



## AMERICATROPICAL



Top left: Roberto Matta, *Untitled*, 1941; Bottom left: Jose Bedia, *Followed by the Storm*, 2007, [winner of first prize at the Beijing Biennale]; Above: Trine Ellitsgaard, *Virgin of Guadalupe*, 2010, Opposite page: Gallerist William Sheehy, photo by Chris Considine; All images courtesy Latin American Masters;

# LATIN LOVER

**GALLERIST WILLIAM SHEEHY DOESN'T LET HIS EGO GET IN THE WAY** BY TANJA M. LADEN

**AT** Latin American Masters in Santa Monica, gallery owner William Sheehy sources, exhibits and sells works of art, obviously, from Latin America. But we're not talking folk art or naive interpretations of Impressionist paintings. Here, the art is actually much more connected to the European tradition than most of the American art of today.

"I was always more drawn to Modernism than to what I call 'advertising culture,'" Sheehy explains. "I was interested in the way in which artists could find a way to look at the wider world and make something that's very universal without repudiating cultural roots that were specific to where they had come from."

A native Angeleno, Sheehy earned a degree from the USC School of Cinema in 1978, but quickly discovered that he had reservations about being a filmmaker. After graduating college, he set out on a backpacking trip in Mexico, where he became familiar with the works of Rufino Tamayo and Francisco Toledo, drawn to a kind of depth and sophistication in their paintings that he felt was lacking in the increasingly commercial contemporary art scene.

"Andy Warhol wasn't of any interest to me at all," he says. "I hate it when an artist produces the same thing over and over again." In contrast to Warhol's mass-produced pop art, works by artists such as Tamayo and Toledo reflected an inherent connection to the academic

fine art tradition, and after attending auctions and getting a sense of the Latin American art market, Sheehy realized that many of the artists were relatively undervalued. In other words, "You could get an awful lot of good art for not a lot of money," he explains.

Following an apprenticeship at B. Lewin Galleries in Palm Springs, Sheehy opened Latin American Masters in 1987 in Beverly Hills. In February 2009, he moved his business to Bergamot Station to a space nearly twice the size of his first gallery. The new location features a graphics room and a micro gallery in addition to the main exhibition hall, which is illuminated naturally by a dozen skylights. It's an artful environment that exhibits everything from drawings, etchings and 22-foot-long paintings to installations and sculpture, all works from the early 20th century and beyond.

"The European Modernist movements like Cubism and Surrealism have had a huge impact on art and influenced many artists," says Sheehy. "In terms of the avant-garde in European culture, and the impact and the synthesis of indigenous culture with Modernism and Latin America, it really doesn't start, in my eyes, until around 1914 or 1915."

In addition to exhibiting work by painters such as the late Roberto Matta and Tamayo, LAM hosts about a dozen living artists as well, including the Danish-born, Mexico-based Trine Ellitsgaard, Cuban artist José Bedia, and José Marchi, a painter in Buenos Aires whose hyperrealist creations reference classical elements while exploring multidimensional notions of time and space. "It's very important culturally that people get a sense of the history of art," says Sheehy, "and that they can also see work by living artists who seem to be part of a living dialogue, not only with the history of art, but the moment in which they're living."

With about half of its clients out of state or abroad, LAM attracts buyers of big ticket-items, like the Matta painting the gallery sold 15 years ago for nearly \$900,000. While some collectors are only focused on Latin American art, others might be the kind of people who have an original Bruegel hanging in the living room. But whatever their backgrounds, LAM's clients are drawn to Sheehy's sophisticated taste as well as his international reputation in dealing Latin American art.

"In our profession, we're one of the top galleries in the world," says Sheehy, who has loaned art to the National Gallery in Berlin,

the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and the Museum of Latin American Art. But rather than take credit for his gallery's success, Sheehy attributes his good fortune to the artists themselves: "I always considered that the artists made me look good. The gallery's not called William Sheehy Fine Art; it's called Latin American Masters. I'm in the background, and I put the art up front."



In an era of consumer-driven art culture, Latin American Masters remains a staunch guardian of the modernist aesthetic while challenging contemporary art practices. "I'm not interested in artists who are just trying to focus on what's trendy," says Sheehy, "because I think a lot of that is distorted by money." Instead, he believes that the experience of art is not just intellectual, but is also erotic, sensual, poetic, human, and ultimately, mysterious and unpredictable; it's just like the art at Latin American Masters.

"A lot of people say, 'We're living in a warehouse — get used to it.' But I don't feel that, because I want to fall in love. And I don't go to the warehouse to fall in love." ☺



DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS *La explosión de Hiroshima / The Atomic Bomb Explodes, 1967*, Ukiyō Pyroclon on wood; Proline series; Mexico; Collection of Pascual Quiñez Roldán, Courtesy of Ing. Guillermo Quiñez Roldán

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