



My Buenos Aires portrait of a city

curators: Paula Aisemberg and Albertine de Galbert

My Buenos Aires continues a series of exhibitions at la maison rouge that showcases the art scene in cities around the world. The series launched in summer 2011 with Winnipeg, Canada, followed in 2013 by Johannesburg, South Africa. As some voice regret at what they see as a "standardized" art world, laying the blame at globalization's door, this seemed the opportune moment to look at centres of creativity which, though out of the spotlight, enjoy a thriving art scene infused with the city, its territory, history and myths.

A mirror city, established once in 1536 then again in 1580, "Our Lady of the Fair Winds" stands on Río de la Plata, the "silver river" that gave the country its name. Buenos Aires extends over two hundred square kilometres and is home to three million *porteños* ("port-dwellers" in Spanish). The Greater Buenos Aires conurbation has a population of fifteen and a half million, making it Latin America's third most-populated agglomeration after Mexico City and São Paulo.

The vast majority of its population descends from immigrants, most of whom arrived from Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These shared origins and the numerous exchanges they inspired over the years no doubt explain the visual and cultural familiarity that greets the European visitor.

Seductive, Buenos Aires is no less sombre. It bears the stigmata of violence endured, of uprooting, military dictatorship (1976-1983), and the mourning of the many disappearances including, since the financial and economic crisis of 2001, that of its own image as a "major European power" that inexplicably alighted on the American continent. The public protests that followed the 2001 crisis have shown a capacity for counterpower with no equivalent in the history of modern nations. Even in the throes of crisis, strikes and the pillaging of recent decades, Argentineans continue to wield sarcasm, dark humour and irony rather than resign themselves

to morosity. Artists are no exception. Decades of crisis and "getting by" have revealed their determination never to give in, and an extraordinary capacity for reinvention in a difficult context from which Argentina is slowly emerging.

And so *My Buenos Aires* is neither a portrait of the city's tourist attractions nor a "who's who" of Argentinean artists. Paula Aisemberg and Albertine de Galbert have set out to capture and recreate for the visitor their own feelings and experience of the cultural ferment that is driving the Argentinean capital forward, through a selection of works by 65 artists over four generations. The exhibition is an invitation to feel the city's disconcerting strangeness, and to plunge into and accept its mystery. It unfolds in a labyrinthine fashion, moving back and forth between political and private, public and domestic space, the conscious and the unconscious, in seven stages, from day to night and from representations of the real-life city to the depths of its psyche.

There is, appropriately, an urban feel to the spaces around the main building, with a house, a street, a patio and a café from which the different galleries branch out, like Hispanic villages huddled around the main square. The works set around this space form both an introduction and the heart of the exhibition, the way in and the way out, a crossroads that defines the spaces and "sets the scene".

1 – Landmarks and (dis)orientation

Visitors are welcomed into the lobby by Magdalena Jitrik's interpretation of the Argentinean flag, which this militant artist has transformed into a hand-sewn, abstract landscape. Also in the entrance are two works by Graciela Hasper. In one, she has superimposed concentric circles onto aerial views of the city, radiating out from what are, for her, the two "nerve centres" of her studio and her psychoanalyst's office (Buenos Aires has the most bookstores and the most psychoanalysts per person of any city in the world). Zooming in, *Nudo de autopistas* takes the spectator on a never-ending ride along the kilometres of highway that criss-cross the city, to a soundtrack by John Cage.

My Buenos Aires sets out to capture a different city to the Buenos Aires of guidebooks and clichés. This is the Buenos Aires that exists in the eyes and work of the artists chosen by the curators. Who are they? Which "tributaries flow into the river of their artistic temperament?" asks María Gainza in the catalogue to the exhibition. As a form of prologue, the artist and art historian **Guillermina Mongan** attempts her answer in a document-work that reconstitutes a history of art in narrative form. In collaboration with historian and curator Jimena Ferreiro for the research, and with artist Marina de Caro, she has devised an installation which materialises the journals, spaces, documents, exhibitions, encounters and bonds that have shaped the artists on show. Using photographs of their book

collection and workspace as a reference point, Guillermina Mongan has drawn arborescences which present each artist as "a changing, fleeting incarnation of something which precedes them, makes them possible, and brings them into the world" (Gainza).

