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Título: Walter Otero: un referente ineludible

Title: Walter Otero: A Leading Reference

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Resumen: El pasado mes de agosto se dio una ocasión idónea para entrevistar a uno de los galeristas más reconocidos de Puerto Rico: la revista *Modern Painters* incluía a Walter Otero Contemporary Art entre las 500 mejores galerías de arte del mundo.

Abstract: Last August was the ideal opportunity to interview one of the most renowned gallery owners in Puerto Rico: *Modern Painters* magazine included Walter Otero Contemporary Art among the 500 best art galleries in the world.

Palabras clave: Walter Otero, Walter Otero Contemporary Art, *Modern Painters*, galería de arte, mercado del arte, Laura Tíscar García

Keywords: Walter Otero, Walter Otero Contemporary Art, *Modern Painters*, Art gallery, Art market, Laura Tíscar García

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Walter Otero: A Leading Reference

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Walter Otero

There could be no better time to interview one of the most renowned art gallery directors in Puerto Rico. Last August, *Blouin Modern Painters* magazine included Walter Otero Contemporary Art among the 500 best art galleries in the world, an outstanding recognition achieved by only two Puerto Rican galleries in that same edition. The publication has placed the gallery director from Mayagüez in the spotlight and on the receiving end of an extraordinary amount of attention, unprecedented in the history of the local art market. After the well-deserved celebrations and the expected acknowledgments, we spoke with the recipient of this honor and began looking back at how his career took shape.

Laura Tíscar: We can imagine the tremendous efforts involved when you were a young man beginning your career as an assistant to painter Arnaldo Roche, for whom you are now an agent. However those efforts are not specifically related to the skills embodied by a renowned gallery director. What are the financial, social, and emotional tools, in short, the resources that a gallery director must practice in his profession in order to familiarize and captivate the foreign collector with Puerto Rican art?

Walter Otero: As a gallery director, you try to convey everything you know about the craft of artistic creation to collectors, helping to open their minds without overburdening them. In my opinion, I always try to educate, although my role is to sell, because it is much more effective if we give the relevant tools to collectors. I offer them literature and organize trips so that they understand what they are doing. This doesn't only apply to collecting for hobby or for investment. I love when collectors pour their hearts into it, and I enjoy it even more when they get goosebumps because an acquired piece of work is likely to gain financial value.

LT: Along the same lines, and as a connoisseur of the entire structure of the Puerto Rican art scene, how could the function of the gallery director be expanded to promote both international interest and local development so that the Puerto Rican artist is relevant on a global level?

WO: You see, everything has to do with contacts. My first years in the art world were all about public relations, introducing myself outside of Puerto Rico. During that time, I invested a lot of money in advertising in art magazines in order to create a brand, and I also took advantage of the opportunity to work with an internationally recognized artist, such as Arnaldo Roche — accompanying him in his daily activities and making the most of the chance to build relationships with museum directors, curators, and gallery directors... Back in Puerto Rico, I started networking, and there was a snowball effect. On the other hand, the phenomenon of Art Basel has been of great help to the island's market — I saw it as a window, a springboard for internationalizing artists both commercially and in the realm of museology. My mentality is like that of Leo Castelli, the father of gallery directors and discoverer of such major artists as Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg. It teaches you the prototype of a gallery director, someone who protects the artist and gives him tools. You don't have money? Here's the money. You don't have an education? We will give you an education. This vision is the tool that helps you to internationalize the local market and to generate the next wave of cultural heritage for Puerto Rico.

LT: You once defined the concept of the gallery as a “center of dialogue for collectors to publicize the work and careers of the artists they represent.” At the same time, you acclaimed the profile of collectors who, unlike mere investors, “follow the career of the artists, travel to events and exhibitions, visit studios, and converse with them, establishing another type of relationship.” This leads us to reconsider the possibilities of the artistic triangle — white cube / gallery director / collector — in this day and age. Is the gallery a space for discussion that gives rise to new expressions in art, an enclave for the emergence of new discourses among the members of the artistic sphere?

