

Guillermo Kuitca

Organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York,
essay by Lynn Zelevansky

Author

Kuitca, Guillermo, 1961-

Date

1992

Publisher

Newport Harbor Art Museum

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/345

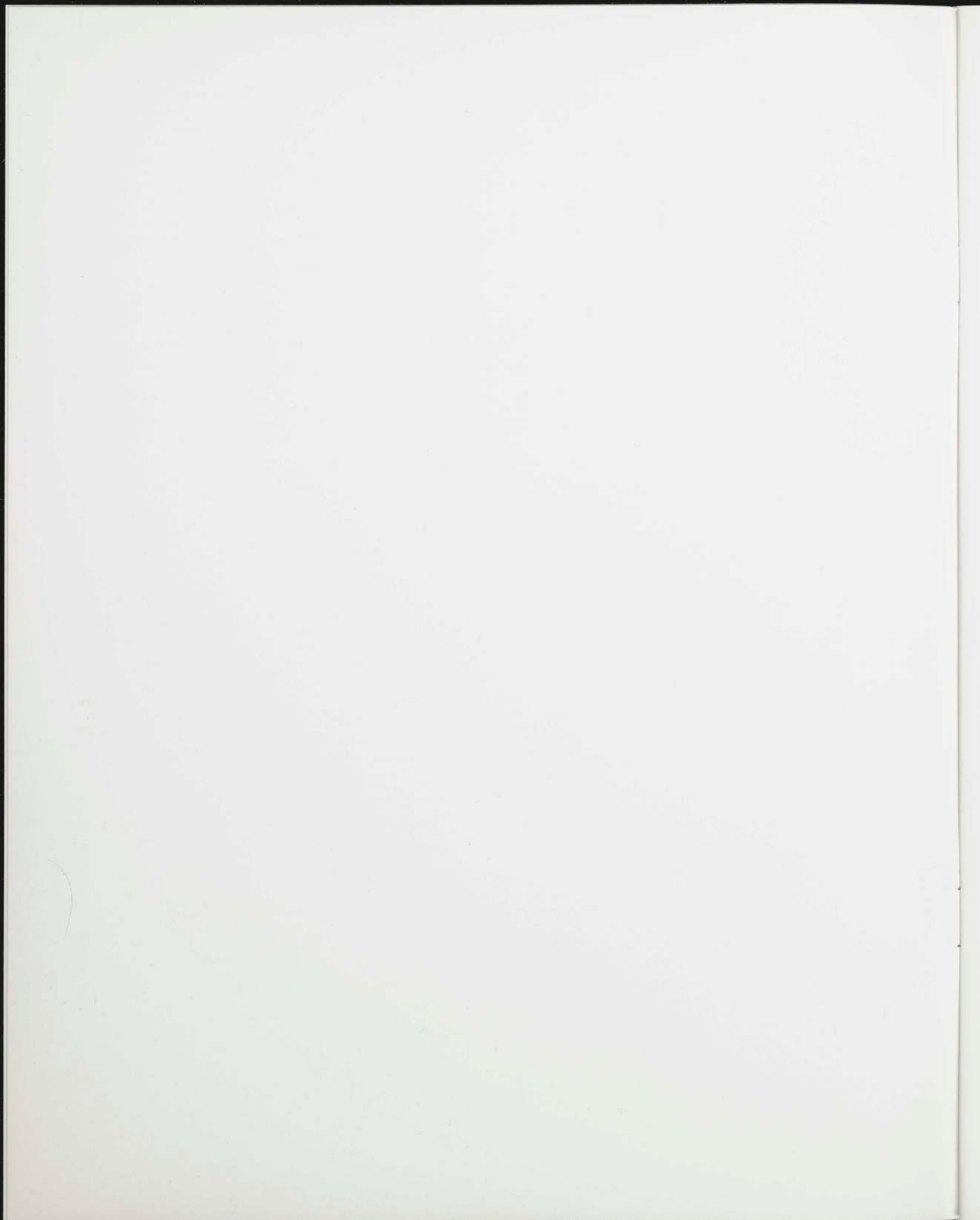
The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.

The image features a solid, textured yellow background with a mottled, organic pattern of darker and lighter yellow-green tones, resembling aged paper or a natural material. Centered horizontally in the upper half of the image is the word "KUITCA" in a large, bold, white, sans-serif typeface. The letters are thick and have a slight shadow, making them stand out against the textured background.

KUITCA







GUILLERMO

KUITCA

Organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Essay by Lynn Zelevansky

NEWPORT HARBOR ART MUSEUM

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The Guillermo Kuitca exhibition was organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, as part of its Projects series, which is made possible by grants from The Bohen Foundation, The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support for this exhibition was provided by the Embassies of the Argentine Republic in Washington, D.C., and The Hague.

The national tour of GUILLERMO KUITCA has been made possible with funding from the Embassy of the Argentine Republic, Washington, D.C.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, New York, New York

September 13-October 29, 1991

NEWPORT HARBOR ART MUSEUM, Newport Beach, California

February 7-March 29, 1992

THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART, Washington, D.C.

May 9-June 28, 1992

CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM, Houston, Texas

August 8-October 11, 1992

The Newport Harbor Art Museum wishes to extend thanks to Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, and Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporânea, Rio de Janeiro, for their generous support of this publication.

