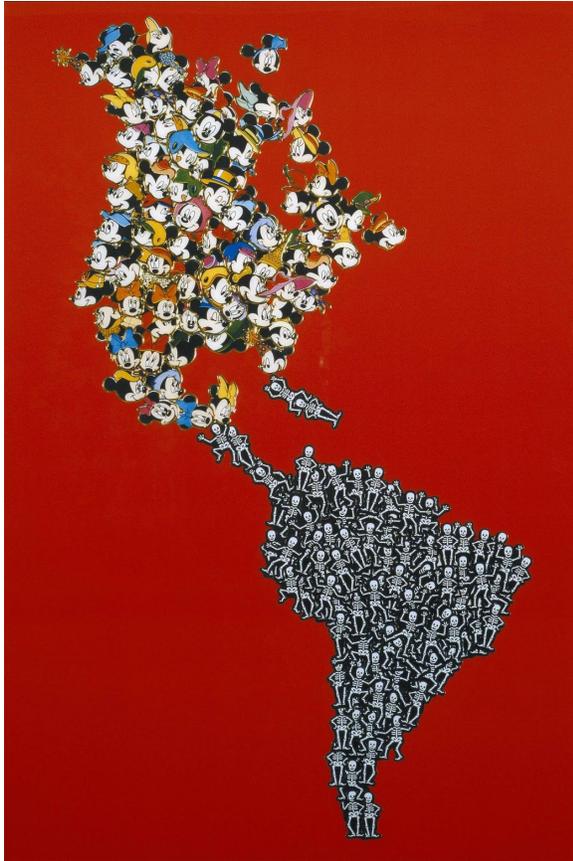


A CLOSER LOOK

Nelson Leirner



Nelson Leirner (Brazilian, 1932-2020)

Untitled, from the series, *Right You Are If You Think You Are*, 2003

Color photograph mounted on aluminum

SBMA, Museum purchase with funds provided by Larry and Astrid Hammett, 2004.1.1-2.

Themes

- Identity
- Borders + Boundaries
- Colonization
- Pop Culture

About the Artist

Nelson Leirner was born in São Paulo, Brazil in 1932. He became known for creating artworks that critiqued consumer culture and high art, often by wittily incorporating popular imagery and graphics.

A dedicated art professor throughout his career, he is recognized for teaching a new generation of contemporary Brazilian artists.

Overview

Nelson Leirner’s works of art from 2003 remind us that outdated modes of thinking about the Americas no longer hold. Using cartography or maps as a starting point, Leirner shows us the fallacy of believing we can contain the complex reality of “America” within geographic boundaries. Not only does he get us to question the artificial distinctions of maps and borders, he also pokes fun of our popular conceptions of what being “American” means. Using icons from pop culture like Mickey Mouse and the calaveras or skeletons popular in Latin American folk culture, Leirner invites us to explore what those popular symbols stand for in today’s world of fluid borders and globalization.

When Leirner flips the images (putting the skeletons in North America and the Miceys in South America) he is flipping our sensibilities as well and getting us to see that the definition of America or what is an American is all a matter of perception. Leirner’s methods of art-making extend from hand-applied stickers to digital photography, his work transcending geography and chronology to propose a new identity.

Watch

In this five-minute video, listen to Nelson Leirner discuss his life and work:
<https://www.artnexus.com/en/videos/5e73895b601c902182ecd77b>

Research: Maps

Looking at historical maps provides a clue to how various societies have viewed the world. Analyzing borders and boundaries tells us how societies, including our own, view themselves in relation to the rest of the world. The role of maps in art, poetry, and literature tells us that maps can reflect a society’s basic beliefs and emotions.

Compare and contrast versions of maps from the United States and South America from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Can you trace developing or disappearing borders to historical events such as the Louisiana Purchase, the War of the Pacific, or the Spanish-American War? Look at examples of maps where California is seen as an island or where vast parts of the globe remain uncharted—where even sea monsters are included in the maps’ design.

What connection do you think Leirner is making to maps’ reliability? Can maps be emotional as well as factual?

How might you map Santa Barbara as a reflection of your own knowledge and experience? What would be most prominent? Least? Would you emphasize the division between east side and west side? What would you leave out all together as if it didn’t exist?

Activity: Symbolism

Leirner uses Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, and the calaveras to suggest qualities of North and South America. Why do you think he chose those particular images? Do they remain fixed in one place? Why not? What do you think their movement suggests (immigration, trade, colonization, etc)? Why doesn't he mix them together?

Television and advertising send images around the world so that they are recognized across cultures. Can you list some other symbols or logos that might be instantly recognized almost anywhere? What is positive about this fluidity? What is negative? Does the flow of culture go both ways—north to south and south to north? List some examples of each.



Activity: Re-Imagining

If the two panels represent a kind of chronological vision of the Americas, what would a third panel include? **Create your own third panel or write a description of what it would include.**

How would you rearrange the icons on Leirner's map to represent your own vision of the Americas? If you could replace these icons with different symbols what would you choose?



