VISUAL ARTS

An upcoming exhibition at the Frost attempts an answer

WHAT IS AMERICAN ABOUT LATINO ART?

BY JOHN COPPOLA
Special to the Miami Herald

Coming soon to museum walls near you: a visual debate on what's Latino about American art — or, if you prefer, what's American about Latino art.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum has engaged that conversation in a provocative exhibition now on display in Washington that will continue when *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* opens at the Frost Art Museum on March 28.

The special exhibition reflects the national museum's commitment to incorporate Latino artists into its permanent survey of American art. By contrast, says Frost director and chief curator Carol Damian, "there is already a great appreciation locally for these artists who have become a presence in Miami and created works that are both expressive of their heritage and of what is significant on a global stage."

SAAM's exhibit comprises 92 works by 72 artists, two-thirds of which were acquired since 2011. Not coincidentally, E. Carmen Ramos, the exhibition's organizer, joined the SAAM staff in 2010 as its first Curator for Latino Art.

The museum has exhibited Latino artists before — notably in the shows *CUBA/USA: The First Generation* and *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* in the early 1990s — and has a permanent gallery devoted to Latino folk art. This is the first time, however, that SAAM has drawn exclusively on its own collection, which now numbers more than 600 works by artists of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Central American and South American heritage.

Ramos says she wants visitors to the exhibition to be challenged by a different view of American art.

Latino artists, she says, have been "participants in American history and culture, but absent from the annals of American art." Much of what is now included under the heading of Latino art, she notes, originated with Chicano artists in California and Puerto Rican artists in New York challenging the status quo. Yet, paradoxically, "these artists were seen as existing outside American art, but they were already part of it."

"These are American artists," she says. "Many Latino artists engage the same traditional themes" that define American art: migration; western expansion; pop culture; portraiture; everyday people and life; mass media and issues of stereotype.

Beyond the exhibition, Ramos says, she wants "to develop a collection that defines the field and establishes the boundaries of what is Latino art, a collection that's regionally and ethnically diverse, conceptually and esthetically diverse."

The field of Latino art has been under-researched, she says, and the collection and exhibition can "reveal history that's been excluded and reveal why it isn't known. We need to know and understand this history to integrate it" into the museum's permanent galleries that showcase the broad scope of American art.

The first work in the Washington installation fittingly is Luis Jiménez's sculpture *Man on Fire*, which was also the first significant work by a Latino artist to enter SAAM's permanent collection. The fiberglass and acrylic urethane sculpture, in many ways, encapsulates the exhibition's goals. Texas-born Jiménez, who died in 2006, drew on the depiction of the Aztec ruler Cuauhtémoc in Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco's work of the same title. Jiménez used it to create a sculpture that, by turns, evokes the anti-Vietnam war sentiment among Chicano youths and alludes to the Indian head ornament on his father's car — and is a self-portrait of the artist.

Many artists in the show will be familiar to Miami museum- and gallery-goers, especially Cuban artists and their progeny who diversified the Latino population in the 1960s and afterwards. This was an immigrant community, in contrast to Mexican Americans whose residency, in many cases, predated the United States, and to Puerto Ricans, who were already American citizens. Damian notes that several of the artists represented in the exhibition are from Miami and that "we look forward to welcoming them and their work 'back home.' "

Two Cuban American artists with Miami ties — Rafael Soriano and Teresita Fernández — demonstrate that the term "Latino art" is not a fixed category, but nonetheless serves to call attention to the broad contours of this lesser known aspect of the nation's history. Those two define opposite ends of the Cuban American experience. Soriano arrived in Miami in 1962 as a mature artist whose geometric style reflected current modernist trends. After a two-year hiatus from painting, Soriano began to reflect his immigrant experience in his work. His painting *Un Lugar Distante* (A Distant Place) can be viewed both as a memory of a lost land and as a gateway to new imaginary adventures.

Fernández, on the other hand, was born in Miami six years after Soriano's arrival and depicts nature through minimalist sculptures. Her *Nocturnal (Horizon Line)* departs from her use of manufactured materials and is made entirely from graphite. Its 6-by-12 foot size evokes the scale of Western landscape paintings.

The works Ramos selected for the exhibition are all by artists of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican and Salvadoran heritage. Ramos explains that those groups have formed the traditional definition of Latino; she adds, however, that her intentions for the collection include a broader definition and points to the recent acquisition of work by the Chilean-born Alfredo Jaar. "Other groups in the Latino disapora have matured artistically," she says, "but need to be integrated into the historical narrative."

Central American artists are one group in particular that Ramos says needs more attention. "They represent national themes," she says, "as well a local topic" for the nation's capital with its large Salvadoran population.

Salvadoran-born photographer Muriel Hasbún arguably epitomizes the difficulties in defining what it means to be a Latino. Born in El Salvador to a Palestinian father and a Jewish mother, she represented El Salvador in the 2003 Venice Biennale and also chairs the photography department at Washington's Corcoran College of Art and Design. Her work, coincidentally, is currently on view both in SAAM's *A Democracy of Images* exhibition, which surveys American photography, and in the museum's survey of Latino artists. Hasbún's photographs are pictures within pictures, overlays and multiple exposures that explore events that compelled her family members to migrate.

El altar de mis bisabuelo depicts the altar that Hasbún's Greek Orthodox great-grandfather built in El Salvador after he left his native Bethlehem to avoid being drafted into the Ottoman army. *¿Sólo una sombra/Only a Shadow (Esther IV)?* portrays her Jewish great-aunt who survived the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Hasbún says that she works through "an intergenerational, transnational and transcultural lens." In an interview, she added that "the initial investigation of my own family history was a strategy to reconcile the irreconcilable. ... This became a method of inquiry and part of my creative process. It also became a way of engaging my own family and the greater community in a dialogue about our individual and collective sense of identity."

