

# Santa Barbara Independent

## 'Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA'

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By Charles Donelan



More than 60 institutions from across Southern California came together in 2011-2012 for *Art in L.A. 1945-1980*, the Getty's first *Pacific Standard Time (PST)* initiative, and the cultural impact was immediate and intense. When museums and galleries from Santa Barbara to San Diego all offered simultaneous, coordinated exhibitions about the rise of Los Angeles as an art center, the international art world took notice. Less than a year later, it seemed as though every major museum in New York City had a show by one of the L.A. artists from *PST*. Although many of these exhibitions had been

in the works for several years, visiting New York when it was so thoroughly besotted with California art made the first *Pacific Standard Time* collaboration appear in retrospect to have been the fulcrum of a massive paradigm shift.

This week, the Getty and a colossal array of California art institutions launch *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, an even more ambitious effort that has the potential to once again destabilize the historical narratives and upend the conventional wisdom of the art world. The two instances of “LA” in the subtitle refer to Los Angeles and Latin American/Latinx art. This time around, Santa Barbara will have a significantly larger presence in the project, as all of the city’s art museums, along with the Santa Barbara Historical Museum and the Community Arts Workshop, are collaborating to bring four substantial shows and dozens of events and activities to our city over the next four months. What’s more, all of these exhibits and events focus on the impact of Latin American and Latinx art on Southern California, a subject that could not possibly be more relevant to our current historical moment.

## ¿Dónde Está Latin America?

For many, the omnibus term “Latin America” reeks of Anglo-American ignorance, implying a nonexistent unity of people who live south of the United States–Mexico border. Do Cubans, Brazilians, Chileans, Argentines, and Mexicans all share some common identity with, for example, the French citizens of Martinique and Guadeloupe? Upon closer examination, however, the term’s history reveals an unexpected and complex ideological origin.

Paul Wellman

The first users of the expression “América Latina” were a Colombian, José María Torres Caicedo, and a Chilean, Francisco Bilbao. Their object — both of them writing in the year 1856 — was to rally support for resistance against the recently completed U.S. seizure of territory in the Mexican–American War and against the Anglo-American adventurer William Walker’s invasion of Nicaragua. It was not long, however, before “Latin America” took on a distinctly different valence, when it was adopted by propagandists of the French invasion of Mexico to imply that all nations speaking Romance languages such as Spanish, French, and Portuguese had a common cause in a world increasingly dominated by Germanic and Anglo-American militarism.



For the purposes of *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, the concept of “Latin America” covers more than geographic or linguistic boundaries might suggest, just as “Los Angeles” has come to designate a cultural phenomenon in addition to a sprawling metropolis. Heather MacDonald, program officer with the Getty Foundation and one of the architects of *PST: LA/LA*, describes the project in terms of a desire to discover and foster international and institutional connections through art.

“Globalism has always been with us,” said MacDonald, “from the colonial era forward, there have always been these cultural connections,” many of which continue to percolate below the surface of the popular imagination. How many of us are aware that the equivalent of mid-century-modern Case Study Houses were built in Mexico? Or that the modernist aesthetic of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics influenced the design of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles? For MacDonald, the excitement of *PST: LA/LA* has come from talking with a multitude of creators and scholars about the often unrecognized or underappreciated cultural affinities that crisscross the borders of two continents and saturate our everyday life. Santa Barbara, with its long history of sophisticated cultural appropriation and its powerful galaxy of talented curators, occupies a particularly important place in the work of this project. Speaking of the community created here by the inter-institutional work involved, MacDonald had nothing but praise for the teams that “set a standard by collaborating early and often.”

In the sections that follow are preliminary descriptions of the four major *PST: LA/LA* shows that open in Santa Barbara beginning September 15, 16, and 17. In the months to come, the *Santa Barbara Independent* will feature further in-



depth reviews of the exhibitions, along with additional coverage of the various events and activities that the museums have planned, including the special *PST: LA/LA* weekend scheduled for October 20-22.



Valeska Soares, “Un-rest” (2010)

### ***Valeska Soares: Any Moment Now***

at **Santa Barbara Museum of Art**

- 49 works including installation, sculpture, photography, and video, dating from the early 1990s to the present
- Curated by Julie Joyce, SBMA, and Vanessa Davidson, Phoenix Art Museum
- Open September 17-December 31

For Julie Joyce, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art’s (SBMA) curator of contemporary art, this was an opportunity to introduce the city to an important artist whose work has never been seen here. As one of the first projects approved by the Getty, *Valeska Soares: Any Moment Now* has been years in the making. Vanessa Davidson, the Phoenix Art Museum’s curator of Latin American art, also worked on the exhibition, and it will travel to Phoenix for a second installation in March 2018.

