

The Museum at FIT FASHION CULTURE Podcast
Melissa Marra-Alvarez in Conversation with Tanya Melendez-Escalante

Recorded Wednesday, May 31, 2023

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City.

[UPBEAT MUSIC CONTINUES]

[VALERIE STEELE]

Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

[MUSIC CONTINUES]

[VALERIE STEELE]

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[MUSIC CONTINUES TO FADE OUT AND TRANSITIONS INTO A SLOWER SONG]

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

My name is Tanya Melendez-Escalante and I am Senior Curator of Education and Public Programs at The Museum at FIT.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

And my name is Melissa Marra-Alvarez and I'm the Curator of Education and Research here at The Museum at FIT. Together, we are the co-curators of *¡Moda Hoy! Latin American and Latinx Fashion Design Today*.

[SONG CONTINUES TO FADE OUT]

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

So, Melissa, remember when we did that research trip to Mexico City with Liz Way? We were exploring the food and fashion of Mexico City.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

I do.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And we had this cab ride where we were all really excited about what we saw, what we ate, and we thought, “Wouldn’t it be fabulous if we had an exhibition on LatinX and Latin American fashion?”

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

I do remember that. I feel like we were all kind of giddy and really excited about this trip. We had had a couple of days by then, of visiting designers, visiting studios, soaking in the culture, the food, which was so delicious. And it was just in general, like such a fulfilling experience that... and the designers that we saw while just in Mexico alone were so varied.

And yes, I think that was the moment where really the impetus for this, like doing this exhibition *now*, came about.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

And I also think, Tanya, you know, we knew we wanted to do this exhibition and then we had this plan to do this publication around the exhibition. And I think one of the, you know, one of the things I’ve been kind of meditating on was how much – like how wonderful doing the research for that book was and how much it really also kind of lent to shaping the way the exhibition took place.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Absolutely. There were so many things that we discovered through the book, but also we had that symposium, which was a new experiment that the museum did of having a symposium before the exhibition actually is completed and listening to our colleagues’ research, but also listening to the audience members. The questions they had, the information they wanted to come across within an exhibition was really eye opening to rethink what our exhibition needed, not only to convey and include, but also the way that it needed to connect with people.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Yes. And that was really, I think, just the first step in kind of involving... getting community feedback, right?

And involving our community and their thoughts in their opinions in this exhibition so that we can kind of get multiple voices, multiple perspectives, that we can then show through that through *¡Moda Hoy!* when it opened.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Right? It’s a way of making the curatorial process a little bit more horizontal, which can be very challenging. Trying to involve the feedback and the ideas or the expectations of many people is not an easy task.

Yeah. I mean, when I would look at the work of designers, I feel that a little bit of that feedback was always in the back of my head.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Yeah, absolutely!

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Yeah, would that... would this fulfill their expectations or would they find interest in this? Like they were really very much part of our thinking through the curation of the exhibition, and the voices of our advisory committee were actually also really important. They were very helpful in reaching out to certain designers that maybe they knew and we didn't, or they were really supportive and champions of our exhibition. But also they helped us see gaps, information that we were missing or that we needed to explore in more depth. And so, I'm very grateful because I think they made our exhibition so much stronger.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Super grateful. And I think every personality ... person/personality ...that was part of our advisory committee, from Nina Garcia to Ruben Toledo to Regina Root, Aldo Araujo, all of them brought sort of a unique perspective and really helped us kind of consider things, whether it was from a PR perspective or from an academic perspective. It was just a lot of fun, but also really educational.

So Tanya, I think... thinking back on the beginning of the exhibition and how we were planning everything out, I think one of the most interesting conversations that we had at the very, very start was around the term "Latinx" and what we were going to name the show, the book, how people wanted to be – what names they wanted to be identified by: Latino, Latina, Hispanic, Latinx. And so that was really the very beginning of understanding the complexity of this topic as well.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Mm hmm, yes, and no. Well, you know, you have this whole use of the language, right? There's these categories that exist in the United States to refer to people of Latin American heritage that are very, very exclusive to this country.

