

Cultural Connections

Words: Dervla Louli **Portrait:** Lucy McNally **Images:** Courtesy of Puerto Roja Gallery

FORMER FINANCIER ADRIANA ALVAREZ-NICHOL IS THE FIRST ART SPECIALIST AND DEALER IN HONG KONG DEDICATED TO LATIN AMERICAN ART IN ASIA. THE FOUNDER OF PUERTA ROJA GALLERY AND THE VICE PRESIDENT OF THE FOUNDED BOARD FOR THE HONG KONG ART GALLERY ASSOCIATION TALKS TO KEE MAGAZINE ABOUT THE MATURE AND VIBRANT NATURE OF LATIN AMERICAN ART, OPENING THE DOORS TO AN EXCITING MARKET, AND THE DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED ALONG THE WAY.



Adriana Alvarez-Nichol purchased her first piece of Latin American art at the young age of 17 and has been passionate about that particular genre ever since. After a successful spell in the world of finance and being chosen as one of the 'Top Ten Most powerful Mexican Women Abroad' by CNN, she relocated to Hong Kong and set up the first specialised Latin American art dealership in Asia in 2010. She is passionate about growing the cultural and commercial links between Asia and Latin America and catering to the strong upward trend forecasted for Latin American markets as predicted by the Art Tactics 2012 Outlook Report. The well-travelled and highly educated art expert speaks slowly, purposefully and always to the point.

Kee: HOW DID YOU MAKE THE TRANSITION FROM FINANCE TO ART?

Adriana Alvarez-Nichol: I studied economics and then did a Masters Degree in London that kicked off my career in banking. Through living there I became closer and more attached to things from home. My family and I have always been passionate about art, so in an informal way I started connecting artists in Mexico with people who were interested in buying art. I could show them things that they wouldn't likely see in galleries in Europe. After what was a very successful, but not necessarily fulfilling career in banking, I wanted to do something that I was passionate about and which I enjoyed. My husband and I decided to relocate to Hong Kong approximately three years ago as we had lived in Asia many years before and always wanted to return. We coincidentally arrived when the Hong Kong art market was growing very aggressively and no-one was doing Latin American art, so I decided to set up Puerto Roja, the first specialised Latin American art dealership in Asia.

K: DID YOUR EXPERIENCE IN FINANCE ASSIST YOUR VENTURE INTO THE ART INDUSTRY?

A A-N: Yes definitely, in two different aspects. Growing up in a banking business world has allowed me to think of my art business in different terms. My business model is quite different from that of a traditional gallery as I have taken certain aspects from my experience in the finance industry and applied them to the art industry. I also gained corporate experience skills which been very helpful in setting up the Hong Kong Art Gallery Association. I had significant experience in terms of governance and in setting up an industry body that would represent the interest of all the members. So I think I'm bringing a unique skill set to the table.

K: WHAT ARE THE MAIN CONCERNS AND GOALS OF THE HONG KONG ART GALLERY ASSOCIATION?

A A-N: To really represent the interest of our members in a fast moving market, and to provide one voice. In addition, there are significant developments taking place in the Hong Kong art world including plans for the Kowloon Cultural District and new efforts from the Government to drive a more cultural agenda that require us to participate and have one voice in terms of representing commercial galleries in Hong Kong.

Our goal is also to reach out to certain members of the community. We want to find other opportunities for collaboration and synergies with other Government and Non-Government art associations. Our final concern as an industry body is to increase the knowledge and the spread of best practice within galleries. We also want to set up a series of seminars where we can talk about the art world.



Arco Reflejo

K: HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED ANY DIFFICULTIES IN FORGING A PATH AS THE FIRST LATIN AMERICAN SPECIALISED ART DEALER IN HONG KONG?

A A-N: Being the first in any industry is always difficult, but it also provides some advantages. The knowledge of Latin American art in Asia tends to be very limited. Within the expatriate community you have collectors with an American or European background who are familiar with Latin American art because it's a market that has been present for a very long time. But when you're more focused more on the local market and if you're talking about Mainland China and Singapore, there is little knowledge of Latin American art and this is both good and bad.