Published by the NEWPORT HARBOR ART MUSEUM for the national tour of the exhibition GUILLERMO KUITCA.

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Newport Harbor Art Museum

850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach, California 92660-6399

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Cover: Detail of UNTITLED, 1991 (cat. no. 4)

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FOREWORD

The recent history of Argentina is the matrix on which Guillermo Kuitca has based his meditations on history and loss. But Kuitca has driven that specific sensibility to give us work that grapples with the sense of longing and dislocation that afflicts humankind on a broader plane. With each new form of topography, he devises another metaphor for confronting alienation. His work becomes a kind of existential struggle which must be its own reward. • We are delighted with the opportunity to collaborate with our colleagues at The Museum of Modern Art on this catalog. Published to accompany the national tour of The Museum of Modern Art's Projects exhibition of Guillermo Kuitca's work, it provides complete documentation of the exhibition. • We would like to thank Lynn Zelevansky and The Museum of Modern Art for permission to use her essay, Sue Henger for supervising this publication, Peter Kosenko for his research, and Sandy O'Mara for design. We are grateful to Annina Nosei of Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, and Thomas Cohn of Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporánea, Rio de Janeiro, for their participation in and support of the publication project. Finally, our thanks go to Bruce Guenther for arranging to bring the exhibition to the Newport Harbor Art Museum and for coordinating the catalog.

Michael Botwinick
Director
Newport Harbor Art Museum



PROJECTS: GUILLERMO KUITCA

installed at

The Museum of Modern Art, New York,

September-October 1991

KUITCA

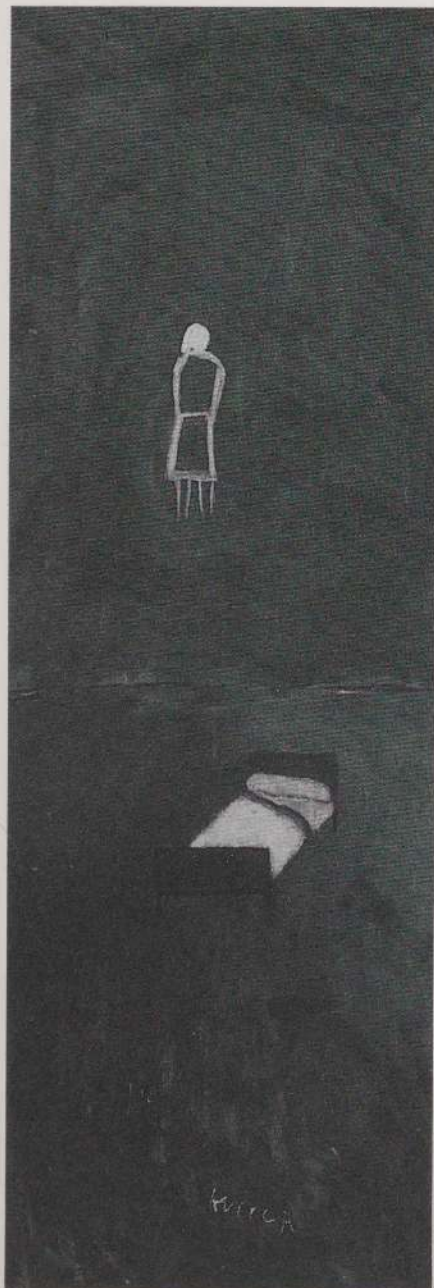
"...from the number of imaginable cities, we must exclude those whose elements are assembled without a connecting thread, an inner rule, a perspective, a discourse. With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else."

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*¹

Guillermo Kuitca's paintings of city and house plans, road maps and theater sets, are fraught with feelings of longing, passion, desire, and fear. The maps usually chart known locales, a slice of London, a piece of the Ukraine, but as the work has progressed, the identity of the areas depicted has become less crucial. Though the specificity of their references can still evoke a narrative informed by the viewer's sense of history, they also chart personal territories, promoting a kind of mind-travel. The romantic, theatrical melancholy that pervades Kuitca's work speaks of loss. The pain and terror of the dictatorship in his native Argentina has resulted in a diaspora, as many have left their homeland, and the artist communicates the ensuing nostalgia in a manner as Argentine as a tango. Kuitca's art also expresses a concern with the human body, a subject that has formed a leitmotif in European and American art of the last decade. His house plans, for example, serve as metaphors for the human organism, with all physical and psychological functions and frailties in evidence: they weep, bleed, defecate, have broken hearts, and suffer from AIDS. His work speaks simultaneously of the body and the universe, the spirit and the flesh, of turmoil and isolation, of Argentina and Europe. • Kuitca was born in 1961, the child of a psychoanalyst. His mother is a member of the extremely active

analytic community in Buenos Aires, and analytic theory and practice appear to have had a profound impact on his artistic vision. He began studying art as a child and, in his relatively brief career, has produced a surprisingly large amount of work. Around 1982, Kuitca began to develop the imagery he continues to use today. The paintings in the series *Nadie Olvida Nada* (*Nobody Forgets Anything*) often feature primitively rendered beds, the covers usually turned down, ready for occupancy, but empty. Sometimes a small, perhaps maternal female figure, back to the viewer, contributes to a feeling of isolation. Despite common associations with

