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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; A Universe Of Art, Centered In Boston

By GRACE GLUECK

UNLIKE some American cities, Boston stays open for the summer, promoting itself this year as a place for "serious fun." Presumably, that includes art, not too hard to find in a megalopolis known for its formidable museums. From the quiet college town of nearby Wellesley to the swarming student-faculty hive of Cambridge to the deep-city precincts of the Fenway and Boylston Street, there are exhibitions for the taste of any viewer, traveling on foot, by cab or by Boston transit. Here are a few shows you might see on a summer's day.

When we think of art south of the border, it is usually the representational works of Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, José Clemente Orozco and company. Latin American art hasn't seemed to dwell much on the rigors of abstraction, particularly nonobjective abstraction, the absence of reference to the outside world. For most museumgoers, that is a European concept, expressed by Piet Mondrian and the de Stijl movement in Europe and promoted in the United States by the Mondrian-influenced American Abstract artists, beginning in the 1930's.

But "Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art From the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection," an impressive holding of Latin American geometric abstract art at the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, should radically alter any perceptions of Latin America as a Modernist backwater. The collection was begun in the 1970's by Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, a Venezuelan who heads the Cisneros Foundation, devoted to art and education in Latin America, and her husband, Gustavo, chief executive of a telecommunications and entertainment empire.

Presenting more than 60 paintings, drawings and sculptures by artists in Uruguay, Argentina, Venezuela and Brazil, working from the 1930's to the 60's, the show reveals that Latin Americans came to deal with nonobjectivism on their own vigorous terms.

Struggling to unseat traditional notions of art and explore new visual language, these artists produced a wide variety of avant-garde works: geometric and constructed paintings; textured wall reliefs; sculptures composed of modules, planes, arcs and angles; free-form hangings; and assemblages of painted wood. Among the better-known practitioners are Joaquín Torres-García, Alfredo Volpi, Lygia Clark, Jesús-Rafael Soto, Gyula Kosice, Gego (Gertrude Goldschmidt) and

Carlos Cruz-Diez.

The big awakening began with Torres-García (1874-1949), a Uruguayan painter who spent decades in Paris. He returned in the 30's with a new concept: melding the glyphs and pictographs of pre-Columbian art with the grid of Modernism. One of his paintings here is "Locomotive With Constructive House" (1934), a compartmentalized canvas composed largely of rectangles and circles incorporating suggestions of house parts and train wheels.

But it was Torres-García's thrust toward home-brewed ideas rather than his art that posed the real challenge, and avant-gardists in the different Latin American countries evolved their own ways of responding.

A strict example of Argentine concrete art, thought of as an entirely mental concept unaided by influences like the figure or landscape, is "Chromatic Rhythms III" (1949), by Alfredo Hlito (1923-1992). A Mondrian-like canvas, it has small, rectangular colored bars placed horizontally and vertically in a neat arrangement on a large field of white defined by a varied grid of black lines.

In Venezuela, kinetic art, conveying a sense of movement, was one symbol of the technological progress achieved there in the 1950's. It is seen here in the work of Mr. Soto and Mr. Cruz-Diez. Mr. Soto, better known on the international scene (he worked in Europe for a time), studied the properties of light and produced works like "Vibration" (1960), in which a horizontal scribble is suspended over a dark overall field of fine vertical lines, the whole pulsing with optical energy as a viewer moves before it.

Brazil, which established the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo in 1948 and has had contemporary biennials since 1951, produced artists like Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) and Lygia Clark (1920-1988), who shared the vanguard belief that art could play a role in improving society.

Clark, who also studied in Europe, produced a range of works, from a representational painting in 1948 to hinged metal sculptures of flat geometric parts in the 1960's to an undated cut-into circle of flat black rubber that may antedate the biomorphic forms of Eva Hesse in the United States.

Oiticica's belief in interactive art is demonstrated by his "Bolide" box (1964-65), one of a series of receptacles containing rocks, dust, soil and pigmented cloth meant to be handled by the viewer. (But don't try it here.)

This is just a sampling of the Cisneros trove. While some artists in it have had previous exposure in the United States, this overall survey is one of the first to reveal the particular character of Latin American abstract art, its breadth and variety, and its relation to the European avant-garde. What's more, its cerebralism is often inflected by a sensuality that's positively catching.

