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## WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL

### Loló Soldevilla: Constructing her Universe

Edited by Jeffrey Grove, with essays by  
 Rafael DiazCasas and Olga Viso  
 Hatje Cantz Verlag and Sean Kelly  
 Gallery, 2019

Reviewed by Abigail McEwen

Seventy-five years after the lauded exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* opened at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1944, the exhibition *Loló Soldevilla: Constructing her Universe* and its accompanying catalogue crowned a decade-long revision of Cuba's historical *vanguardia* and its fated ends in abstraction. If the intertwining of Cuban art and US policy, from Good Neighbor cultural diplomacy to Obama-era sanctions relief, has at times overweighted the historiography of Cuban modernism, attention has lately turned toward the aesthetic and the archival, a salutary direction taken here. Amid ongoing critical (and market) interests in geometric abstraction across the Americas, from Mexico to the Southern Cone, the restoration of Cuban concretism within emerging, hemispheric narratives of modernism has discerned a number of significant yet neglected artists, Loló Soldevilla (1901–71) and Sandú Darié notably among them. *Loló Soldevilla* follows in the wake of the period exhibition, *Concrete Cuba* (David Zwirner, 2015), and adds to a number of pioneering monographic catalogues—*Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016); *Zilia*

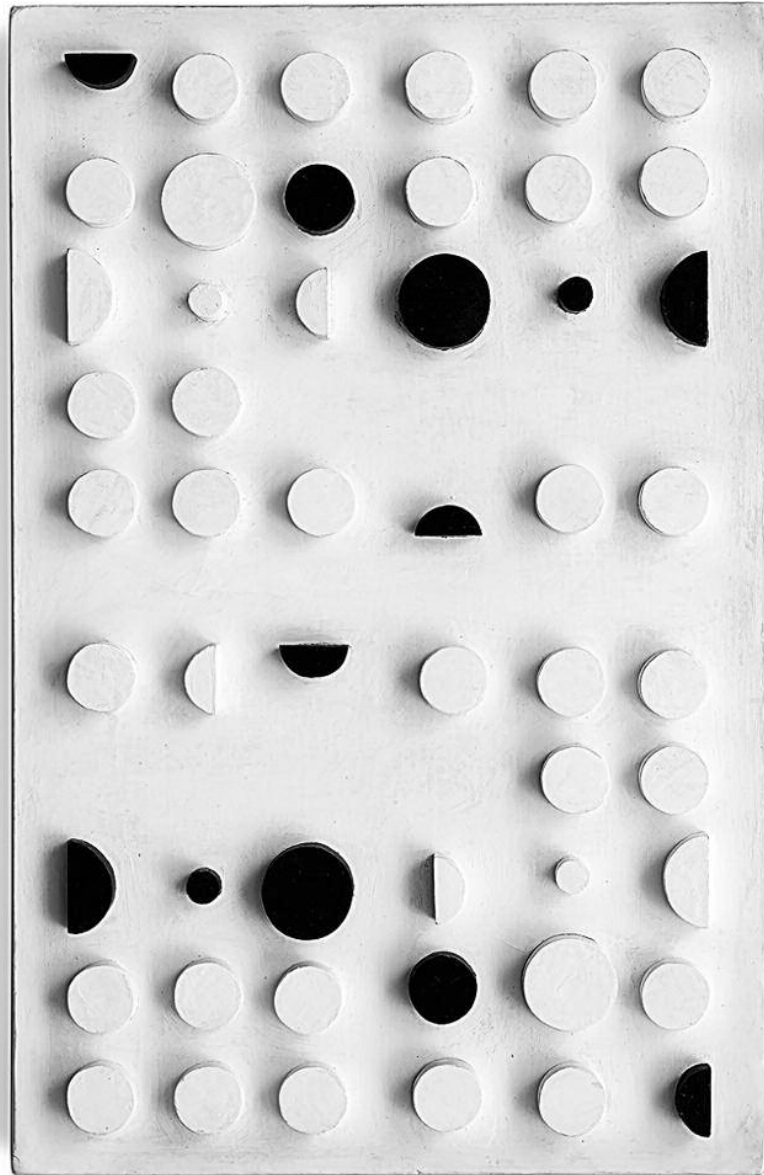


Fig. 1. Loló Soldevilla, *Sin título* (1960), oil on wood, 19 11/16" x 23 5/8". © Martha Flora Carranza Barba, universal heir of the work of Loló Soldevilla. Photo: Jason Wyche. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

