
Book Review: *The Politics of Taste*

The Politics of Taste: Beatriz González and Cold War Aesthetics, by Ana María Reyes. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. 311 pages. Hardcover \$104.95, paperback \$27.95, ebook \$26.55.

Last year, armed with a face mask and hand sanitizer, I visited *Beatriz González: una retrospectiva* at the Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia in Bogotá, which ran October 15 through December 8, 2020. Colombian artist Beatriz González (b. 1938) has been one of the stars of contemporary Colombian art for almost five decades, and there is no shortage of exhibitions and studies on her works and career. Ana María Reyes's *The Politics of Taste: Beatriz González and Cold War Aesthetics* is the first book-length monograph, in English or Spanish, on González. Although the artist has appeared in other academic books, it has always been as part of a larger network of artists. This important and much-needed addition to the literature offers an updated, focused, and original approach to the highly esteemed Colombian artist.

The Politics of Taste studies González's career from 1964 to 1970. It carefully analyzes the material and formal aspects of her paintings, interpreting the complex, often ambivalent, and ideologically loaded criticism surrounding the artist's works through the lens of the Cold War tensions and anxieties that plagued Colombian politics. The book is set during Colombia's return to democracy with the National Front (1958–74)—the bipartisan agreement between the Liberal and Conservative parties to alternate government, which was characterized by an accelerated *desarrollismo* (developmentalism). At the same time, this period was marked by widespread social discontent due to the government's incapacity to fulfill its promises. The author enhances her study of González's early career by including a close examination of local artistic circles and institutions, and a sophisticated analysis of the National Front, as well as the realities and contradictions of Colombian society of the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the book “allows us to access an important and previously neglected piece of the Cold War puzzle—that is, to understand the ways in which the aesthetic discourses played out in a country considered the closest hemispheric

ally of the United States during the Cold War” (9). Herein lies the novelty of Reyes's approach. Although there are several exhibition catalogs and essays dealing with González's work, *The Politics of Taste* offers a reading of the artist's work against the backdrop of Cold War politics—an issue only mentioned in passing in some studies.

Reyes structures her book around González's exhibition trajectory between 1964 and 1970, choosing one key show for each chapter. The first is centered around González's first solo exhibition at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá (MAMBo) in 1964, where she presented the *Lacemakers* series. Focusing on the critical reception, the author argues that the “Colombian art world's myopia” praised the young artist's series for its international language of abstraction and the sophistication with which she treated Vermeer's *Lacemaker* and transformed it into a modern icon. However, as Reyes demonstrates, González's work was far more than that: in selecting her source for the *Lacemaker* from the pages of a cheap, commercial calendar, it was a subtle critique and counternarrative to hegemonic discourses of artistic autonomy and internationalism. If the *Lacemaker* series catapulted González to fame as a young artist of taste, sophistication, and modernity, her next appearance in the Colombian art scene came with a bang.

In chapter 2, Reyes takes us to the presentation and award of *The Sisga Suicides* at the Seventeenth National Salon of Colombian Artists in Bogotá in 1965. The painting was a “radical departure” from her previous work: instead of the abstract shapes of the *Lacemakers*, the suicides are rendered in a crude, figurative manner. And instead of referencing a European master, González chose an image from the newspaper. *The Sisga Suicides* is based on a newsprint photograph of a couple who committed joint suicide in order to deliver the woman from sin and save her from evil. The work has been celebrated for its

introduction of *lo cursi* (the tacky), black humor, and a pop sensibility within Colombian and Latin American art. However, as Reyes rightly asks: “Why would a painting of a suicide meant to preserve a woman’s moral status be perceived as tacky rather than tragic?” (74). In trying to answer this question, the author analyzes Colombian societal norms, gender stereotypes, and class distinctions and connects the work with contemporaneous discussions about contraception, a hotly debated subject in a fiercely Catholic society.