By exploring the diversity and fluidity of any definition of what it means to be a Latino artist, *Our America* arguably poses more questions than it provides answers.

One of the key questions is what the Smithsonian American Art Museum — and other museums, for that matter — will do next.

Ramos foresees continued acquisitions, as well as solo and focused thematic exhibitions that treat Latinos like any other American artists. Perhaps more importantly, she sees the exhibition and collection as opportunities to promote scholarship on the topic and to encourage other museums to emulate SAAM's efforts to incorporate the story of Latino artists into American art history.

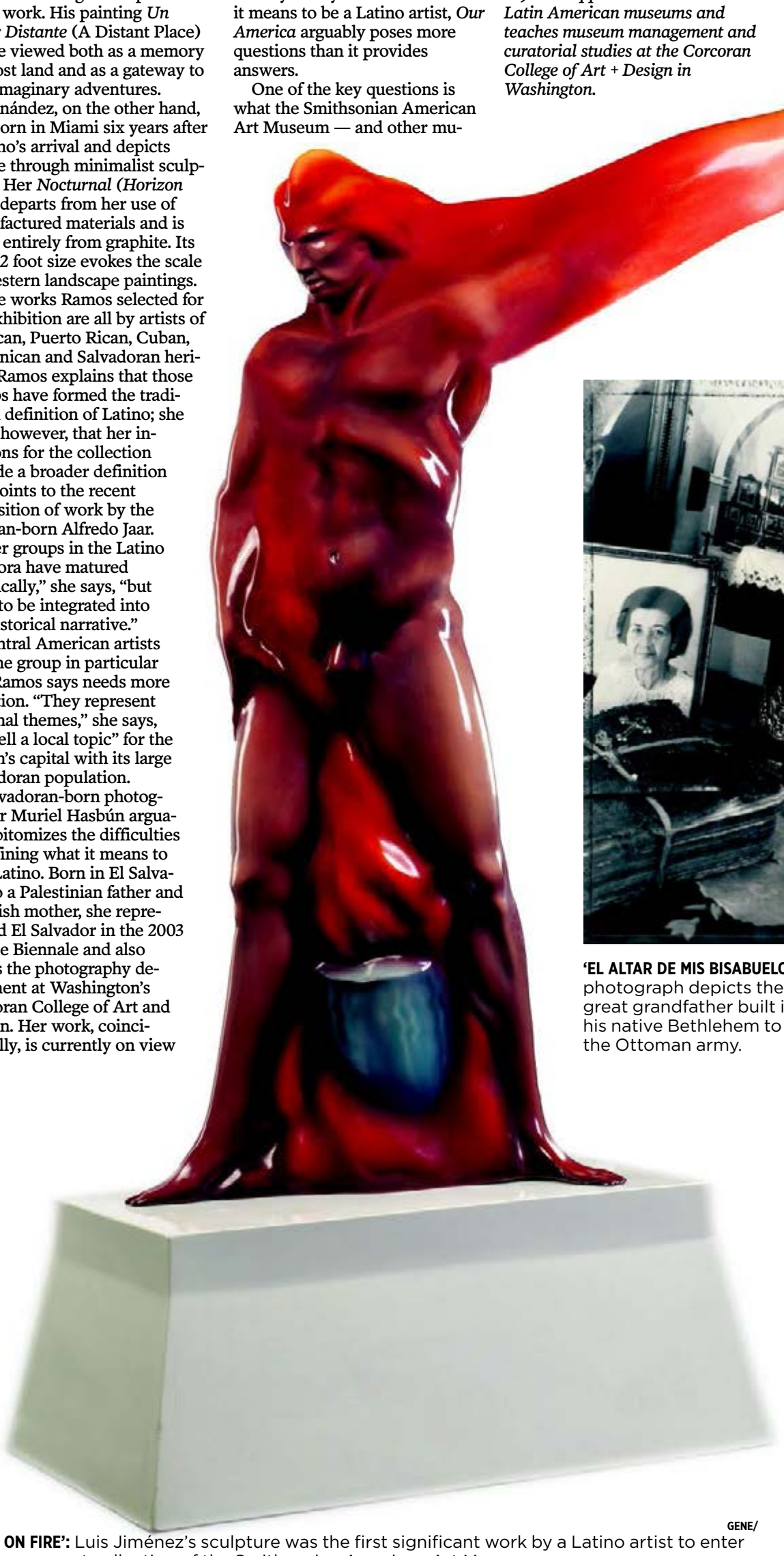
John Coppola is a consultant to Latin American museums and teaches museum management and curatorial studies at the Corcoran College of Art + Design in Washington.

'RADIANTE': This piece by Olga Albizu, one of the first Puerto Rican artists to embrace abstraction. was featured on the album cover for a recording by Stan Getz and Joao Gilberto.

If you go

'Our America' will be on exhibit at Florida International University's Frost Art Museum March 28 to June 22, and then travels to museums in Sacramento, Calif.; Salt Lake City; Little Rock, Ark.; and Wilmington, Del.

'EL ALTAR DE MIS BISABUELO': Muriel Hasbún's photograph depicts the altar his Greek Orthodox great grandfather built in El Salvador after he left his native Bethlehem to avoid being drafted into the Ottoman army.



GENE/

'MAN ON FIRE': Luis Jiménez's sculpture was the first significant work by a Latino artist to enter the pernament collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.