

VIRGINIA JARAMILLO

Israel Sánchez, Celebrating Virginia Jaramillo, Reforma,
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REFORMA


Virginia Jaramillo in her studio at 109 Spring Street, 1968

In an abandoned movie theater in Houston's Fifth Ward, one of the most marginalized ghettos in Texas, an exhibition that was originally not expecting much ended up making history almost half a century ago.

Titled *The DeLuxe Show*, the exhibition organized by the Menil Collection in 1971 featured works by creators such as Sam Gilliam, Al Loving, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, who explored new approaches to avant-garde abstraction, also including Virginia Jaramillo. "*The DeLuxe Show* was one of the first racially integrated contemporary art exhibitions in the United States, with international artists and local Americans who had not really been recognized. And I was the only woman in the show," recalls in an interview the artist, born in El Paso in 1939.

"At first it was just another exhibition, but later people began to realize how important it was. International artists of very high reputation and stature were exhibiting alongside black artists," she remarks via telephone about what instantly became legend.

Within the framework of the 50th anniversary of this artistic milestone, and to honor Jaramillo's participation as

the only woman and Latina in it, Menil inaugurated on September 26th *Curvilinear paintings, 1969-1974*, the first solo exhibition in a museum of the work of the Texan artist with Mexican descent.

Among the eight large-format paintings on display is *Green Dawn* (1970), that unmistakable green canvas -in appearance- crossed in the upper right by a thin yellow line of millimeter precision that Jaramillo exhibited in *The DeLuxe Show* and which she defines as her breaking point.

"What it did (*Green Dawn*) is that it encompassed everything I had been trying to achieve in a painting with one line. It synthesizes my whole concept of how important a single line can be," the artist specifies.

Jaramillo, along with some contemporaries at the end of the 60s, adopted a fresh and minimalist approach to painting against the pictorial tradition of abstract expressionism of, for example, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, whose exuberant splashes and drips sought to reveal the inner psyche.

On the contrary, Jaramillo's audacious rupture and the artists of "post-pictorial" and "non-gestural" works invented ways to eliminate entirely the indication of a brush or the artist's hand to instead emphasize the viewer's visual experience of the artwork.

In her case, the artist shares that she found the answers to her questions about composition in non-Western aesthetics, particularly in the Japanese, and her notion of negative space -or Ma- between objects, which she materialized in the line that divides the space in the painting and that is as important as the space itself.

"In other words, that line had to say everything the entire composition would say without actually saying anything," she explains, adding that to do that it had to be properly matched with color.

For *Green Dawn*, she confesses that she was mixing pigments for a week until she got the color that was finally captured.

"But when people see the painting they say: 'Ah, it's green'. No! It's not just green," she launches, laughing. "It has blue, red, purple. It had to be the right balance of color to make the yellow line speak."

The Curvilinear Paintings, 1969-1974, on display until July 3, 2021 at the Menil Collection presents other of these works characterized by sharp wavy lines that glide across monochromatic fields. Spatial grounds that invite reflection based on the bases that Jaramillo lays for the viewer to project. "When you see most of my paintings there is nothing there; yes, there are a couple of lines, but actually it is a void. Although it is not hollow. I wanted to take the viewer to study the painting. Now people no longer take that time, but I wanted the viewer looking at the work, and wondering what is there," she emphasizes.

Breaking Barriers

Raised in East Los Angeles and trained at Manual Arts High School and the Otis Art Institute, Jaramillo had her work exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) when she was just 18 years old.

Even as the talent was manifesting, she considers that the only reason she was there was because she signed her

artwork only as V. Jaramillo.

"Are you V. Jaramillo?" They asked her when she presented herself with the invitation that had been sent to her by mail to those who clearly thought she was a man.

Dedicating oneself to art at a time when women were considered minor artists, along with the unequal conditions that being Chicana entailed - such as being invited to openings but not after parties, where negotiations with collectors actually took place - are some of the difficulties she had to overcome.

"The way the system is set up, I should have given up. That is basically what is expected of many artists who do not have the support of a system that is made so that minorities do not succeed, especially at that time."

"But the hardest thing was being married to a man of color (artist Daniel LaRue Johnson). Going to New York City as a family, having two kids, no money and still trying to live as an artist. I can't even express how hard it was", shares the painter.

Her Ties to Mexico

With her own aesthetic free of categories and stereotypes, Jaramillo made a place for herself in the contemporary American art scene.

"I never wanted to be cataloged in a certain category. I think that is the death of an artist; the artist should be free to explore," she remarks, with such an idea as the pillar of her career. A one-year stay in Paris - "which unzipped my brain," she defines - and a very brief visit to Guadalajara, before settling in New York, led her artistic endeavor down the path of abstraction. Specifically, she recalls that the impact of *El hombre en llamas*, by José Clemente Orozco, made her seek that her work was that powerful and expressive.

Jaramillo fondly and proudly recalls having managed to captivate Rufino Tamayo, who personally acquired two of his pieces during an exhibition at the Mexican Museum in San Francisco.

"He was passing through the city, he went to the show and said: 'I like those two pieces', and he took the money out of his pocket. Of course, that tells you how cheap they were,"

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she says, unable to contain a laugh, about the two works on paper that the Tamayo Museum protects today.

At 81, the artist is very active, working daily in her Long Island studio. She just painted a 12 by 6 foot painting titled *Quantum Entanglement*, referring to the astrophysical notion of quantum entanglement. “It has to do with the communication between particles, even when they are separated by galaxies. Once they were linked and separated, those particles are still related; it may be a fraction of a second, but that communication exists, and that is what this painting is about” She exposes, highlighting the interest she has felt in science since she was a child and as an avid reader of science fiction stories.