

*Review of Ellen Landau, Mexico and American Modernism
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, 224 pp.*

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The generously illustrated five chapters of Ellen Landau's *Mexico and American Modernism* discuss a range of interactions between a set of artists active in the United States—Isamu Noguchi, Philip Guston, Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell—and a series of institutions, patrons, artists and critics active or based in Mexico during the mid-twentieth-century. Connecting analyses of these episodes is Landau's central and convincingly laid out claim, that "links in and to Mexico played a critical role in the psychic and artist maturity of these four major [...] American modernists associated with Abstract Expressionism" (165).

Landau's book contributes to our understanding of pivotal episodes—some better known than others—in the careers of all these artists. Notable among these are her analysis of the importance of Roberto Matta's automatist experiments to the early development of Motherwell's art, a process spurred by the dialogue between these two figures that unfolded between New York and Mexico City (110-114); of the close connection between Martha Graham's politically invested approaches to modern dance and Noguchi's understanding of the revolutionary potential of muralism, interrelated factors that, Landau argues, defined Noguchi's 1936 completion of a mural in Mexico City's Abelardo Rodríguez Market (31-33); and of Pollock's relatively understudied relationship with the work of José Clemente Orozco, which Landau claims was as significant as his better-known interaction with David Alfaro Siqueiros in New York (70-81). Similarly, Landau's analysis of Guston's formative experience producing a mural alongside Reuben Kadish in the city of Morelia between 1934 and 1935 sheds light on the shared ideological aims of mural painting interventions in Mexican cities other than the capital city and in the West Coast of the United States, adding to recent literature about muralism's international valence.¹ For Landau, this episode additionally proves key to understanding Guston's later "about-face," his return to figuration in the late 1960s, also a theme of

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significant interest for contemporary scholarship (162).²

Although Landau deftly combines various modalities of art historical analysis, an emphasis on the self-fashioning of the various artists discussed which at times relies on psychoanalytic interpretation, remains persistent throughout the book. In her analyses of the works of Noguchi, Guston and Motherwell, Landau combines a detailed examination of the construction of their creative individualities with the development of their working methods and artistic language. Yet interestingly, and perhaps predictably, she examines Pollock in a somewhat different light, focusing primarily on the intricacies of Pollock's mind. Thus, when addressing the relationship between Pollock, Orozco, and Siqueiros, Landau describes Pollock's adoption of Orozco as a role model to resist Pablo Picasso's influence over his work as an attempt to resolve a clear-cut 'Oedipal conflict' (73). In a similar vein, relying on Harold Bloom's theorizations of artistic influence, Landau describes the relationship between Orozco and Pollock as one defined by a 'Freudian "mis-reading"' of the latter artist's work by Pollock (81). These insights enhance our understanding a series of key shifts in Pollock's work, not least given Pollock's own investment in psychoanalysis as part of his creative practice, and Landau combines them with expert close readings of Pollock's works. Yet in light of the fact that Landau interprets works by Pollock's contemporaries not only in relation to the intricacies of their psyches but also through a persuasive contextual analysis in very convincing fashion, this reader wonders whether a similar approach to interpreting Pollock could have also enhanced our understanding of his work beyond the well-known confines of his mind, the space of interpretation where Landau's analysis here, and most Pollock scholarship, remains primarily located.

Landau aptly positions all the episodes in the book as part of larger scenarios of cultural exchange between centers of artistic production in the United States and Mexico. However, despite not being the central object of her analysis, the "Mexican" side of the conversation could have at times been dealt with more thoroughly. For example, Landau argues that one of the reasons why Mexico attracted Jewish-American artists Guston and Kadish was a trait of the "Mexican character" as defined by Octavio Paz in his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, published in 1950 (Landau incorrectly dates the book to 1961, the year of its first English translation, not of its original publication). Landau writes that Paz argued in his book that "insecurity and 'otherness' based on *mestizaje* (race mixing)," a concern of relevance to Kadish and Guston in light of their ethnic backgrounds and of broader racial tensions in the United States to which their work responded, "had made a strong impact on [Mexico's] national character." It is worth noting here that *mestizaje* is one of the single most slippery and politically charged formulations to emerge from twentieth-century Mexican cultural politics, one not fully explicable merely as "race mixing." In addition, to claim as Landau does that "some contest" Paz's assertions (39), is to account only superficially for a major debate in Mexican modernist

thought, one that intersects with many of the debates that also defined cultural production north of the Río Grande during the mid-twentieth-century. Landau rightly points to Paz's theorization of solitude as a key question that connects his concerns and those of his fellow artists and intellectuals in Mexico to those of their peers further up north at this time. Indeed, a more compelling articulation of the broader discursive and historical context for Paz's arguments could have reinforced Landau's thesis about the centrality of precisely this preoccupation to the work of all the artists examined in this book.³

This last point represents only one of several potential avenues for further inquiry about artistic exchanges between Mexico and the United States that this thought-provoking book is sure to stimulate. Given its expansive purview and its insightful and precise art historical analysis, *Mexico and American Modernism* is indispensable reading for anyone interested in a significant chapter in the history of artistic exchange between Mexico and the United States during the last century, as well as in many of the key transformations that defined modernist culture during the mid-twentieth-century.

1 Anna Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

2 Robert Slifkin, *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

3 For the problematic yet common reading of Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* in isolation from this broader context in English-language literature about Mexico, see Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *I Speak of the City: Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 418.