

ART REVIEW

14 Latin Artists Exist Separately In a Bronx Show With Light Touches

By HOLLAND COTTER

"Cartographies" at the Bronx Museum of the Arts is a frustrating exhibition with decent ingredients but no center. The show, organized by the Winnipeg Art Gallery in Manitoba, brings together 14 Latin American artists, several of whom have shown in New York. They are an eclectic bunch, often thought-provoking, in one case genuinely exciting. But neither the specific works nor the essays in the show's vague, buzzword-filled catalogue suggests why they were deemed suitable company.

Given the lack of a unifying theme, one is left to judge the artists one by one, and generally speaking, the lighter their touch the better they look. It's refreshing to encounter a political metaphor as understated as Maria Fernanda Cardoso's "Flag," a checkerboard pattern of guava candies forming an emblem both sweet and insubstantial, or to find gender issues as deftly explored as they are in the work of José Leonilson, whose crudely sewn dresses and wall hangings stitched with provocative inscriptions are "women's work" quietly in revolt.

His studied casualness extends to Iole de Freitas's big Frank Stella-ish scrolls of copper and aluminum

mesh, though on the whole, sculpture proves to be the show's weak point. Germán Botero's semi-abstract pieces based on natural and man-made forms — seeds, fruits, drums — are too close to upscale lounge furniture for comfort, and Gonzalo Díaz's installation titled "I am the way, kiss me a lot," with its processional lineup of gilded sickles, computer boards as votive icons and images of an actorish-looking man dressed in prison stripes, is as theatrically overwrought as it is visually leaden.

Also somewhat stagy but far more effective is the show's photography. The strongest work is that by the Brazilian artist Mario Cravo Neto, whose grouped black and white images of an African religious sculpture, mud-caked human torsos and sacrificial birds invoke the rituals of his country's many hybrid religions while suggesting other, more personal narratives.

Although the most familiar artists on view are painters, they get little opportunity to shine. Guillermo Kuitica's blown-up street maps of European cities, gussied up with expressive painterly moves, are of middling interest, though the work provides one of the show's rare attempts to justify its pretentious title. And Julio Galán, an uneven but often intriguing artist, is disappointingly

represented by two modest works, neither of which capture his bizarrely ingenuous brand of Surrealism.

The star of the show, far and away, is the Mexican artist Nahum Zenil, the only one represented in bulk (with more than a dozen pieces) and in chronological breadth (the work dates from 1977 to 1991). Mr. Zenil works small, primarily in ink, watercolor and collage on paper. He is his own favorite, reiterated sub-

The star of the show is a Mexican whose favorite subject is himself, often nude.

ject: a dour, cranky-looking middle-aged man, often depicted nude, set in a world as hallucinatory as it is meticulously rendered.

In painting after painting, Mr. Zenil keeps his grave gaze fixed on the viewer as he engages in provocative, indecorous or obscene behavior. In one of the milder examples he sits

on a city bus, his arm around a ghostly Frida Kahlo. In another he is carried, Christ-like, crowned with thorns, by a crowd of laborers. In yet another he lies underground, gently brushed by a descending curtain of roots, while life on a Mexican farm goes on above him. Mr. Zenil's combination of religion, homoeroticism, folk culture, paranoid black humor and a keen draftsmanly style makes much of his colleagues seem conceptually approximate and tame.

Possibly this would not have been so had the curatorial focus of the show been shaped and sharpened, but that is not the case. One comes away with the accurate impression that contemporary Latin American art is charged with tensions and imaginative responses very different from those to be found elsewhere, though what that dynamic is or what it might mean are questions left unexamined. Considering the effort that must have been expended to bring the show's participants together, this intellectually lazy approach is to be regretted. It makes "Cartographies" feel like an opportunity missed.

"Cartographies" remains at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, in the Morrisania section, through Jan. 15.



Chris Maynard for The New York Times
"The Dinner," a mixed-media work on paper by Nahum Zenil, from the "Cartographies" show at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.