

The Argentine art collective Mondongo, comprised of Juliana Laffitte and Manuel Mendanha, is widely recognized for their “painted” works using unconventional materials such as meat, threads, modeling clay, wax, and bread. The aesthetics of these materials become visceral through their invention of a procedure that transcends the traditional methods of painting.

Similar to Baroque art, Mondongo surprises with an aesthetic that combines the grandiose with the grotesque, a style that recalls its figures, motifs, and even the unusual elements, as well as the complex perspective of the works of El Bosco, Diego Velázquez, Joos Van Craesbeeck, Francis Bacon, and Francisco de Goya. Their works not only impact visually, and form part of an aesthetic of amazement, but they also delve into social, cultural, and political narratives. A materialist and realist aesthetic that invites viewers to explore beyond the visual surface and approach the image from a sculptural and reflective perspective. Their works explore the subtle edge between tangible essence and immaterial reflection. From the literalness of the images, a political and literary speculative space is projected that encompasses power, work, economy, subjectivity, and sexuality.

Despite their selection of unconventional materials, Mondongo’s creations often evoke familiar images. These creations may be inspired by historical artworks by artists such as Gustave Courbet or J. M. W. Turner. Mondongo also creates pieces based on the production of memes, which are understood as cultural units that are transmitted from person to person through imitation or reproduction, manifesting in ideas, behaviors, or images that go viral in society (this concept of memes was introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book ‘The Selfish Gene’, published in 1976). Among their pieces is a painting that evokes Michelangelo’s ‘Pietà’, and reinterpretations of popular culture icons, like the story of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’. They also recreate universally recognizable scenes, such as landscapes.

Their art transcends cultural borders by exhibiting an “aesthetic populism”, making their works resonate with diverse audiences through the pursuit of beauty as a universal aspiration. Every piece they create, whether highlighting Argentine history or portraying fellow artists and writers, remains authentic in its material essence. In their creations lies a “mystical materialism”, where life is infused into the materials, endowing them with symbolism that constitutes the spiritual aspect of the images.

Their choice of unusual materials is transformed through unique techniques and chosen for their profound essence. In Mondongo’s work, the invention of an artistic procedure, like the use of a bronze brush on modeling clay instead of traditional paint on canvas, is an act of transformation that challenges and dismantles the conventional language of operation. Allowing its reconstruction under new premises opens the door for a work to reach the status of art. In this process, art becomes more than a collection of factual elements; it transmutes into a re-reading of the past that transcends the coordinates of present perception. This creative act not only raises fundamental questions about what art is, but also offers new possibilities and perspectives by challenging pre-existing limitations and expanding the horizons of artistic expression.

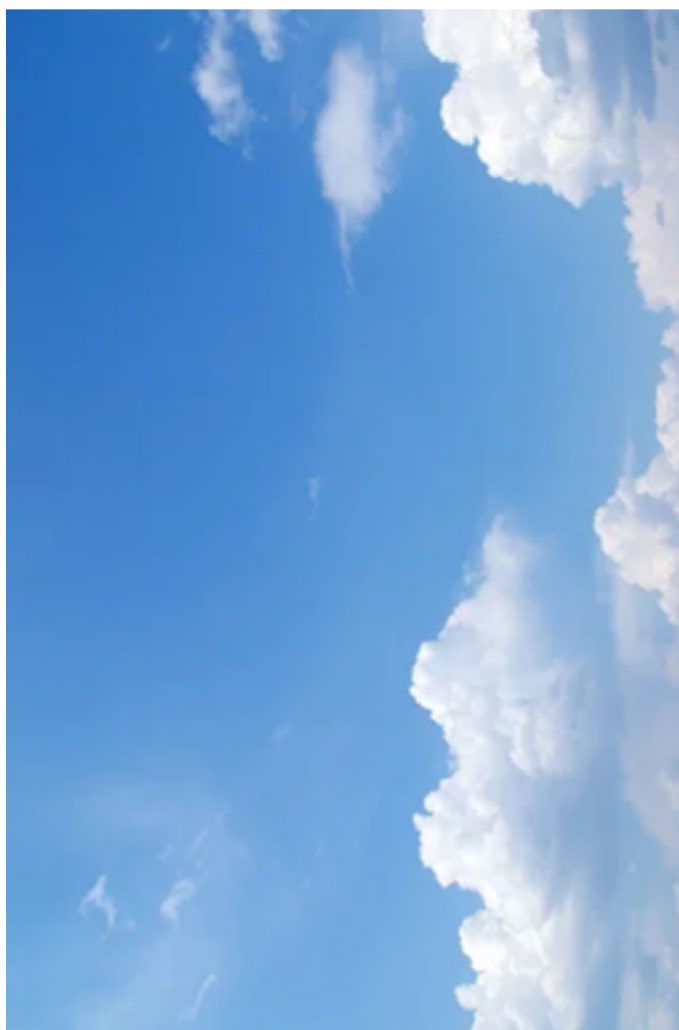
Furthermore, by creating procedures with materials like modeling clay or biscuits, Mondongo also seeks to perfect their techniques and achieve complexity in execution. In this process, there is an element of “artisanal conceptualism”, where the procedure turns against the simply existent and established, redefining its own concept and leaping beyond facticity thanks to the configuration it gives its elements. The artisanal approach goes beyond a simple fortuitous encounter with confusion as the metaphysics of creation; it uses it as a means to understand functional procedures.