Buildings, facades, shops, pavements, passageways, squares, streets, cars and traffic physically define the urban landscape. The tower that rises majestically in **Roberto Aizenberg's** painting suggests a more metaphysical than real city; a dream city by de Chirico to whom the painter has often been compared. Considered to be the first and most important Argentinean surrealist, Aizenberg is a guiding figure for contemporary artists. Thirty years later, Aizenberg's work is openly echoed in *Torre* by **Max Gómez Canle**. Both are infused with the same interest in Renaissance painting. However, the geometric monolith in this landscape suggests as much Piero della Francesca as Stanley Kubrick or a game of Tetris: past and present collide. Temporality is also a theme of Sebastián Díaz Morales' video, in which a man moves endlessly through a maze of stairs, returning over and over to his starting point, like an Escher drawing made real. Fragments of the city are strung together until fiction takes the place of real life.

Our first impression of **Pablo Siquier's** work is one of abstraction, when it is in fact inspired by the city. "I developed my repertoire of shapes and drawings by observing the facades

of buildings and combinations of architectural ornaments during years of riding around on buses." His work contains the precision of a carefully executed technical drawing alongside the imperfection of hand-drawn charcoal strokes. The resulting visual pulse recalls the rhythm that inhabits the city in its very layout.

The real face of Buenos Aires is brought to us by **Ana Gallardo**. In *Casa rodante* she pulls a makeshift cart through the city's streets, piled high with the objects and furniture she has accumulated over the years, and which she must leave behind after being forced out of her home. The past is no longer a mental image tinted with nostalgia but a very real burden whose weight is felt with each push of the pedals. Gallardo's video also makes reference to the vulnerability of countless Argentineans in the darkest days of economic crisis, though not without a touch of humour and optimism.

2 – Urban motifs

Alberto Goldenstein explores the city too, this time on foot and at a more leisurely pace. Armed with his camera, he views Buenos Aires without any predefined aesthetic filter, delivering it to us in all its bustling, modern, colourful dynamic. Each of the works in this section portrays the city at its most humble and down-to-earth. Discarded by some, objects become a support for the creativity of others; they are the equivalent, in

art, of the transformation of urban waste by the *cartoneros*, the men, women, entire families even who since the late 1990s descend nightly on the city's wealthier districts to sort through the rubbish in search of items to sell. Every abandoned item, every scrap of material, has a potential intrinsic value. At a time of economic crisis, and in a two-tier society, using rubbish to bring the street into the museum has particular political significance.

Marcela Astorga transforms fragments of the city into nostalgic trophies that tell of grandeur and decadence. Behind a protective white plaster skin, red brick suggests flesh while delicate metal trimmings become prostheses. **Catalina León** doesn't paint the city, she paints *with* the city. Working on humble materials (plasterboard, offcuts of fabric, and in this instance a piece of hoarding), she allows her paintings to slowly take form, introducing exogenous materials, plants, debris and other found elements. **Adrián Villar Rojas** also uses non-conventional media for his *Sick of Goodbyes* series. References are thrown together: Villar Rojas applies airbrush techniques, the kind used to customise bikes and cars, to a scene that superimposes multiple layers of the past: an extinguished civilisation of prehistoric men is represented in a mural by individuals from another era whose own downfall is the subject of the work. A central figure of the 1990s and a key promoter of "light art", **Jorge Gumier Maier** recycles decorative and

architectonic elements into kitsch ornaments. His work, which defies classification, resembles a cross between Mondrian's neoplasticism in pastel shades and the curved lines of *fileteado*, a style of decorative painting typical of Buenos Aires.

Facing them, **Elisa Strada** seizes on the impermanence that is a part of the urban landscape. She has filled a small space with flyers, the kind that scatter any city, thereby giving a permanent existence to these papers which would otherwise have simply disappeared. Through sheer number, whatever message these flyers were meant to deliver becomes illegible. They are merely strips of colour; visual noise that contrasts with the silent density of **Ariel Cusnir's** oil on canvas, opposite. Despite its simple subject - a man laying a table - it contains an enigmatic quality similar to the atmosphere of an Edward Hopper painting.