birth, passion, and death, these clean and tightly made beds seem more like the resting places of childhood. They represent security, but also banishment from the mysteries of the adult world. For Kuitca, the bed is a site of emotional turmoil, alienation, and constriction. • During the early eighties, a time when he directed several experimental theater productions, Kuitca began to depict stage spaces in his paintings. These canvases frequently seem to represent the moment after violent action has taken place. We are left with the resulting devastation: overturned furniture, figures lying hurt or dead, emotional estrangement. If, in this work, the play represents life, it is not quotidian existence; rather, the theatrical framework serves to expose the drama that simmers beneath mundane events and associations. The paintings of stage sets also recall the dreams that return us to childhood, where spaces are huge because they are seen in relation to our smaller selves. • Kuitca, who extrapolates universal themes from personal experience, sometimes includes biographical references in his paintings. *El Mar Dulce* (*The Sweet Sea*), the title of one of his theatrical works, is also the name of a series of paintings of theater sets done between 1984 and 1987. The theme is Argentine immigration, and the title refers to the Rio de la Plata, the waterway by which Kuitca's grandparents arrived in Argentina around the turn of the century. The subject reappears in *Odessa*, one of the first road map paintings, which was executed in 1987. The work shows the area from which his family came, superimposed on an image he had used in the *El Mar Dulce* paintings—a baby carriage, out of control, tumbling down the Odessa steps. This image is taken from Sergei Eisenstein's classic film *Potemkin*. It is one of a series of events in the film that accompanies the Cossacks' massacre of the people of Odessa. At the end of the sequence, the baby lurches from the carriage to the ground. For Kuitca, the image came to symbolize an event from his own family history: his grandmother had accidentally spilled boiling liquid on one of her children, who died as a result. Kuitca redefines the baby carriage, the domain of the lost child, as the vessel that brings the family to the new world. Eisenstein's sequence also suggests the pangs, violence, and trauma of birth. In the case of Kuitca's ancestors, it was rebirth in a new land. • The house plans also appeared in 1987. They always show the same generic four-room apartment, most often isolated, but sometimes as a modular unit in a larger complex. The artist imagines this as the home of a family of three: mother, father, son. These



NADIE OLVIDA NADA, 1982

acrylic on canvas

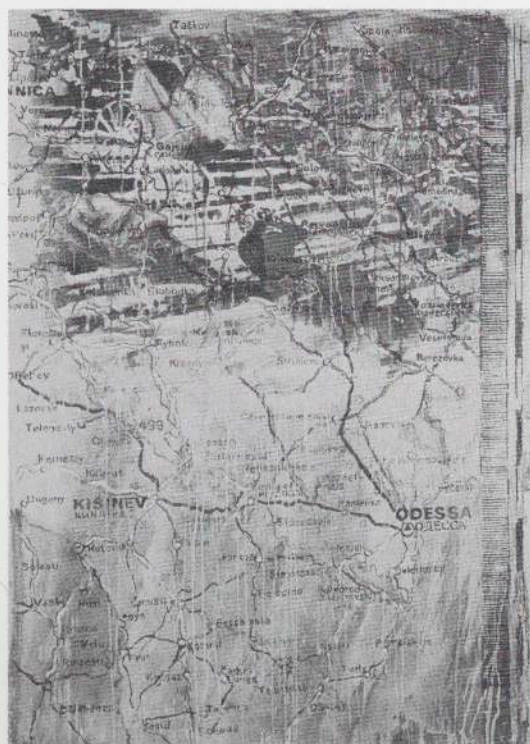
55 1/8 x 20 1/2 inches

Collection of the artist



1. FUTURE, 1988

are Kuitca's most flexible images. When rendered as three-dimensional, the plans become scale models, and, like the stage sets, some seem to represent the immediate aftermath of tumultuous action. In *Coming Home* (1990), the house plan becomes an airport landing strip seen from an airplane about to touch down. In *Oil Cross* (1988), it is elongated into the configuration of a cross. Thorns appear for the first time on the house plans, as do tears, hanging bodies, and bones. • Kuitca also produced his first city plans in 1987. By 1989, he was painting road maps on the mattresses of actual beds, inscribing the larger world onto a piece of apartment furniture; universes collide. The interweaving of different levels of reality, and the easy movement between them is essential to Kuitca's art. This fluidity is a connecting thread or inner rule as Calvino would have it. It is made possible by the artist's use of established, symbolic modes of inscription—the road map, city plan, floor plan—taken out of context and sufficiently abstracted that emotional associations to time and place survive, but literal meanings



