



Above: Patricia Phelps de Cisneros at her home. Photograph by Chris Fanning

A, latin primer

Patricia Phelps de Cisneros's collection of South American contemporary art is the starting point for its absorption into the mainstream, as **Rebecca Dimling Cochran** reports

In November of 2004, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened its museum expansion with a much-discussed reinstatement of its permanent collection. Among the artists included were Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica of Brazil, Armando Reverón and Jesús Rafael Soto of Venezuela and Joaquín Torres-García of Uruguay. It was the first time that any of these Latin American artists had hung among the permanent collection of the Museum.

This change, in large part, can be attributed to board member Patricia Phelps de Cisneros. Patty, as she prefers to be called, invited the curators from MoMA to examine her collection of Latin American art and suggest works they believed would benefit the museum. Soon after, she and her husband Gustavo donated to MoMA nine important works.

Glenn Lowry, the director of MoMA, admires Patty's thoughtful approach: 'It's not only unusual to have someone that generous... but also to have someone so willing to work with us to make sure we got from her collection precisely what we needed.'

Patty is dedicated to promoting a better understanding of Latin American art and culture. She grew up in Caracas in the 1950s, surrounded by international artists such as Alexander Calder and Joan Miró, and the Venezuelans Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez. She appreciated the intellectual rigour in the Latin Americans' view of modernism. 'Venezuela has always had a lot of unrest and violence,' she explains. In these works she discovered 'a symmetry and an order. I think [I find] peace in those structures.'

While most collectors from the 1970s to the early 1990s were

attracted to more figurative Latin American artists such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, Patty and Gustavo were collecting abstract and conceptual art. Along with a significant holding of Venezuelan kineticism and geometric abstraction, the Cisneros have works by the Argentinian Madí and Arte Concreto Invención groups and examples of Brazilian Concretism and Neoconcretism.

The Cisneros were also unusual in that they were looking across borders. Rafael Romero, curator of the Colección Cisneros since 1998 explains, 'The Cisneros have the peculiarity of being maybe the only private Latin American art collectors who collect Latin American art from all different countries. Normally, when you go to Brazil, for example, you will find there very good Brazilian art collections. And if you go to Mexico it's the same. If you go to any other country it is more or less the same. The Colección Cisneros has the virtue of putting together works of different countries.'

Patty attributes the difference to her husband: 'Gustavo said, "This [separation] can't be. We're part of the world. We have to get our own countries to know about each other and then go out to the rest of the world." He has just always been a very global thinker and I think it rubbed off on me.'

It is, indeed, this desire to build bridges that inspired Patty, Gustavo and his brother Ricardo Cisneros to create the Fundación Cisneros. With headquarters in their home town of Caracas, the organisation is dedicated to the future of Latin America and to increasing global awareness of Latin America's contributions to world culture. While the foundation supports ▶

On visits to rural areas, Patty found the clay pots were no longer clay, the fish hooks not bone. They were aluminium



► community and humanitarian services, the environment, education and culture, much of the programming revolves around Patty and Gustavo Cisneros' art collections.

Along with their geometric abstraction collection, the Cisneros also have substantial collections of contemporary Latin American art, Latin American landscapes from the 17th to the 21st centuries, and colonial furniture and decorative art from Venezuela's Hispanic and Republican periods. The couple also have one of the largest groups of Amazonian artefacts in the world. The Colección Orinoco brings together over 2,000 ethnographic objects created by 12 distinct ethnic groups located in the Orinoco River Basin in southern Venezuela and the Guyana and Black River Amazon basin regions of Columbia and Brazil.

The Colección Orinoco came about out of a sense of responsibility Patty felt to preserve the heritage of the region. 'I don't really need 150 spears,' she jokes, but on her frequent expeditions to the remote countryside she noticed, 'the clay pots were no longer clay – they were aluminium. The fish hooks were no longer carved from fish bones; they were bought in their yearly trip to the big city, 2000 aluminium hooks for 10 cents. And I said, "Oh my goodness, nobody is taking care of this. We should do something about it." So we started, on our expeditions, actually collecting the pieces that we saw.' They also purchased objects owned by Edgardo González Niño, an explorer who lived in the region and often served as the Cisneros' guide.