And so the conversation was also about how we have – all the designers or the people from the Latin American countries will refer to themselves as their nationalities versus our colleagues in the United States who might be originally from other countries or who might have been born here, but have a Latin American heritage. And the word Latinx is very contentious, and some people embrace it, other people reject it.

And it was a super insightful exercise. We did a survey within FIT to try to figure out how people self identified. We read a lot of literature. There was this definition of Latinx from a catalog from El Museo del Barrio, remember?

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

That's right, I remember.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Where they said that Latinx was more encompassing not only of gender diversity, but also ethnic and racial diversity. And we felt really strongly that that aligned with our vision within The Museum at FIT.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Exactly.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Right? Where we want to embrace diversity and different... I don't know, life experiences within our museum.

And so in that respect, we felt that – and with the feedback from from the survey, where people had no issue. I mean, some had issue–

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Well, everybody had a preference. But then at the end of the day, everybody said that they didn't think... while they might have preferred one term over another, they didn't matter. They were okay with being called any of those terms.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Any of the above. And so we were like, well, this is the most inclusive of difference term. And so that's how we selected Latinx.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Right, and you know, the other thing that struck me, I think when we were doing the survey also was just this idea of, you know, how people identify and how personal that is, right? And you know, there is never – there may never be one term that everybody is going to be happy with.

But you can try as best you can to find a term that includes, or that is the most inclusive.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Well, and I think in a sense, in the title we used the word Latinx. But the truth is that in conversation or even in the analysis of the exhibition, we use a variety of words, right?

Some designers describe themselves as Chicanos or as Nuyoricans or as Mexican or Venezuelan or Latin American. And the truth is that we embrace all these different– because in the end it is a matter of self-definition. And one of the arguments that we make in the exhibition is that there is porosity not only in interests and in practice, but also in the understanding of the self, right. I can be like, “I am Mexican” but I also consider myself Latinx. I

could even say, well, I am close to my Chicano colleagues, right? We have a group of Chicanos in the exhibition and I feel very welcomed by them. And so, I am one but I am many.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Many, yes, exactly.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Mmhmmm. For me, it is so exciting to be able to include many countries of Latin America in the exhibition, but also the diaspora of Latin Americans to the United States. I think that the region is really large. It's – in Spanish, it would be el continente Americano. In English, it's North America, South America and I guess Central America?

[MELISSA LAUGHS]

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

But the reality is that we have so many places, right? And to the opening reception, for example, we have designers that came from Peru, from Bolivia, from...

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Colombia.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Colombia, Mexico, a scholar who came here from Chile, people who came from L.A.. And so that is to me, that's so important that we are such a large region. And yet, we were able to coalesce in one exhibition.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

In one exhibition... and last night, we had our opening reception, right? And we had this party, and it was so nice to see all of these different designers from so many different countries, some of whom had never met each other before, all commingling in one space and networking and sharing ideas. And everybody was so excited. I think the energy was just so much fun, but also so invigorating, right?

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Yes. And designers were really happy to see themselves placed side by side with other great designers in Latin America. And it was very heartwarming to see the mutual admiration of different designers who are all really invested in their practice and being celebrated as a group.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

As a community! It was a bringing together of this community of designers. And I'm – I just enjoyed that whole aspect of the opening and sitting back and kind of watching that unfold.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

So, Melissa, we have eight sections in the exhibition, plus an introductory section on the 20th century, and I really love the way you explain how these eight sections came about.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Well, it was part of our curatorial process, right? We were sitting down and we were saying, “Okay, now we've got a proposal approved. How are we going to sit down and approach this show?”

And that's one of the first steps, right, that you do when you're curating an exhibition.