ODESSA, 1987

acrylic on canvas

49 1/8 x 33 1/2 inches

Collection Stedelijk Museum,

Amsterdam

are sublimated. It is not surprising that Kuitca has recently made paintings of the heavens. Having covered all known territories, he now feels free to navigate in any realm he chooses. And this latest development may indicate a leap from an earthbound, existential vision to a personal cosmology. • The flexibility Kuitca enjoys is also possible because of an underlying theme, there regardless of the ostensible subject of a given painting: the physical and psychic state of the human organism. The artist makes the beds with painted mattresses into abused objects that recall the filthy detritus found on city garbage heaps. One's bed is the most personal and private of places, so it is especially unnerving that Kuitca's appear to carry "the discharge and waste of another's body."² With these works, the artist not only evokes the larger world represented by the road maps, and the private sphere of the apartment, he also makes reference to the human animal's basic functions, the micro-universe inside the body. A similar effect is achieved in a painting from 1990 with a blood-red background, which shows a detailed plan of an unidentified city. The pattern of streets, avenues, and squares is delineated by thorns, rather than conventional straight lines. Together, the thorns, blood-red color, and title, *Una Idea de una Pasion* (*An Idea of a Passion*), recall the physical torment of Christian martyrs. Some viewers may recognize the metropolis as San Francisco. This information is not crucial to an understanding of the work, but it adds dimension: in relation to a city so identified with the gay movement, one associates the reference to martyrdom with the AIDS epidemic. The painting's network of city arteries becomes a metaphor for the veins that run through the body. • The list of artists who have moved Kuitca is diverse: it includes painters Antoni Tàpies and Francis Bacon; latter-day Conceptualist Jenny Holzer; German performer Pina Bausch, whose work prompted Kuitca's involvement with theater in the early eighties and inspired a shift in the internal



2. HOUSE PLAN WITH TEAR DROPS, 1989

scale of his paintings to one that is theatrical and enormous; Gilbert and George, who use photographic mediums to create large and colorful works with homoerotic themes; and the writer David Leavitt. Perhaps the most salient of Kuitca's references is to Frida Kahlo. Kuitca saw her work for the first time in Madrid in the early eighties, and she became a major influence, providing him with a means of integrating indigenous Latin American and specifically Catholic imagery into his art. As a Jew, Kuitca initially felt that Catholic symbols were not his to use, and it took time for him to introduce them into his paintings. The main vehicle for the personification of his symbolic, abstract forms, they also make reference to much in the history of Western art, adding both emotional and intellectual range to his work. • Kuitca's paintings share a number of important formal and conceptual qualities with Kahlo's. Both artists have integrated biographical information into their work through the use of personal symbolism. Kuitca's baby carriage tumbling down a flight of steps may be an elliptical symbol compared with those



Frida Kahlo
SELF-PORTRAIT WITH CROPPED HAIR, 1940
oil on canvas
15 3/4 x 11 inches
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;
gift of Edgar Kaufman, Jr.

utilized by Kahlo, who often employed self-portraiture to make the content extremely specific. But Kuitca's biographical references are equally pointed. Like Kahlo, Kuitca frequently puts words into his paintings. He says that he chooses phrases because they repeat in his mind, developing a kind of resonance. In works from the series *Tres Noches* (*Three Nights*) (1985-86), Kuitca integrates the title into the painting, something Kahlo does in *Unos Cuantos Piquetitos* (*A Few Small Nips*) (1935) and other works. Both artists also include songs in their paintings, although there is a fundamental difference in the way they relate word and image. Kahlo's is the more literal sensibility, and in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, which records a defiant act on her part, the lyrics speak in the voice of a man who no longer cares for his lover since she has cut her hair. In comparison, *Strawberry Fields Forever*, which shows men, in what appears to be a concentration camp barracks, singing the Beatles' psychedelic lyrics, is enigmatic in the extreme. • Kahlo employs the same kind of theatricality as Kuitca, secularizing Catholic imagery to speak of her own devastating physical disabilities as a form of martyrdom. In *The Broken Column* (1944), we see inside her trussed torso to a broken classical column that is her spine. Nails protrude all over her body, and tears fall from her eyes. In Kuitca's 1989 treatment of a related theme, the artist shows a floor plan (a metaphor for the self, or perhaps the family) that is a maze of thorns, dripping blood. • Most of the artists of interest to Kuitca see the human body as an arena for personal exploration and the challenging of social taboos. Bausch, Bacon, and Gilbert and George are examples. And in *Lamentations*, a work that fascinates Kuitca, Jenny Holzer tells us: *I have a / hot hole / that was / put in me. / I can live / with it. / People made it / and use it / to get / to me. / I can hurt / it too but / usually I put / my thinking / there for / excitement.*³ • Surrealism provides a precedent in early modernism for the focus on sexuality, the body, and its functions,