As daylight slowly dims, a darker aspect of Buenos Aires emerges. The stigmata of Argentina's recent turbulent history looms out of **Santiago Porter's** photograph in which a decapitated statue of Eva Perón takes on the appearance of a Gothic princess. The statue was part of a memorial which a military commando mutilated and threw into the Río de la Plata during the 1955 coup d'état. Forty years later, the headless bodies of these ghosts of history were fished out of the river and have since been erected in the grounds of Juan Perón's country home.

One of Argentina's most internationally renowned artists (he represented the country at the 2005 Venice Biennale), **Jorge Macchi** instils maximum emotion into a minimum of elements. This car being swallowed by a viscous liquid, becoming one with the materiality of the paint, takes us through the looking glass into an uncertain world.

Fabio Kacero confronts us with the harsh reality of urban life, where the individual loses all capacity to be moved by another's plight. In this performance, filmed in 16mm at and around Plaza de Mayo, the artist lays as though dead on the ground, to the complete indifference of passers-by. In *La lógica de la supervivenica* ("logic of survival"), Gabriela Golder explores economic and social violence in a video montage of three scenes, screened at nightmarishly slow speed, that recall the worst moments in the country's economic recession.

3 – Bring on the night

Darkness has fallen. We turn a corner, and suddenly the world is thrown into reverse. Inside and outside merge; through a window, a storm is brewing. Where are we? As in a novel by Jorge Luis Borges, whose writing fuels the imagination of many Argentinean artists, reality plays tricks in **Leandro Erlich's** immersive installations. Nothing is ever quite as it seems. The visitor, who is drawn into a game of perception, can contemplate from the outside a storm that rages inside.

Everyday life is transformed by a new sensory experience.

As we emerge from the night, **Esteban Pastorino's** photographs plunge us into a fantastical world. These are real 1930s buildings – cemeteries, slaughterhouses, city halls – from different towns in Buenos Aires province, all in the inimitable style of architect and engineer Francisco Salamone. However, the anachronic gum-bichromate printing process which Pastorino has used gives them the timeless materiality of a drawing.

Margarita Paksa's very real drawing shows two sides of Buenos Aires, by day and by night, always with the strains of a tango playing in the background. The names of famous tangos are drawn on a map of the city, as though their notes could be the bricks and mortar of the landscape.

At night, the theatres come to life. At Teatro Colón, the Buenos Aires opera house near Avenida Corrientes, one of the city's busiest thoroughfares, the curtain is raised on an intimate spectacle in this collage by **León Ferrari**. Active in the 1960s and winner of the Golden Lion award at the 2007 Venice Biennale, Ferrari's work is consistently irreverent. Meanwhile, Donjo León plays out the cruel destiny that awaits any living organism, illustrated by the slow decomposition of an ordinary banana, transformed into a master of ceremony. A voice rises from behind the wall: in Ana Gallardo's video, Silvia Mónica, a campaigner with AMMAR, an organisation helping prostitutes in

Buenos Aires, tells of sad and painful experiences to the tune of an Osvaldo Fresedo tango.

Ernesto Ballesteros follows the same protocol for each work in this series of nocturnal urban landscapes, using a black marker pen to "turn out" the lights in a photograph. Paradoxically, masking the light makes whatever is going on in the darkness all the more present. The work of Flavia Da Rin, shown opposite, revolves around her manipulations of self-portraits.

4 – Home sweet home

Private space, glimpsed through the windows of Ballesteros' photographs, is "mapped" in this work by **Guillermo Kuitca**: placed under an apartment layout, the mattress surrounded by roses anchors abstraction in a real world of encounters and solitude. Marisa Rubio waits until dark to take her camera into anonymous homes and, unknown to them, films their inhabitants through half-open doors and chinks in the curtains, laying their private lives bare for all to see.

Another entrance and more transgression, as visitors penetrate what appears to be an ordinary, albeit slightly rundown bedsit, devoid of its occupant. A closer look reveals that each item - ashtray, furniture, books, appliances, everything - has been broken then repaired. Every single element in this installation by **Martín Cordiano** and **Tomás**

Espina bears the scars of a destructive rage, or a well-kept secret. Someone has tried to repair the damage, to pretend that nothing happened, but the cracks show through all the same.