And so we had options, right? We could have done it chronologically. We could have done it geographically. But we decided that we had wanted to do it thematically because organizing the exhibition thematically allowed us to show...kind of not the diversity of talent, right? But also these underlying ideas that link them, that link their work together and these like, these nuances that brought them together. And so that was part of our mission, right, for this exhibition, which was to show that there wasn't just one monolithic Latin American style, but that the region or designers of Latin American heritage, there's so much creativity among them, and that the designs that they're doing are so rich and so layered. And the thematic approach for us, I think we agree that it really allowed that to shine and come through.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

I totally agree. And I think when we were thinking of where to place each section in the exhibition, another thing that we discovered is that there's a lot of connection between different sections of the exhibition, right?

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Yes.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Many themes or many ideas that are floating in the work of designers can that a designer could fit in multiple sections and a garment by a designer could be read from different lenses.

And so, for example, we had indigenous heritage and popular culture, one across from each other, and they could seem in theory so different, but they are both about identity. And identity not through the lens of fine art, but identity through the everyday.

[MELISSA CHUCKES]

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Yes.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And then had the section on Gender across from Art, and they share so much, right? In both sections, for example, we have videos of performance art pieces in museums done by fashion designers, which you would think they might have very little to do. But actually gender is very important in art practice, and art really educates the way that we think about gender and all the other sections like politics, where our designers in Latin America can be very brave and very bold in how they address matters of politics. But some of the ideas that they put forward there are also related to indigeneity or to sustainability. They are all so intertwined. And sustainability, I think, is one of the sections in the exhibition that really touches so many others, right?

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Yes, and I especially love the kind of crossover between the Indigenous heritage section and the sustainability section. And again,

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And craftsmanship.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

And craftsmanship, exactly. And, you know, last night I was talking to **Rio Review of Gypsy Sport**, and he was telling us about the red Michael Jordan jersey gown that we have in the show. And he said, "Oh, well you know that that gown is made? Like, I don't remember exactly, but like almost 80% from recycled materials."

And I was like, "I had no idea about that."

And so he was like, "Yes, it could have been in Sustainability!" Or, then he was saying that he was really happy to be featured in the Popular Culture section. But I think that's just a perfect example of how much these categories, you know, how we're defined... you know, we're looking at their work through this one lens. But then there is this malleability.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Yes. Well, and we shouldn't forget our section on Elegance, because I think elegance is a word that's used a lot to refer to Latin American fashion.

But I think that Latin American designers are very cheeky about their use of the word elegance.

[MELISSA CHUCKLES]

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Elegance..

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And so what we tried to do was really tap into these very different ways of approaching

the idea of elegance and how for some it's something to be celebrated, and for others it's something to be discussed and to maybe criticized or be critical of, and present new ways in which elegance can be understood.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Yes. And I guess that also makes me think of the Craftsmanship section, which wasn't initially... You know, when we had initially thought of our themes, it wasn't in our first round of themes.

And then as we were kind of teasing out these ideas and we were looking at designers' work, we were listening to different speakers talk about Latin American fashion, you know, this idea of craftsmanship kept coming up and, you know, it was there in Sustainability, in Elegance, in Indigenous heritage. But we didn't have a single section about that. And then we said, "No, let's stop. Let's pull this out and make this its own part of the exhibition."

And so that was a little bit of sort of how everything unfolded, right?

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Yeah, well, I think for Latin Americans, our craft heritage is very important. And there's always this conversation about how we really should value it the way that the French value couture. And we were... that's part of what we are doing in the exhibition. We are reminding everyone [of] the extraordinary and exquisite work that comes from the hands of artisans in Latin America.

[MELISSA MARRA-ALVAREZ]

Yes, Yes. That is the equivalent of the labor and the skill and the time that that would be a couture piece. It is couture. It is couture in its own right.

[SLOW MUSIC FADES IN]

[MUSIC CONTINUES TO PLAY, THEN FADES OUT]

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Hi, this is Tanya Melendez-Escalante. Thank you for listening to our Fashion Culture Podcast episode. This conversation was recorded just before the exhibition ¡Moda Hoy! opened. While the exhibition is now closed, you can explore the themes and designers mentioned in this episode on our past exhibitions page on The Museum at FIT's website. There, you will also find recordings about designers and objects featured in the exhibition. Links are available in the show notes.

[MUSIC FADES BACK IN AND ENDS]