It's good because you can start with a blank canvas, as there are no preconceptions of how Latin American art should be. From an art dealer's point of view, the absence of knowledge requires me to go through a strong and deep educational process with clients. It is true that people in Hong Kong tend to be brand orientated, even in art, but the points of reference for quality are not necessarily known. We have to work hard to introduce the art and associate it with quality instead of the names that are on it. Having said that, after a two-year effort I have found a very strong response and an acknowledgement that there is a different proposition and a different aesthetic that can be linked to the concerns, views and tastes of Asian buyers.

K: ARE THERE CERTAIN CRITERIA THAT THE ARTISTS IN YOUR GALLERY MUST MEET BEFORE YOU WILL REPRESENT THEM?

A A-N: It's very important to try to get away from what I call "tourist art", for example bright paintings of a market or traditional scenes from Latin America. The artists that I bring must have a universal discourse and be trying to express either aesthetically



Iris

or technically issues that are of concern to everyone. The way they express must be Latin American and this usually is exhibited in two forms. First I think that technique and craftsmanship in Latin America is of the highest standard, and most of the artists that I bring are highly educated and have been exposed internationally. The second thing I look for is visual impact. Latin American artists are very expressive and emotionally outspoken. This is most obviously demonstrated by the colour, texture, form and media choices that are used and which haven't been seen here until now.

K: WHAT ARE THE MAIN INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN LATIN AMERICAN ART?

A A-N: I get asked that question a lot, and I don't always give the answer that people expect. I can't say that art is a fantastic investment because in most cases it's not. Art can be a good investment but my advice to clients is to buy something that will definitely preserve its value and has the potential to increase. The most important thing I advise is to buy something that they like and that they will want to keep.



Cantona



Hector Abierto

K: CAN YOU HIGHLIGHT THE KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ART MARKETS IN LATIN AMERICA AND ASIA?

A A-N: The Latin American market operates very differently to the Asian market. The markets in Asia are very speculative, so people are always looking for a strong secondary market, fast results and high appreciation. It's a market full of hype and speculation that tends to focus on short-term gain. The market in Latin America is very strong and full of high quality artists because collectors buy to keep and focus on long-term investments. This means that it is difficult to get secondary price points for some very sought-after artists, and it's almost impossible to buy their works because nobody wants to sell them.

If you're looking at it from a portfolio perspective, for major collectors the interesting points about Latin American art is that it brings a huge diversification factor if they are primarily Asian or European dominated. If you look at the major market indexes, you will see that the Latin American market grows steadily and doesn't have the sporadic ups and downs of other markets. Collectors stay in the market and with an artist because they are committed.

K: CAN YOU DISCUSS THE RECENT EXHIBITION, 'UNFOLDING BODIES' BY HÉCTOR VELÁSQUEZ?

A A-N: We were really excited to bring Héctor to Asia because he brings together all of the aspects of Latin American art that I mentioned previously. He is what I would call a 'middle-career' artist and has completed a large number of exhibitions internationally. He studied Fine Art in Mexico and Germany and has three art degrees. Strong reviews from critics and a successful academic background adds to Héctor's very strong CV.

When I introduce an artist, I always bring in a minimum of 10 years of his or her work. 'Unfolding Bodies' is vast and features 40 sculptures done over a decade that have a consistent theme. Héctor's technique is his signature. He moulds body parts of himself, his family, or other people he cares about. These resin sculptures are then covered in very colourful yarn, which is a traditional Mexican thing. So he is going back to his heritage, but through very contemporary art.

K: WHAT STYLES AND TRENDS SHOULD PEOPLE EXPECT TO SEE IN PUERTO ROJA GALLERY IN THE FUTURE?

A A-N: It will be a continuation of the efforts that we initiated two years ago, which is to ensure that we offer a stable of artists and artworks that will cater to everyone from large private collectors right down to those only beginning to be interested in art.

K: WHEN DOES AN ART CONSUMER TRULY BECOME A COLLECTOR?

A A-N: Most people assume that an art collector must invest in very expensive art and already have a huge collection, but an art critic from New York once said to me, "You become an art collector when you buy a piece of art and don't know where you're going to put it", and I think that perfectly sums it up.