What could be more personal, more intimate, than the home? The domestic interior is the reflection of the harmony or dysfunction that reigns within. In the bourgeois interior of *Un plan ambicioso* (shown on three screens spread around the gallery), **Eugenia Calvo** proposes a peculiar alternative to the logic that rules the everyday by blowing up household items, trying (unsuccessfully) to blend into the decor, or building a barricade out of furniture. **Pablo Suárez** eroticises the paraphernalia - flask, bowl and metal straw - of Argentina's national drink, mate. The bowl's anthropomorphic contours suggest "el chongo", the imaginary figure of a muscular young man that Suárez invented in the 1970s. Next to this, **Fernanda Laguna's** wicker trays frame naïve portraits and still lifes; slash marks on the surface form a counterbalance to their apparent innocence.

A display case contains works by **León Ferrari**, who has subjected the Holy Family to the hell of an oven, a frying pan and a meat grinder. The most insignificant items are transfigured. A juice carton, when decorated with stickers and pompoms, becomes a glamorous object at the hands of **Marcelo Pombo**, another proponent of 1990s "light art". **Mariela Scafati**, an activist artist and founder of El Taller

Popular de Serigrafía (The People's Screen-Printing Workshop), composes a colourful abstract painting, both formal and incarnate, from a diamond-pattern pullover and repurposed frames.

The installation that takes up the centre of the room sets out to transform the bedroom into a libertarian playground. A performance diva and paradigmatic figure of Argentinean Pop Art, **Marta Minujín** is the incarnation of psychedelic culture in 1960s Buenos Aires. Created with Dutch sculptor **Mark Brusse** and first produced in 1962, *La pieza del amor* was one of the first participatory artworks ever: visitors were invited to use the (mobile) bed however they wished, to dream, sleep, meditate, love...

Holes in the wall are another invitation to transgress boundaries. Visitors who poke their head through discover a work by **Diego Bianchi**: agglutinated forms and organised structures that constitute "a jungle of formal and conceptual elements drawn together by entropic energy" (Gainza). The installation appears to have grown organically, taking over the interstitial spaces in la maison rouge which it fills with its curious presence. Also created from recycled objects (landscape paintings found at flea markets), José Luis Landet's work keeps its constituent elements closely in check. His *Reticula* series uses only the stretchers from these paintings, which he assembles into a vertiginous visual network. **Adriana**

Minoliti's abstract work is both impetuous and radiant. Her "sexy metaphysics" articulate figuration and abstraction in a referential and theatrical painting.

Off-limits to the rest of the household, a teenager's bedroom is central to the works in this section, which are informed by youth and the overwhelming energy of the teenage years. **Carlos Huffmann** portrays himself as a young writer in a room scattered with books, any of which could provide useful information but which are instead illegible, reduced to coloured surfaces. **Nicolás Bacal** sees the bedroom as a microcosm, proceeding identically for each photograph in this 2009 series: the artist moves into his friends' bedrooms and recreates the origins of the world in their bed from his and their favourite objects. Thus the bedrooms become time capsules as well as images capturing the "big bang" moment of teenhood. **Carlos Herrera** evokes this energy through sport, and more particularly football which is a vital part of Argentinean culture. Boots, balls and shin pads are bound together, forgoing their original function to become trophies instead.

Roberto Jacoby has been the protagonist of numerous artistic movements since the 1960s and is considered one of Argentina's first conceptual artists. He has worked as a sociologist and as a journalist, wrote lyrics for the rock group Virus in the 1980s, and founded Proyecto Venus, an alternative micro-society, among other projects. "Strategy of joy" is his

description of the festive gatherings and parties held in bars and clubs, such as this "concert against fear". He considers these moments to be acts of political insubordination, because they are a catalyst for joy and action, and because they show the body as a medium for pleasure at a time when other bodies are disappearing...

1b – Landmarks and (dis)orientation

Back in the "street", **Luis Terán's** *Totems* in the patio make explicit reference to Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*. In Terán's work, the rhythm he imparts to his sculpture is cross-pollinated by the desire to create an aesthetic out of quotidian forms, and specifically discarded items. A closer look indeed reveals familiar contours: those of the plastic bottles from which these totems are made.