Contemporary Institute

Like "Geometric Abstraction" at the Fogg, "The Social Scene" at the Institute of Contemporary Art

in Boston is selected from works owned by a foundation, in this case the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

This densely American show of 250 photographs covers artists working in the documentary mode from the 1930's to the 80's. It includes the usual suspects, like Diane Arbus, Brassai, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Helen Levitt and Garry Winogrand, and less familiar names like Danny Lyon, Roger Merten and John Pfahl.

The pictures -- and there are some truly great ones -- have been perhaps too neatly corralled by the Los Angeles museum into six areas: "American Icons -- Ideas and Issues," "Character Studies," "Loss of Innocence," "Natural Occurrences," "Picture-Making" and "Social Space." Among the greats in "American Icons," devoted to "defining images" from the postwar era, are Mr. Frank's "U.S. 285, New Mexico" (1955), a ribbon of existential black-and-silver road that stretches in deep perspective to eternity. In Mr. Friedlander's "Route 9W, New York" (1969), the photographer himself appears in the side-view mirror of a vehicle as he snaps a stone chapel topped by a cross and the legend "God Bless America" on the corner of another lonely road.

In sharp contrast is Winogrand's people-packed "Easter Sunday, Central Park, New York" (1971), in which a nude young man stands before a crowd of onlookers, hands raised, mouth open in what could be a plea or a blessing.

"Character Studies" is an attempt to show how the camera can portray social identity. One attention-getter is a voyeuristic Arbus take of a male transvestite in a bra and stockings; others are deadpan views of seedy Parisian life by the French-Hungarian photographer Brassai.

A touching vignette by Helen Levitt of a Harlem mother holding out a welcoming hand to a little girl, who walks tentatively toward her in bare feet on a wet sidewalk, adorns the section titled "Social Space," intended to convey the way an environment becomes part of the subject's identity. At a distance is Arbus's sardonic view of a Westchester couple sunning in twin chaises longues on their ample lawn. America seems very American in this sprawling show.

In a separate gallery is "Nikki S. Lee: Projects," a show of color snapshots by a young Korean-born photographer. Or rather, a collaboration between her and a friend, who snaps Ms. Lee in various guises as part of different groups: tourists, punk rockers, skateboarders, Japanese schoolgirls, lesbians, the elderly and Wall Street yuppies.

So informal and seemingly unposed are these shots that at first glance they look as if they come from a teenager's album. But they are far from casual. Their aim is to register Ms. Lee's sense of identity in a multiplicity of contexts, and she does it with sprightly humor. It's a long way from Cindy Sherman, but on her track.

Davis Museum at Wellesley

No, this small treasure of a show is not about the pop singer. "Divine Mirrors: The Madonna

Unveiled," at the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College, covers nine centuries of art relating to the Virgin Mary in a long-running display that is an abbreviated version of a larger temporary exhibition at the gallery last year.

A prime goal of "Divine Mirrors," organized by Melissa R. Katz, assistant curator at the Davis Center, is to explore the changing image of the feminine ideal in art.

The show's most contemporary object, dated 1997, is a startling but benign depiction of Mary Magdalene by a Harlem artist, Meg Henson Scales. It is painted as the label on a mock fruit can filled with prayers from different creeds.

But the works go back to the 13th century, in the form of a heavily stylized anonymous Italian painting depicting Jesus mounting the cross and the funeral of St. Clare.

In between, a miscellany of images -- virtually all from Wellesley's own holdings -- depict Mary or surrogates in roles as mother, idol, mourner, witness, beseecher. Among the standouts are a small 14th-century French ivory portraying the Dormition of the Virgin; a marvelous three-panel German painting of the Annunciation, with St. Barbara and St. Catherine of Alexandria, circa 1460; and a folkish ex-voto from Mexico, dated 1798, commemorating four miracles attributed to a black Jesus.

Two Italian paintings depict Mary in her familiar role as the purest of mothers: a highly idealized "Holy Family With the Infant St. John the Baptist and St. Francis," done after 1544 and attributed to the Italian painter Giorgio Vasari and his workshop, and the gentler, more appealing "Virgin and Child With Saints," by Pintoricchio, dated 1495-1500.