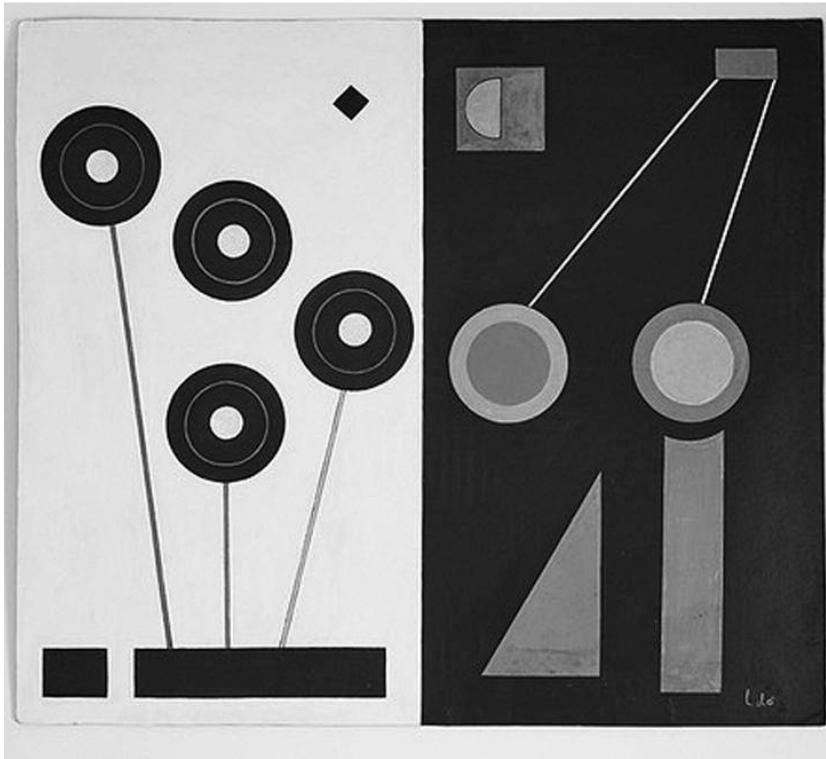


Fig. 2. Loló Soldevilla, *Sin título* (n.d.), oil on masonite, artwork: 22 3/16" x 25 3/16"; framed: 25 1/2" x 28 11/16" x 2 1/4". © Martha Flora Carranza Barba, universal heir of the work of Loló Soldevilla. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

*Sánchez: Soy Isla* (The Phillips Collection, 2019)—that not only recuperate these (women) artists but also, and authoritatively, document their historical record.<sup>1</sup>

*Loló Soldevilla* marks the artist's first major monographic exhibition outside of Cuba and consolidates her stature as a leading artist and staunch champion of Cuban abstraction. Soldevilla slipped into obscurity following her death in 1971, and not until Elsa Vega's exhibition, *Loló: un mundo imaginario*, at Havana's Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in 2006, did she return to national consciousness. Her work has since appeared in numerous group shows in Cuba and abroad and in national, regional, and generational contexts of abstraction; Tresart Gallery (Miami) held her first solo exhibition in the US in 2011. As galleries and collectors—no less, art historians—have increasingly sought her work, the publication of *Loló Soldevilla* serves a practical, as well as a scholarly, purpose. Drawing upon

considerable research and primary sources, among them Soldevilla's personal diaries, curator Rafael DiazCasas chronicles the artist's life and work in the catalogue's main text, situating her in broadly national and international contexts during the critical decade of the 1950s. Olga Viso, who oversaw the installation of *Adiós Utopia: Dreams and Deceptions in Cuban Art Since 1950*—which incorporated works by Soldevilla—at the Walker Art Center (2017), contributes a concise, critical accounting of the artist's exhibition history and legacy. The catalogue includes an extensive chronology, compiled by DiazCasas, that provides a fine foundation for future scholarship.