The exhibition titled, “Welcome”, by Mondongo at BARRO Gallery in New York, showcases three works varying in intensity, medium, and theme. The first of these, titled Villa II, is an eighty-one inch diameter circular painting that revisits the classic tondo format, made of modeling clay. This piece portrays scenes from informal settlements in the Global South, including Buenos Aires, Dharavi, and Rio de Janeiro.

In “Villa II”, the work of Mondongo is influenced by the tradition of social realism, a tradition made prominent by Antonio Berni, and it delves into the representation of the social, political, and cultural realities of Argentina and beyond. Both Berni and Mondongo share a commitment to exploring social themes and criticizing modernity and the capitalist system. While Berni focused on characters like Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel to depict urban inequalities and contradictions, Mondongo uses innovative techniques and contemporary materials to create visual narratives that reflect on identity, history, and culture in a globalized context.

“Villa II” offers a poetic contemplation of the paradoxes and challenges associated with modernization in Latin America. Throughout the twentieth century, several nations within this region, motivated by Western models of development, embarked on processes of industrialization and urbanization. Unlike first-world countries, these nations did not experience economic development in a uniform sequence of stages. This led to a coexistence of advanced technological sectors with labor forms reminiscent of almost feudal conditions.

Peripheral modernization, instead of generating more inclusive societies, led to pronounced economic and social asymmetries. Cities that grew rapidly yet without adequate planning found themselves overwhelmed by the massive influx of rural migrants who, in search of better opportunities, ended up settling in urban outskirts, giving rise to shantytowns or informal settlements.



In this context, the phenomenon of shantytowns and informal settlements in Latin America cannot simply be understood as a product of poverty or migration. It is rather the result of a capitalist modernization model that has been unable to increase its productive matrix and distribute its benefits equitably.

The second work is titled *The Wall* and is an “electronic painting” created in collaboration with Albertina Carri, an Argentine filmmaker. This piece pays homage to *Palabras Ajenas* [The Words of Others], a literary collage by León Ferrari, conceived between 1965 and 1967 to be read aloud, functioning as constantly moving historical archives. *The Wall* combines audiovisual material from international press related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and is presented in a robust frame of modeling clay bricks, establishing a continuous link between digital painting and its sculptural dimension: a “documentary object.”

“The Wall” manifests an “archive ecology,” scrutinizing the consumption, manipulation, and disposability of images. Carri proposes that akin to tangible waste, digital detritus such as spam or ephemeral images inundate our virtual landscapes. This phenomenon provokes a critical examination of the necessity to proliferate imagery in an epoch already brimming with visual saturation.

The Wall is a digital painting in which the division of the frame becomes the language of framing. In this context, the discursive center is actually at the margins and threshold, highlighting the border nature of the “passe-partout”.

This element acts as a master key that opens all doors and reveals all images. Images are used by different actors, including governments and corporations, to control, influence, and manipulate public perception.

Finally, the exhibition features *Cada cual tendrá derecho a su propio rectángulo* [Everyone Shall Have the Right to Their Own Rectangle], a series of oil paintings that capture the gazes of Mondongo’s friends, writers, poets, and filmmakers. This series reflects the virtual connection established through video calls between artists and writers in Buenos Aires during the COVID-19 pandemic, alluding to a politics of friendship in the context of quarantine.

Cada cual tendrá derecho a su propio rectángulo [Everyone Shall Have the Right to Their Own Rectangle] is a series of oil portraits of gazes that explore, in a deep and provocative manner, the possibility of recognition through the gazes of others in a contemporary context. Exercising the bourgeois genre par excellence, these works present an intriguing approach by capturing the gazes of friends during the pandemic, where the eye and the screen intertwine in a unique visual dance. This “observed ethnography” by the public surfing through Zoom becomes a canvas that challenges the traditional conventions of portraiture. The dimensions of these paintings refer to the size of our mobile phone screens, devices that govern much of our daily lives and delineate our space under the influence of satellite technologies, reflecting the political and technological control of an emerging world order.

“Welcome” invites contemplation on the transformative trajectory of Argentine urban development, highlighting the shantytowns within the emerging global order. It offers a critique of the moving images that shape our worldviews and our responsibilities concerning global violence, surveillance, and exploitation. These enclaves have profoundly shaped the artistic and literary dialogue of the Global South, echoing through the narratives of Roberto Arlt and César Aira, to the visual lexicon of Antonio Berni and Mondongo. Over time, these once-peripheral areas have emerged as pivotal canvases for artistic exploration. Within these confines, local artists and writers have unearthed distinct voices that resonate with the profundity and intricacies of their lived realities.

In this tableau, the enduring political discourse—steeped in the 19th-century dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, and deeply ingrained in Sarmiento’s “Facundo”—undergoes a critical reexamination through the lens of these emergent talents from the slums. These artistic and political narratives poetically confront and deconstruct entrenched historical stories and persistent stigmas, which are often upheld by governments and corporations with the aim of directing, shaping, and swaying public opinion. Exhibiting “Welcome” in the metropolis of New York makes a bold statement about the universal relevance of marginalized urban narratives and critical thinking. This global stage breaks down long-standing stereotypes, presenting a layered and insightful exploration of the realities within slums and suburban precincts. Symbolically, “the head of Goliath” epitomizes the ascent of the suburban artist, whose voice is amplified through art and literature, signifying a formidable gesture of representation. This mode of artistic expression launches a critique against the societal and power frameworks that have traditionally overlooked these communities, introducing a genuine and varied perspective to contemporary art and socio-political discourse. Such discourse is particularly poignant against the backdrop of post-pandemic recovery and the shifting of a global paradigm.

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