More contemporary works, some dragged into the Marian context, are Fernand Léger's robotic but tender "Woman and Child" (1921), and Gertrude Fisk's "Mary," a 1920 portrait depicting a demure but not altogether docile young girl in pigtails and a plaid jumper.

This very inclusive show sometimes reaches too hard for its premise: how images of Mary can be found in more secular identities. But it makes a very handsome display in the Davis Center, an impressively designed museum of recent vintage, well supplied with space and light.

In its abbreviated version, "Divine Mirrors" will remain as an installation through 2002, while a number of works from the original exhibition will travel this fall to the Katonah Museum in Katonah, N.Y., for a show supplemented by other borrowings.

Gardner Museum

It doesn't take a special show to draw visitors to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, a remarkable Venetian Renaissance palace that remains much the way it was when the virtuoso collector for whom it is named built it and filled it with art nearly 100 years ago.

Besides its famed trove of ancient Chinese bronzes, textiles, Renaissance paintings and even a

Matisse, it has a glorious covered courtyard adorned with flowering plants.

And although it's hard to infer from the ancient look of the place, the Gardner does present contemporary shows.

In 1992 it began an artist-in-residence program that fosters current work, shown in a small gallery off the main exhibition areas. The most recent resident was the California artist Laura Owens, some of whose fanciful oils, watercolors and collages are based on textiles in the museum.

Ms. Owens is partial to monkeys, often found in Chinese art, and in the largest painting here, a whimsical monkey wearing eyeglasses swings from a gnarled limb on an ancient tree as a bat hovers nearby. (She is also partial to bats.) Smaller works include a dark scene of bats flying at night, a view of the tilted blue arc of a hill laced with trees, and a tenderly rendered version, minus the Roman family crest, of a symmetrically patterned 17th-century textile replete with leaves and flowers and lots of white space.

This playful work, lively, decorative and full of brisk humor, suggests the observations of a gifted child. Stay long enough, and it may grow on you.

From Brazil to Bronzes to Bats

The exhibitions reviewed by Grace Glueck:

"DIVINE MIRRORS: THE MADONNA UNVEILED." Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Mass., (781) 283-2051. Continuing. Hours: Tuesdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sundays, 1 to 5 p.m. Free.

"GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION: LATIN AMERICAN ART FROM THE PATRICIA PHELPS DE CISNEROS COLLECTION," Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 32 Quincy Street, Cambridge, Mass., (617) 495-9400. Through Nov. 4. Hours: Mondays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sundays, 1 to 5 p.m. Admission: \$5; \$4, 62+; \$3, students.

"LAURA OWENS," Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 280 the Fenway, Boston, (617) 566-1401. Through Sept. 16. Hours: Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission: \$10; \$7, 65+; \$5, students; free for those under 18.

"THE SOCIAL SCENE" and "NIKKI S. LEE: PROJECTS," Institute of Contemporary Art, 955 Boylston Street, Boston, (617) 266-5152. Through Sept. 30. Hours: Wednesdays and Fridays, noon to 5 p.m.; Thursdays, noon to 9 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission: \$5.25; \$4, 62+; free for children under 12.

Photos: Above left, Léger's "Woman and Child" at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College. Above right, "Composition in Blue, White and Red," by Alfredo Volpi, at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard. Left, an untitled watercolor by Laura Owens, at the Gardner Museum. (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum); (Left, Davis Museum; above, Fogg Art Museum)(pg. E27); "Holy Family With

the Infant St. John the Baptist and St. Francis," attributed to Vasari and his workshop, is on view at the Davis Museum. (Davis Museum and Cultural Center); Lee Friedlander's "Route 9W, New York" (1969), in "The Social Scene" at the Institute of Contemporary Art. (Institute of Contemporary Art); Latin American art: "Construction in Black and White" (circa 1938), by Joaquín Torres-García, from the exhibition "Geometric Abstraction" at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard. (Fogg Art Museum); "Untitled" (1946), a Harlem image by Helen Levitt, in "The Social Scene," a show of documentary photography from the 1930's to the 80's at the Institute of Contemporary Art. (Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston)(pg. E29) Map of Boston highlighting museums. (pg. E29)