In his lengthy essay, "Loló Soldevilla: Constructing her Universe," DiazCasas knits biographical and socio-historical details around a chronology of Soldevilla's evolution as an artist. Her long political career is surveyed briefly—the first fifty years of her life,

from her early musical training to her work with the Auténtico party, remain enigmatic—as a prologue to her move to Paris, in 1949, and subsequent artistic career. The congregation of Latin American artists in postwar Paris and their affinities for geometric abstraction are well established, and DiazCasas traces Soldevilla's movements within these familiar circles, enhancing her narrative with new details, many drawn from unpublished journals and correspondence. Illustrations of her lesser-known portraits and the inclusion of numerous period photographs, also on display at Sean Kelly, are of particular interest. Still, the essential formal innovation of Soldevilla's practice, apart from her facilitating role in the rise of Cuban abstraction, is somewhat elided. DiazCasas concludes that her "forms of expression ... are able to construct an atonal, homogeneous voice in which a sculptural tendency seems to emerge," but the nuances of musicality and medium are not fully resolved (43). A review of Soldevilla's return to Havana in 1956, her cultivation of artists around her short-lived but influential Galería de Arte Color-Luz, and her limited production of the 1960s conclude the text. Precise explanations of her "political connections" and elevated class status are left conventionally unattempted, a point of criticism hardly unique to this publication (60).

Following some seventy pages of color illustrations, Viso's essay, "Loló Soldevilla: Visionary Artist and Advocate of Cuba's Mid-Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde," appraises the artist's latter-day ascendancy. Combing through her recent exhibition history and considering the broad contemporaneity of her work in the 1950s, Viso centers Soldevilla within "a confluence of generative forces," from the Pan-American Union to Brazilian Neo-Concretism, that made abstraction possible in mid-century Cuba (159). "Loló Soldevilla: Life and Times" enumerates the artist's career year by year, supplementing personal and exhibition details with notations of relevant events in and beyond Cuban modernism. Its scope and accompanying documentation, including archival photographs and catalogues,

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form an enduring and valuable resource for the field.

The best available sourcebook for Soldevilla, this catalogue constitutes a meaningful contribution to the histories of Cuban modernism and transatlantic abstraction. A lack of access to primary sources, artworks and otherwise, has long frustrated advances in Cuban studies, and publications of this kind helpfully redress this historical impasse. Yet while the newfound commercial viability of Cuban abstraction has surely enabled scholarship, it has also stimulated the circulation of fakes and forgeries, whose presence confounds any scholarly enterprise. (I make no claim against the works here included but must acknowledge this general concern.) *Loló Soldevilla* directs itself to

general readers and collectors with consistently clear, accessible writing with little theoretical discourse. Lavishly illustrated, its cover designed apropos with geometric cut-outs (Fig. 1), the catalogue is both elegant and substantive.

As a fuller history of Cuba's nascent vanguardia of the 1950s continues to unfold and, even, reshape our understanding of modernist canon and geography, Soldevilla appears a pivotal, if at once improbable, protagonist of abstraction. *Loló Soldevilla* signals the artist's arrival onto a global stage, her work increasingly—and profitably—positioned within myriad trajectories of monochrome painting, kinetic and op art, and concretism (Fig. 2). More than a record of the eponymous exhibition, the catalogue represents a commendable

achievement in the study of Soldevilla and her generation and will doubtless inform future directions in research. •

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## Notes

1. The author contributed essays to *Concrete Cuba: Cuban Geometric Abstraction from the 1950s* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2016) and *Zilia Sánchez: Soy Isla* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2019).