Jorge Macchi subverts everyday logic: a fan mounted in a corner of the ceiling relentlessly chips away at the walls. Further along, the obelisk on Plaza de Mayo stands in the background of a photograph from the *Pop Latino* series, in which **Marcos López** presents a candy-coloured, caricatured vision of Latin America. His subjects are not people but stereotypes. His maid-meets-Snow-White character vaunting the merits of cleaning products is a virulent criticism of the 1990s ultra-liberalism that pushed the country into bankruptcy. Buenos Aires has many outdoor markets, and stalls are often

set up around Plaza de Mayo. The best-known of all, however, is that of La Salada, just outside Buenos Aires, the subject of this work by **Julián D'Angiolillo**. Thousands of people pass through the twice-weekly market to stock up on goods, including fakes, which they then resell across the country. D'Angiolillo's installation invites visitors to take home a pirate copy of his documentary on how to become a stallholder.

Since 2009, a group of artists has taken *Proyecto Secundario Liliana Maresca* into a school in a poor suburb south of Buenos Aires, with the aim of introducing the visual arts across the curriculum. The film and "postcards" made as part of this project tell of daily life in the neighbourhood, and of newcomers and their tightrope existence. They convey an image that is anything but postcard-esque, far removed from the stereotypes which, says **León Ferrari**, are traps. Or could it be the Casa Rosada - the presidential palace, reproduced on countless postcards - that has been caught in a trap laid by an artist who never ceases to criticise power and established order in every form.

Jorge Macchi's *Buenos Aires Tour*, in the display case, invites us to follow the random lines on a pane of broken glass laid over a map of the city, and choose among forty-six points which he has illustrated with photos, text and sound. Macchi's tour takes us off the beaten track of ordinary guidebooks and opens new perspectives for anyone for whom getting lost is an adventure.

Nicolás Bacal's installation in the café conjures up chaos and disorder. Are we looking at a building site? Faulty electric wiring? Illegal power hookups? This is "catch as catch can" transposed to an artistic context; a work that is both aesthetic and functional, as visitors can use the plugs to charge batteries. On the wall, **Elisa Strada's** photographs of signs caught in reflections are too saturated with information to be in any way legible. Her work references visual pollution in today's cities without capturing its image.

5 – The uncanny

The further visitors advance in the exhibition, the more the real Buenos Aires fades into the background, giving way to a dreamlike, fantasy city steeped in what Freud referred to as "the uncanny". In both his sculptures and drawings, **Matías Duville** creates an unsettling mood. What kind of fish did such a giant hook catch? He leads us into a world of hypertrophied and distorted scales of the kind encountered in dreams. **Eduardo Basualdo's** cabin has been burned to a cinder, a remnant of some chaotic situation. Titled *La Isla* (the island), it is indeed a solitary place, a closed-in world that stands apart from the other works, which visitors are invited to enter one by one. The inside is a paradoxical space of narrow hallways where all manner of unrelated objects (drawings, figurines, masks, trees and references to underground culture) communicate between themselves to form a mysterious narrative. To enter the work is

to penetrate an individual's mind, to experience a thought with one's entire being, and to picture it emotionally more than intellectually.

Joaquín Boz's abstract paintings are the result of complex experiments with paper and its reactions to various materials. Soaked in oil, drenched in paint or covered in graphite, paper takes on new qualities of opacity and translucency, elasticity and rigidity, to welcome primitive markings that appear to emerge directly from the subconscious. The room breathes to the rhythm of **Pablo Reinoso's** pure monochromes whose steady respiration marks the city's endless pulsations.

6 – Ghosts

"Art is a form of communication that enables us to consider tragedy," says **Marcelo Brodsky**. A political exile in Barcelona in the 1980s, he returns again and again to themes of memory and politics. *El Río de la Plata* is a close-up of the muddy waters of the river into which prisoners were thrown, alive, during the "death flights" of the military dictatorship. An installation in the display case by the same artist uses "subversive" books that became "passports to death" and were therefore buried by their owners during these years of terror, to be dug up a long time after. Books are in danger again in **Sebastián Gordín's** model library. Frozen in mid-fall, they represent both risk and an impact avoided. Hugo Aveta looks to a more distant past. In

1955, an army faction made an attempt on Juan Perón's life. The artist seeks to capture, through drawing, archive images of the attack projected onto a book, but these images become mixed with childhood memories, when little boys drew planes to play war.