“Installation” is certainly the operative word in describing Soares’s artworks, which depend to a large extent on nuances of setting and require an exacting process of reconfiguration and recalibration for each new location in which they appear. Born, raised, and educated as an architect in Brazil, Soares moved to New York in 1992, where she quickly established herself as one of the leading figures in the field of installation art. Mixing the vocabularies of minimalism and conceptualism with a distinctly personal emphasis on multisensory perception and literary allusion, Soares presents a vision of art that Santa Barbara has yet to experience on this scale.

In a conversation during the meticulous period of fitting 49 of her pieces into the SBMA — which also happens to be undergoing an ambitious renovation right now — Soares explained why she eschews the familiar apparatus of explanatory wall texts and audio guides in favor of an unmediated encounter with the work. Describing the show as “a house, with different rooms that are like bedrooms, living rooms, and dining rooms,” she expressed her desire that visitors to the show dwell in uncertainty rather than grasping too rapidly for settled definitions of what they see, hear, and even smell.



Valeska Soares, “Any Moment Now ...” (2014)

Viewers will not be able to help noticing that Soares loves books and that she connects with them in unexpected, often surreal ways. In addition to “Any Moment Now...,” the massive wall installation of 365 book covers and dust jackets that hangs in the Ludington Court and gives the entire show its name, there are multiple other works that repurpose and reimagine iconic texts from Soares’s extensive personal library. One particularly striking example of the lengths to which she will go to undercut any automatic response to a familiar text lies piled in the corner of the Von Romberg Gallery. “La Dédicace (from *Fragments*)” (2007) consists of around 7,000 white porcelain letters, all of them extracted from the chapter titled “The Dedication” in Roland Barthes’s hybrid philosophical text *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. Continuing a process that viewers will encounter in several other works in the show, Soares invites the individual witness to imagine a new kind of reading, one in which the reader is as much responsible for putting the text together as the author.

Elsewhere one encounters another aspect of the artist’s imagination in a series of works that modify and reflect on gardens. In the Thayer Gallery, immediately behind the Ludington Court, an unusual piece of minimalist furniture invites the unwary to get comfortable — if they can. “Fainting Couch” (2002), a low rectangular bench made of stainless steel, comes perforated with 297 evenly spaced holes and adorned with a cylindrical cotton pillow. Hidden inside the piece, there’s a cluster of intensely fragrant flowers known as Stargazer lilies. Anyone who feels the urge to rest on this smelly sculpture will soon discover that all is not necessarily well with the odor of the lilies. Although many people enjoy them, the fragrance of Stargazer lilies has a well-known reputation for making certain people ill, with symptoms that include headaches, nausea, nasal congestion, and breathing difficulties.



Valeska Soares, "Fainting Couch" (2002)

As this is a mid-career retrospective, several site-specific works will be exhibited through documentation. Among the most interesting of these is "Picturing Paradise," a piece that Soares produced in 2000 as part of inSITE, a collaborative project along the U.S.–Mexico border. After her initial proposal for cutting large holes in the border fence was rejected, Soares came up with a plan to install mirrored panels on both sides that would make it appear from a distance as though the fence were porous. These mirages of free crossing were in fact reflections of whichever land you were in, not the other side, but even so, they retained some of the utopian impulse toward reconciliation that informed her original request. Discreetly inscribed with a quotation from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the panels of "Picturing Paradise" remain among the most poignant images in the artist's oeuvre.

It's likely that the most popular installations in this giant cabinet of curiosities will be "Vaga Lume" (2006) and *Push Pull* (2013). *Push Pull* will only be seen once, as it is a performance piece and requires strenuous participation from a team of caterers in order to succeed. Originally commissioned for Miami Art Basel by the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, *Push Pull* features giant clumps of brightly colored and flavored saltwater taffy hanging from hooks. The taffy must be manipulated continuously to keep it from hardening or falling to the ground. In Miami, onlookers stepped forward periodically to allow the taffy pullers to tear off small pieces and lay them on their waiting tongues. To experience *Push Pull*, you should attend the performance, which is open to the public and takes place on Sunday, September 17, 11 a.m.–2:30 p.m.

Encountering "Vaga Lume" involves making one's way through a hanging forest of long, beaded light pull-chains. Each of the thousands of chains operates an individual bulb fastened to the ceiling of the gallery in a giant grid. Enveloped in a cascade of chains, viewers are invited to turn lights on and off as they wend their way through the room, reconfiguring the pattern of light and dark bulbs above them as they go. It's an apt metaphor for the entire experience, which challenges each individual to carve out his or her own path through the sensuous worlds that this artist creates.