

Artists Space is pleased to present the first US survey exhibition by Puerto Rico based artist Zilia Sánchez, spanning a period from the early 1950s to the present day.

Born in Cuba in 1926, studying at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro, Sánchez has since the early '50s developed a language that is highly significant when reconsidering the seemingly resolved history of minimalism.

“I guess I am not a Minimalist, but rather a Mulata.”

Sánchez's early work in Cuba developed an approach to formal abstraction through paintings and drawings, alongside the design of furniture as well as theater sets. Influenced by the Havana based modernist painter Victor Manuel, she became associated with a group of artists and intellectuals known as Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo. She designed scenography for guerilla theater group Los Yesistas (The Plasterers) signaling her involvement with the pre-revolutionary, anti-Batista movement.

As a result of regular exhibitions in Havana, she received grants enabling her to travel to Europe, before moving to New York in 1964. Living in the city for eight years, she began working with elaborated stretcher frames producing shaped canvases, emphasizing the sculptural abstraction of bodily form. Her paintings have regularly taken on a modular character, comprised of two or more abutting parts. This seriality has become a cornerstone of Sánchez's work: she continues to rework and add to paintings begun as early as the 1970s, considering each work to be a part of a larger whole. Alongside the sensual and haptic “queering” of a hard-edged minimalism, her multi-part works bear relation to the temporal and semiotic sequencing of musical notation, as well as to the architecture of tropical modernism.

In 1972 Sánchez moved to Puerto Rico, where she lives today. Between 1972 and 1975 she designed the literary journal *Zona de Carga y Descarga* (Zone of Charging and Discharging), a short-lived but highly influential publication principally edited by writer Rosario Ferré, marking a moment of experimentation in Puerto Rican writing commissioning marginalized Latin American, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, and Nuyorican writers. Sánchez's use of photomontage, innovative typesetting and layered layouts of image and text inscribed into the publication a fractured topology. This was paralleled by Cuban author, fellow *Zona* contributor and close friend Severo Sarduy's own reflections on writing that emerged around his involvement with the Parisian literature journal *Tel Quel*, collectively published in his compendium of essays, *Written On a Body* (1969). *Zona* was configured as both a place and as a way of working, intrinsically connected to Sánchez's paintings

as “actualizing in space (and in the skin of the canvas)... the ludic meaningfulness of language, as both a tense, a wracked, and a martyred system of differential signs, and as a related erotic display of desire.”<sup>1</sup> Since the 1980s such textural and scriptural qualities have become more defined, through line drawings on the surface of the canvas, including the occasional literal appearance of figurative transfers of semaphore and sign language.

Over the last three decades, Sánchez has taught at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas de Puerto Rico, becoming an inspirational figure for many artists. Her work however has seldom been exhibited outside Puerto Rico – the exhibition at Artists Space marks a long overdue survey of her practice.

<sup>1</sup> Benigno Trigo, “Zona. Carga y Descarga. Minor Literature in a Penal Colony,” *MLN*, (John Hopkins University) Volume 124, Number 2, March 2009

Curated by Stefan Kalmár and Richard Birkett

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