WO: The white cube is like that happy medium, that ring in which one connects the collector with the work while trying to create an artistic space. In Puerto Rico, you have to go the extra mile — collectors prefer more privacy, so they want you to go to their place, sit down in their home, and bring the work to them. That extra mile also has to do with making the collector feel like a part of the gallery, the artist, and that artistic development. I understand that having the space is pretty helpful, but then one has to give a little extra depending on the target market: while the American customer is fairly objective and practical — “What do you have? I like it, or I don’t like it” — Latin American clients are more anecdotal. They like to move slowly and to feel like they are making history. Visiting the artist’s studio is something that everyone loves, seeing the artist’s tools and his or her brush dipped in paint. However, the way that the art system works has much more to do with the name, the brand ... it’s sad, but there are collectors who don’t even look at the work; they just care about the name. That part bothers me, because they’re not looking at how the work is manufactured or whose face is behind it, and the artist suffers because of this kind of thing. Some collectors don’t think they can hurt the artist when, after owning a work for only five years, they decide to sell it because they don’t like it anymore or its cash value has doubled; especially when the artist took the time to explain the work to them personally and share personal anecdotes with them that the gallery director wouldn’t have known. When collectors sell a work because — forgive me, but — they just redid the living room and it doesn’t match anymore, the artist gets frustrated. That’s why artists sometimes keep their distance.



Photo: walterotero.com

LT: Your commitment to the Puerto Rican artist is more than obvious. You deal with a selection of mostly Puerto Rican artists, but sometimes you exhibit works that are outside of your usual realm, as we saw recently with *Polaroids*, by Andy Warhol, or with other masters like Anselm Kiefer or Bill Viola. To what do you attribute this foray into these other projects and, on the other hand, what are your current interests in promoting the initiatives of emerging artists? At first impression, what are the factors that catch your eye when you look at the work of a potential emerging artist?

WO: We are seeing much greater movement of international artists in the gallery because there is clearly a hunger for international art; locally there are few collectors, and there comes a time where you have to offer the public other alternatives. It's not that you have fewer Puerto Rican artists — you reach a point when all these artists already figure heavily among what's already been sold to Puerto Rican collectors, and you can't sell any more until those artists present new themes or works. There is also the need to exhibit artists of international renown to strengthen the local art scene and promote art education. There are many people who don't even know who Andy Warhol is! And yes, I work with a group of Puerto Rican artists, although I am a bit careful when it comes time to exhibiting an emerging Puerto Rican artist in the gallery. I love art over the long term, and if I sell you a piece by a young artist because I see a future in him or her but tomorrow he or she decides to call it quits, how do I look to the collector? The artist establishes a relationship where we walk hand in hand, side by side; it is not a relationship of hanging a picture on the wall, handing them cash, and saying goodbye. For me, sales are very easy: I enjoy the pre-process, and even more so when the artist shares an idea with me and in two months I can see it captured on canvas.



Walter Otero

LT: In this day and age, professional partnerships are crucial to the visibility of the sphere in which we perform. Many would think that the presence of numerous art exhibition scenes on the island is synonymous with competition, but this same seed has stimulated a strong presence of Puerto Rican art on the global stage, reinforcing the visibility of local artists and, likewise, of the country as a destination for art lovers. With which entities does WOCA associate itself to transform a mere exhibition space into the source through which Puerto Rican art develops?

WO: First of all, I have very good relationships and communications with my colleagues and with other galleries. I'd love there to be more galleries because, competitiveness aside, sometimes the responsibility falls to a single gallery once it's been hailed the best in Puerto Rico. I have colleagues who are also doing serious things, but they are lesser known because I have the know-how, contacts, or purchasing power. I always try to keep myself and my team busy — that is part of the responsibility of being a gallery director — and I get involved with institutions whether they are public, semi-private, NGOs, non-profits ... I identify which entities have funds to sponsor projects because the artist is not aware of that, and I am in constant communication with entities and curators, not necessarily speaking, but sending them information, leading them to an artist's studio...

LT: What qualities define San Juan as an indispensable artistic enclave to the collector?

WO: As was noted in the publication *Art Cities of the Future*, we need to forget New York, Paris, and London, these are the twelve cities that are going to impact the art world for years to come. And San Juan is one of them. In this city, serious art is being created by serious artists who already enjoy international renown. My home base is in San Juan because it is the capital of Puerto Rico, and powerful art movements happen here, but my target is New York, and I would like to have a space there in which to create a tighter bond between Puerto Rico and New York. The socio-political situation in which we live — since we are a U.S. territory and at the same time, we don't have power over electing a president but he certainly has power over us — has become an inspiration for producing art, and many artists work off this idea.

After two decades of an intense career in the art world, Otero has become an undisputed pacesetter in the context of the market, both locally and internationally, as is evidenced by his designation among the 500 best art galleries according to the aforementioned trade publication. At the end of the day, his generous welcome and scintillating conversation represent gestures that are also worthy of recognition.

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