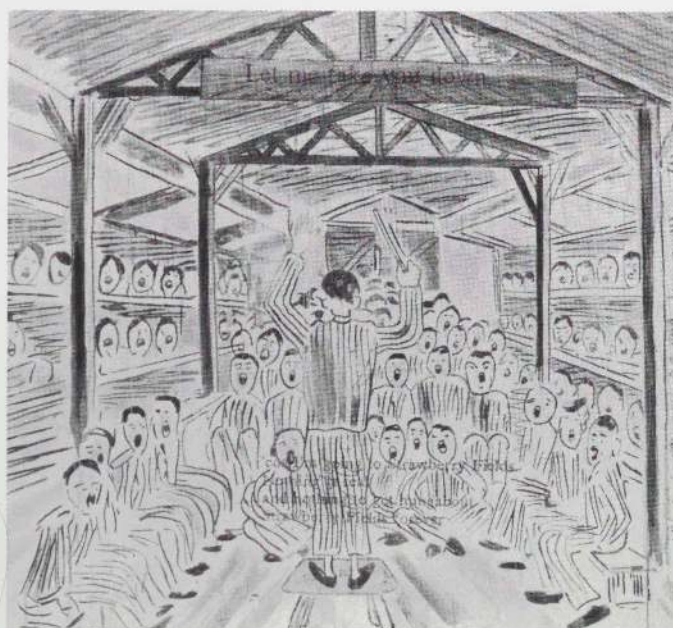


3. UNTITLED, 1990-91

so often found in the work of artists today.⁴ Kahlo, who graphically depicted her sense of physical humiliation, was, of course, a Surrealist discovery; André Breton claimed her as one of them.⁵ While Kuitca is not a Surrealist per se, he employs certain strategies akin to those of that group. Among them are a focus on the human body, a concomitant involvement with eroticism, and a psychologically oriented world view. In a work such as *Disposable House Plan* of 1990, which shows a floor plan defecating, the artist clearly attempts to transgress socially accepted boundaries; the same is true of the 1988 painting *Coming*, on which he has splattered what looks like semen. That he is open to utilizing associative techniques is evidenced in the method by which he chooses words for his paintings, and his works frequently have a dreamlike quality. Also, he uses his art analytically, as a means of understanding his own emotions. • For Kuitca, all tools and strategies are means to an end: the construction of a multifaceted art. His cities, roads, stage sets, and apartments conceal memories, fears, and desires. That his paintings are almost excessively dramatic, with titles like *House Plan with a Broken Heart*; that the play is a crucial metaphor, emphasizing this nearly artificial theatricality; that, in every map, plan, and set, Kuitca mimics symbolic representations of experience, only under-

score the sadness. It is a sentiment with which one can readily identify. Political exile and social estrangement are norms of our era. As time cuts us off from our past, and external pressures shape our lives, we become alienated from some part of ourselves, as well. Kuitca strives to express this state of being, and the struggle for connection through which we may overcome it.

Lynn Zelevansky
Department of Painting and Sculpture
The Museum of Modern Art, New York



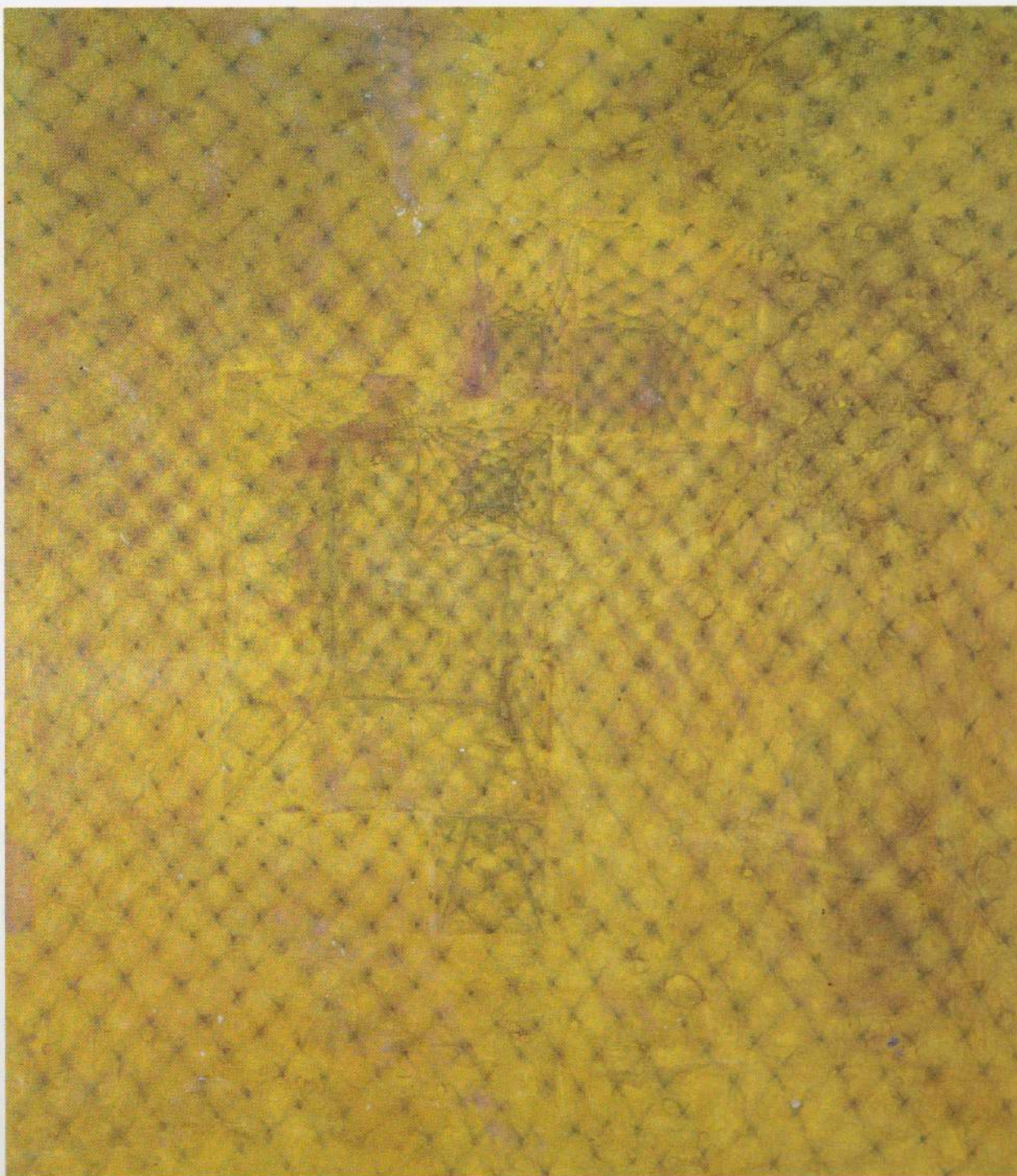
STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER, 1988