There is a transgressive element in the work of **Luciana Lamothe**, who not only brings building materials into the exhibition, but invites the institution and, more so, the visitor to overcome their concerns for safety and venture onto the unstable gangway, when putting one foot in front of the other becomes an act of faith.

Balanced on this fragile perch, which bends under the weight of the body, the visitor has a sweeping view of **Nicanor Araoz's** installation. Every element is steeped in ambiguity: from afar, we see a charred body; from close quarters, we realise it has been delicately wrapped in satin ribbon. And what of the neon? Is it a cloud or a menacing flame? The answer depends on our interpretation of the floating figure: flying Icarus or mutilated body?

The installation is reflected in **Martín Legón's** work, which is clearly a homage to Malevich's *Black Square on a White Background*, given mysterious, almost lyrical form by its unfathomable nature. Darkness also pervades the work by Eduardo Stupía, who began his artistic practice in the 1970s. His message has become lost in the tangle of blotches and

signs formed by the repeated passage of his hand on the canvas. They hint at a meaning more than they actually say it, as do all the works in this room, each of which evokes the impossible task of putting certain things into words.

Sometimes, meaning comes not from words but from the absence of words. In *Ovnis en La Nación*, **Magdalena Jitrik** and **Luján Funes** assemble the numerous articles on UFO sightings which the main Argentinean newspapers published during the dictatorship. No distinction is made, no hierarchy of information, between these alleged sightings and reports on disappearances and murders, published in the same columns.

In a letter to **Mirtha Dermisache** after seeing her work, Roland Barthes wrote "You have [...] given your readers neither the messages nor even the contingent forms of expression, but the idea, the essence of writing. Nothing is more difficult to produce than an essence." Published as books, letters, newspapers or postcards, Dermisache's graphic works expose a language that cannot be translated into words whereas **Fabio Kacero's** sound piece fills the space with invented words which, though utterable, are devoid of meaning.

7 – The promise of dawn

The introspective works in the basement gallery ask how we build our identity, how we define ourselves, how we analyse ourselves, and most of all how do we rebuild ourselves?

First visitors pick their way through **Valeria Vilar's** plaster masks, spread over the floor. Monkeys, foxes and hens are no longer the colourful creatures of childhood stories or birthday fancy dress; their whiteness and fragility are more akin to bones. They inspire not so much joy as nostalgia and introspection: an incitation to literally "drop the mask".

Andrés Denegri also examines childhood through family photos. Images of soldiers, abruptly inserted among portraits of the artist as a young boy sleeping, playing or dressing up, and the disturbing soundtrack create mounting unease. Is the work a reminder of the political context of a boyhood in the shadow of dictatorship, or an evocation of the artist's ambiguous relation to his own family history? It is, in any event, a re-reading of his younger years by the artist, now an adult and lucid as to recent political events in his country.

Gabriel Chaile's work is a form of self-portrait. The bed he slept in as a child stands on piles of personal belongings, the objects that helped him grow: books, a plant, paint... all part of his intimate environment. From its new raised position, the bed becomes a means to "engineer necessity": it is a bed to dream in, a table to eat from, and perhaps an altar to pray at.

Otherness is central to **Nicola Costantino's** work, a four-minute trailer for a non-existent film. On learning she is pregnant, the artist makes a cast of her body. This double interacts with her, remaining unchanged as her body is

transformed. Once the baby is born, this doppelganger becomes an increasingly menacing presence which the artist ultimately destroys, sacrificing the image of the woman she has ceased to be.

At the end of the corridor, a strange form is profiled in soft light; a sculpture by **Marina De Caro** who is also known for her textile works, *vestibles*, that she intends to be worn and experienced. With her love of experimentation, and her belief in art's power to free the individual and generate moments of sharing and cohesion, De Caro invites metamorphosis and transformation through the "power of existence".

At the exit, **Guillermo Kuitca** invites us for one last tango. Inspired by Andy Warhol's dance step diagrams, Kuitca puts theory into practice and transforms a lifeless, printed schema into the living traces left by his bare feet on canvas. As for **Sebastián Díaz Morales**, he reminds us that Buenos Aires has countless other doors still to open...