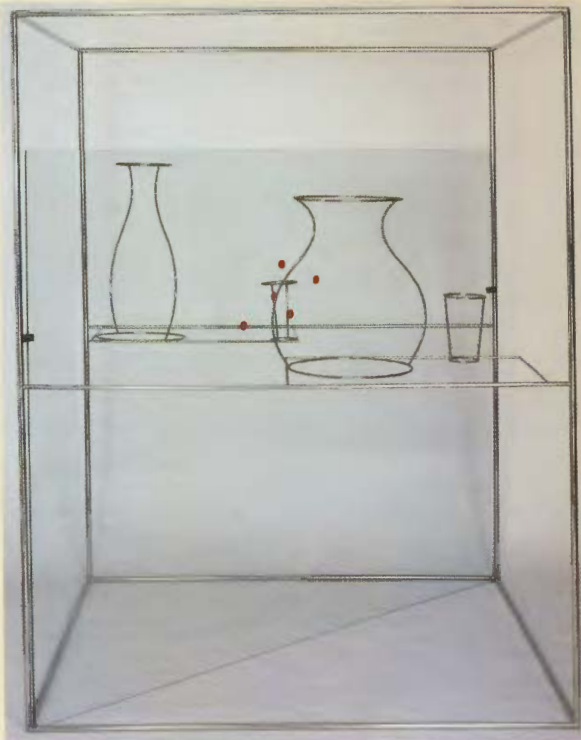
Where many couples might have given their various collections to a museum or even built their own, the Cisneros feel a responsibility to make sure the work is exposed. Over three million viewers have seen the Colección Orinoco in venues across Western Europe (how many would have travelled to see it in a museum in Caracas?) Another one million have visited the award-winning website orinoco.org. 'Gustavo is so involved in media, it's part of our daily breathing... When the Internet began, I think Gustavo's company was the first one to use it in Latin America. He's always been very up to date.' Patty, in turn, was one of the early pioneers to create an educational website. 'I really did at the time think it would be for about maybe 60 or 70 people in the world, for the professors who didn't have access. I never dreamt that it would be as popular as it is.'

While the Colección Orinoco has been travelling Europe, promoting a broad understanding of and respect for the cultures of the Amazonian region, exhibitions of the Colección Cisneros have remained primarily in Latin America, fostering collaborations and connections amongst neighbouring countries. It's a position that the collection is uniquely qualified for, explains Romero. The diversity of the collection means 'we can go to any country and show the art of the whole continent but also show their own art. It's very surprising for people in [Brazil] to find out that Mrs Cisneros has gathered a selection of very important Brazilian modern art... and the same with Argentina.' The exhibitions provide an opportunity to explore the visual and conceptual connections that exist between works of the different countries. They also present a paradigm for multinational Latin American collections.

In 2006, the Colección Cisneros will begin a three-venue tour of the US. The Jack S Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin and the Grey Art Gallery at New York University are confirmed venues. A simultaneous exhibition will begin in an as yet unnamed venue in Barcelona and proceed through Europe. While both shows will introduce modern and contemporary Latin American art to new audiences, other works from the collection will be loaned to group exhibitions to help demonstrate the way it developed in the context of, and contributed to, the international avant-garde.

Both kinds of exposure are important to Patty. 'I used to think, in my younger days, that it was a conscious decision not to show art from Latin America in different museums.' But she eventually realised, 'It is not a conscious decision. It's that they don't know what's there.' To combat this ignorance, the Fundación Cisneros has established a number of cross-cultural training programs. The Patricia Cisneros Travel Award for Latin America enables MoMA employees – curators, conservators and registrars – to visit Latin American museums. In an ongoing relationship with the University of Texas, Austin supports the department of art history to develop exhibitions and seminars around their degree in Latin American art. There is also a scholarship for students from Latin America to attend the curatorial studies programme at Bard College.

This multi-tiered approach, touching the largest institutions as well as young students, makes her efforts all the more successful. Lowry explains, 'Patty is an extraordinarily generous person from the get-go. I think she is someone with a tremendous sensitivity for people and for institutions and has the grace, the tact, the skill, the intelligence to know how to work with people.'



Opposite page, top
Lygia Clark, *Close of the Sun*, 1960,
aluminum. Opposite
bottom, Jesús Soto,
Double Transparency,
1959, industrial
enamel on Plexiglas
and wood. This
page, above, Ana
Mendieta, *Silhouettes*,
from 'Silueta' series in
Mexico, 1973-77,
chromogenic
impression on color
transparency. Left:
Waltero Caldas,
Transparency, 1997,
200 x 150 x 125cm

Patty also has a first-hand knowledge of what is happening in contemporary art. She and Gustavo travel extensively, and Patty is always looking at art throughout Latin America and elsewhere. She is often the first to see the work in an artist's studio in Rio de Janeiro or at a gallery in Bogotá, allowing her to choose the best pieces. It also means she sees work outside that is deemed commercially viable by the international art market, giving to the collection a breadth not often seen.

Not only does Patty exude a passion for her artworks, she considers herself responsible for them as well. 'I don't feel that these works are ours. I feel that we're custodians. I feel this is our heritage and I feel very strongly about preserving our heritage.' If her actions are any indication, she also believes in providing the opportunity for others to learn about them. With a glance at the artwork that surrounds her in her New York apartment she concludes, 'The hope is that we will be able to hang [Alejandro] Otero with de Kooning and Calder, and that hopefully in 20 years or less – 15 years, 10 – this interview will not have been necessary.'

'The Colección Cisneros', until 28 Feb, the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, San José, Costa Rica (+ 506 257 7202, madc.ac.cr)