acrylic on canvas

37 3/8 x 41 1/4 inches

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Jorge Helft,

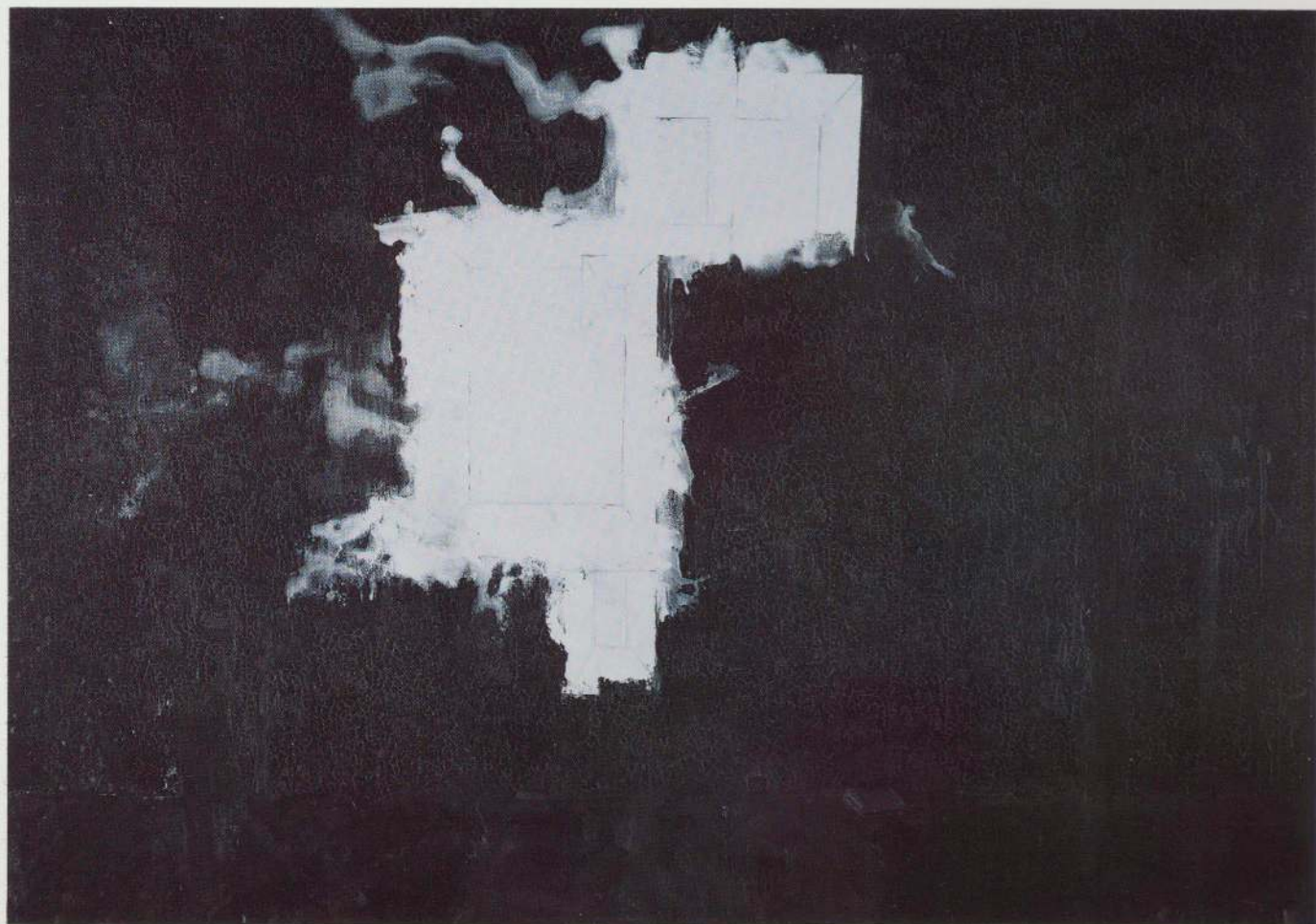
Buenos Aires



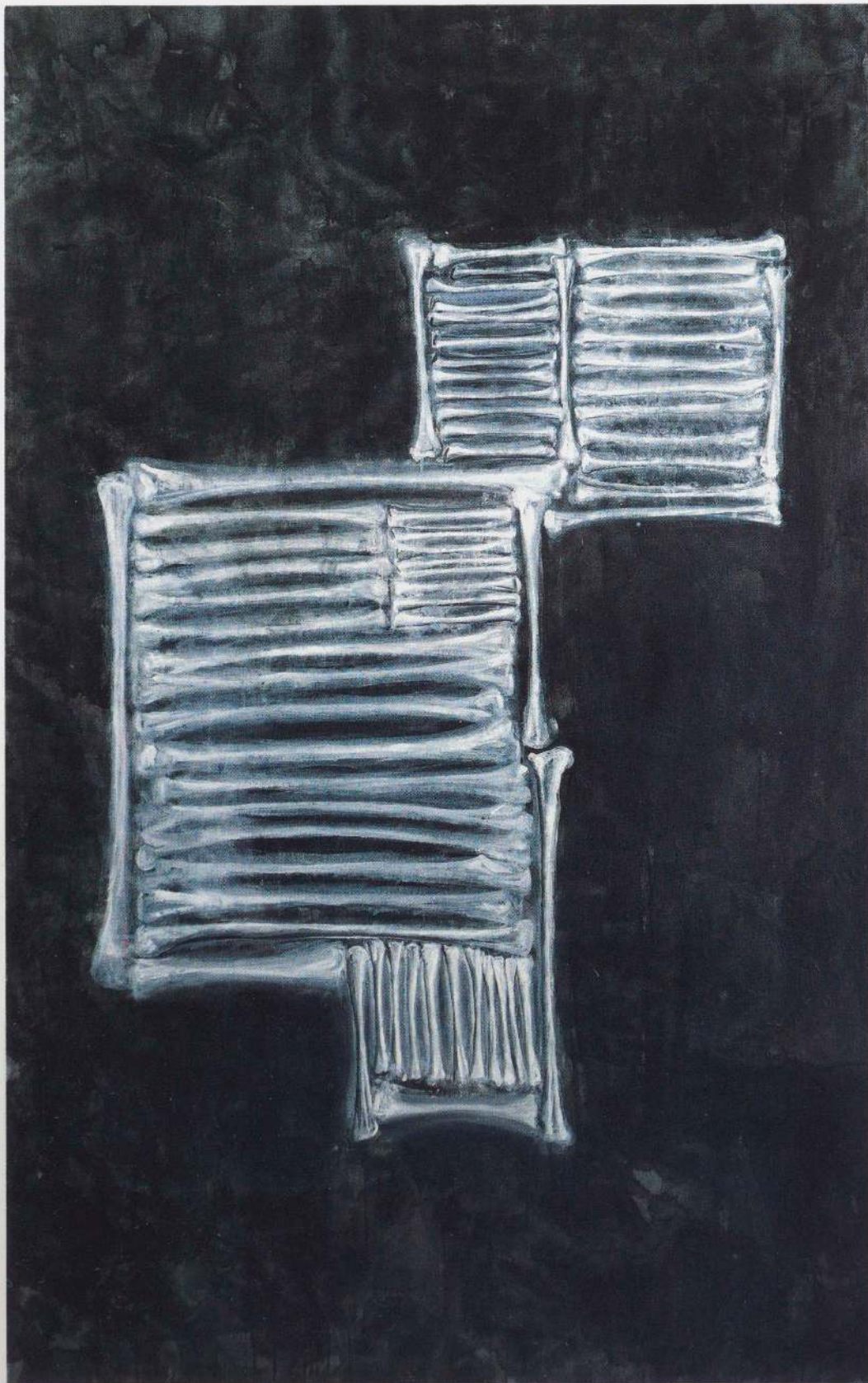
4. UNTITLED, 1991

ENDNOTES

1. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 43-44.
2. Charles Merewether, *Guillermo Kuitca* (Rome: Gian Enzo Sperone, December 1990), n.p.
3. Jenny Holzer, *Lamentations* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, n.d.), n.p.
4. There is a growing body of scholarship relating to the issue of women and Surrealism. The treatment of the female body by Surrealist artists and the role of female members of the movement are two areas of exploration. See, for example, Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Pornography and the Avant-Garde" in *The Poetics of Gender*, Nancy Miller, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), and Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991).
5. There has been disagreement as to whether or not Kahlo should be considered a Surrealist. It is possible that she developed her style independently. However, as is seen in works like *The Broken Column*, Surrealism seems to have had an impact on her following her exposure to it.



5. UNTITLED, 1991



6. UNTITLED, 1991



7. UNTITLED, 1991

CATALOG OF THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches (followed by centimeters in parentheses); height precedes width precedes depth.

1. FUTURE, 1988

acrylic on canvas

88½ x 62¾ (225 x 159)

Collection Jules and Barbara Farber, courtesy

Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam

2. HOUSE PLAN WITH TEAR DROPS, 1989

acrylic on canvas

79 x 63 (201 x 160)

Collection Angela Heizmann Gilchrist, New York

3. UNTITLED, 1990-91

mixed media

118 x 53½ (300 x 136)

Courtesy Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporânea,

Rio de Janeiro

4. UNTITLED, 1991

acrylic on canvas

90 x 78 (229 x 198)

Courtesy Annina Nosei Gallery, New York

5. UNTITLED, 1991

acrylic on canvas

78 x 111½ (198 x 29)

Courtesy Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporânea,

Rio de Janeiro

6. UNTITLED, 1991

acrylic on canvas

80¾ x 49¾ (204 x 125)

Courtesy Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporânea,

Rio de Janeiro

7. UNTITLED, 1991

acrylic on five children's beds

15 x 23½ x 47 each (38 x 60 x 119)

