing’s beginning and end demonstrates this interest in cataloguing, in sorting work by mathematical measure. But in an untitled series in which she creates impressionistic, non-exact reproductions of children’s drawings, she exposes the complexity of the original works and the difficulty in defining “adult” art, thereby reassessing standard value judgements of artistic quality.

Mano Mal Dibujada reminds viewers how narrow the contemporary art canon is, how male-driven, and how predominately focused on American and European artists. Burga’s work is as complex as any of the canon’s male heavy-hitters, and yet as a Peruvian woman her work has only received its due attention in recent years.

Teresa Burga: Mano Mal Dibujada continues at SculptureCenter (44-19 Purves St, Long Island City, Queens) through July 31.

Corrections: A previous version of this article said Teresa Burga joined Arte Nuevo after her time in Chicago, but in fact it was before. This has been fixed.