Chapter 3 discusses González’s exhibition at the new MAMBo headquarters at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, where the artist presented a series of faux collages. By the time the show opened in 1967, “Cold War tensions had been escalating throughout Latin America as counterinsurgency objectives overrode development projects. . . . Consequently, the norm of the day was repressive violence against young intellectuals and students who increasingly identified with Cuba’s *barbudos*, especially Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara” (113). This was the case of the students at the Universidad Nacional, considered at the time a “hotbed for radicalization.” Reyes’s analysis of the artist’s strategic use of a traditional medium (painting) in the manner of an experimental one (collage) is especially interesting against the backdrop of the highly politicized campus. The exhibition of 1967 consolidated González as the painter of *lo cursi* and *lo nuestro* (that which is ours) and, as Reyes argues, “somewhere in the relationship of these concepts is an aesthetic critique of modernization processes that resonated with the growing opposition to the National Front government and its close relationship to U.S. aid programs” (115). In other words, according to the author, González’s art identified and expressed the social discontent of the youth and the *barbudos*.

In chapter 4, Reyes examines González’s entries to the Nineteenth National Salon of Colombian Artists, *Notes for the Extensive History I and II* (1967). Here, the author argues that the paintings “must be understood as a critical revision of historical and allegorical genres” (154), insofar as their subject matter touches upon the founding history of Colombia and its bipartisan political system. The works consist of two enamel-on-tin portraits of Simón Bolívar and Francisco de Paula Santander, who are considered the fathers of the nation and are credited with laying the ideological groundwork for the Conservative and Liberal parties, respectively. By placing the portraits

of these two figures side by side, González “fueled the fire of discontent with the regime of the National Front coalition” (154). At the same time, the paintings were received as an attack on patrimonial culture and values, exposing the anxieties of the elites who felt threatened by the rapid changes to social structures and by Cold War revolutionary ideas.

Chapter 5, set in 1970, takes the reader to Medellín and the Coltejer International Biennial. Here, Reyes introduces González’s *mobiliario*, “milestones of Latin American art today” (183) finding that González’s *Almost Still Life*—her entry to the competition—was largely ignored by the critics. The work consists of a metal bed frame with a painting of the Fallen Lord of Monserrate in lieu of a mattress. As the author argues, the biennial was conceived as an effort to modernize and internationalize the artistic scene in Colombia, and González’s work fit poorly within this agenda: the choice of a local religious image and a cheap metal bed made by local artisans could not speak to an international audience. Instead, González chose to operate within a “strategic provincialism” that critically engaged with the realities of so-called third-world countries. Ultimately, as Reyes carefully argues, the Colombian artist inserted herself within discourses of identity, the local versus the international, and *lo nuestro*, which were in vogue among art critics and historians of the 1970s in the region. “In this light, González served as a key player in the rise of Latin American regionalism as a form of anti-U.S. imperialism during the Cold War” (219).

The book closes with an epilogue, which touches upon González’s career after 1985 when Colombian political realities could no longer be the subject of humor and laughter. After this period, the artist’s work deals with the realities of violence, forced migration, and death, among other topics.

The Politics of Taste is a fun read. Here, Reyes examines Colombia’s many layered realities through different lenses, including class distinctions, gender inequalities, social and political circumstances, and patrimonial values. However, what is missing is a more critical interrogation of the artist’s own agency and subjectivity. For instance, Reyes could have questioned the inherent contradictions of an upper-class artist dealing with lowbrow and popular subject matter. Although she notes the condescension and patronizing attitudes of critics and audiences when confronted with González’s popular subjects, she does not

apply the same scrutiny to the artist. I wonder if this same condescension transpired in González's use and appropriation of *el pueblo* (the people) in her art. Similarly, Reyes doesn't give much attention to González's experience as a female artist in a traditionally patriarchal society. The author rightfully claims that the artist dealt with the issue of gender in many of her works, but she does not delve into the ways in which González herself, as a woman, confronted the still highly macho world of Colombia and

the demands put forward by the nascent feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s in the country. However, these omissions can also be viewed as opportunities: Reyes's book opens many new doors and avenues for the study of postwar Colombian and Latin American art and leaves the reader eager for more.

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