Courtesy of the artist and

Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporânea, Rio de Janeiro

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Born Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1961.
Lives and works in Buenos Aires.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1991 <i>Projects: Guillermo Kuitca</i>, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (brochure); traveled in 1992: Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (catalog)
Annina Nosei Gallery, New York (catalog)</p> <p>1990 Annina Nosei Gallery, New York
Kunsthalle Basel, Basel
Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam (catalog)
Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam (catalog)
Städtisches Museum, Mülheim
Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome (catalog)</p> <p>1989 Galería Atma, San José, Costa Rica
Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporánea, Rio de Janeiro</p> <p>1987 Galería Paulo Figuerado, São Paulo
Galería del Retiro, ARCO, Madrid (catalog)</p> <p>1986 Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporánea, Rio de Janeiro
Galería del Retiro, Buenos Aires</p> <p>1985 Elizabeth Franck Gallery, Knokke-Le Zoute, Belgium</p> <p>1984 Galería Del Retiro, Buenos Aires</p> <p>1982 Centro de Artes y Comunicación, Buenos Aires</p> <p>1980 Fundación San Telmo, Buenos Aires</p> <p>1978 Galería Christel K., Buenos Aires</p> <p>1974 Galería Lirolay, Buenos Aires</p> | <p>1987 <i>Arte Argentina 1810-1987</i>, Istituto Italo-Latinoamericano, Rome
<i>Art of the Fantastic, Latin-America, 1920-1987</i>, Indianapolis Museum of Art; The Queens Museum, New York; Center for the Fine Arts, Miami; Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City (catalog)
<i>La Nueva Imagen, dos Generaciones</i>, Galería Forum, Lima
<i>Argentina, Pintura Joven</i>, Galería Arte Actual, Santiago</p> <p>1985 <i>XVIII Bienal</i>, São Paulo, Brazil (catalog)
<i>Ideas y imágenes de la Argentina de hoy</i>, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City; Venezuela, Peru and Brazil (catalog)
<i>Del Pop Art a la Nueva Imagen</i>, Galería Ruth Benzacar, Buenos Aires; Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Montevideo
<i>Instalaciones</i>, Fundación San Telmo, Buenos Aires
<i>Latinoamericanos en Nueva York</i>, M13 Gallery, New York
<i>De la Nueva Figuración y Nueva Imagen</i>, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas (catalog)</p> <p>1984 Murals for the city of Buenos Aires
Centro Cultural Islas Malvinas, Buenos Aires
<i>Artistas en el papel</i>, Centro Cultural Ciudad de Buenos Aires
Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes Juan B. Castagnino, Rosario, Argentina; Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes, Tucuman, Argentina
<i>Libros de Artistas</i>, Centro Cultural Ciudad de Buenos Aires</p> <p>1983 <i>Intergrafik '83</i>, Berlin
<i>Artes visuales y democracia, La Nueva Imagen de los '80s</i>, Centro de Artes y Comunicación, Buenos Aires
<i>Realismo, Tres Vertientes</i>, Museo de America, Madrid; Maison de l'Amérique Latine, Paris; Moscow; Belgrade
<i>Sieben Maler aus Buenos Aires</i>, DAAD Gallery, Berlin
<i>Buenos Aires a través de sus artistas</i>, Cultural Ciudad de Buenos Aires; Akademie der Kunst, Berlin; International Union of Architects, XV Congress, Cairo</p> <p>1982 <i>Premio Braque</i>, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires
<i>Bienal Arche</i>, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires
<i>La Anavanguardia</i>, Estudio Giesso, Buenos Aires (catalog)
<i>Gruppo IIII</i>, Centro de Arte y Comunicación, Buenos Aires (catalog)
<i>La Nueva Imagen y "Pintura Fresca"</i>, Galería Buen Ayre, Buenos Aires</p> <p>1981 <i>25 años</i>, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires</p> <p>1980 <i>Premio Braque</i>, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires</p> |
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SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

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|---|---|
| <p>1992 <i>Currents 1992: The Absent Body</i>, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Documenta, Kassel</p> <p>1991 <i>Metropolis</i>, Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany (catalog)
<i>Landscape Paintings</i>, Annina Nosei Gallery, New York</p> <p>1990 <i>Group Show, Paintings</i>, Annina Nosei Gallery, New York
<i>Hommage to Van Gogh</i>, Poster Design, Netherlands (catalog)</p> <p>1989 <i>New Image Painting, Argentina in the Eighties</i>, America Society Art Gallery, New York (catalog)
<i>U-ABC</i>, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
Museum Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon (catalog)
<i>XX Bienal</i>, São Paulo (catalog and individual brochure)
Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporánea, Köln</p> <p>1988 <i>Salón Internacional Bienal</i>, San José, Costa Rica (catalog)</p> | <p>1982 <i>Premio Braque</i>, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires
<i>Bienal Arche</i>, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires
<i>La Anavanguardia</i>, Estudio Giesso, Buenos Aires (catalog)
<i>Gruppo IIII</i>, Centro de Arte y Comunicación, Buenos Aires (catalog)
<i>La Nueva Imagen y "Pintura Fresca"</i>, Galería Buen Ayre, Buenos Aires</p> <p>1981 <i>25 años</i>, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires</p> <p>1980 <i>Premio Braque</i>, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires</p> |
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- XVIII Bienal Internacional de Arte*. (São Paulo: Bienal São Paulo, 1985).
- Art of the Fantastic*. (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1987). Texts by Rosa Brill, Holliday Day, Hollister Sturges.
- XX Bienal Internacional de Arte*. (São Paulo: Bienal São Paulo, 1989).
- U-ABC*. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1989). Texts by Win Beren, Dorine Mignot, and Guillermo Whitelow.
- New Image Painting, Argentina in the Eighties*. (New York: Americas Society, 1989). Texts by Louis Crachos and Jorge Glusberg.
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- Metropolis*. (Berlin and New York: Martin Gropius Bau and Rizzoli International Publications, 1991). Edited by Christos Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal.
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