

# GALERIE LELONG

528 West 26th Street New York, NY 10001

T 212.315.0470 F 212.262.0624

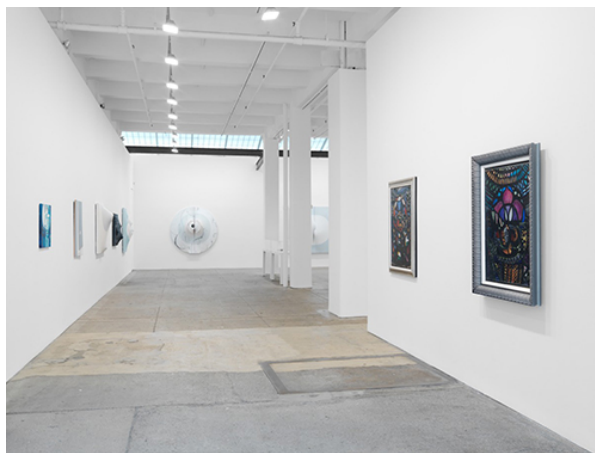
[www.galerielelong.com](http://www.galerielelong.com)

13 rue de Téhéran 75008 Paris

[www.galerie-lelong.com](http://www.galerie-lelong.com)

**Brooklyn Rail**  
**May 3, 2016**  
**by Laila Pedro**

## INGRID ELLIOTT with Laila Pedro



Installation View: *Dialogos constructivistas en la vanguardia cubana*. April 28 - June 25, 2016. Galerie Lelong, New York. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

Ingrid Elliott is an independent scholar and curator specializing in Cuban art. In 2013, she co-curated the exhibition *Amelia Peláez: The Craft of Modernity* at the Pérez Art Museum in Miami. This month, she collaborated with Galerie Lelong on *Diálogos constructivistas en la vanguardia cubana* [Constructivist Dialogues in the Cuban Vanguard], an exhibition that offers an alternative take on modern art in Cuba, seen through the lens of three generations of Cuban women artists: Amelia Peláez (1896 – 1968), Loló Soldevilla (1901 – 71), and Zilia Sánchez (b.1926). Elliott walked Laila Pedro through the show as it was being installed. Their conversation touched on the cosmopolitan nature of 20th-century art history, the enduring influence of Russian constructivism, women artists as role

models to each other, and the aesthetic strategies and artistic affinities that persist across generations.

**Laila Pedro (Rail):** I see the twinned and mutually dependent themes of cosmopolitanism and exile conceptually framing this show. You've chosen an interesting historical point of departure: the impact of Russian Constructivism on Amelia Peláez, which then metamorphoses, evolves, and is reinterpreted by Loló Soldevilla and Zilia Sánchez. So let's start at the beginning. I'm very curious as to why Russian constructivism attracted Cuban artists at this point in time. After the revolution of 1959 and the close, dependent relationship with the Soviet Union, which is both ideological and cultural, it is obvious why. But before, many artists were looking to France, Italy, or Germany for aesthetic inspiration.

**Elliott:** It's about exile, right? After the Russian Revolution of 1917, many Russian artists relocated to Paris—that was the option that was available to them if they didn't want to participate in Russian constructivism the way it was evolving, which was primarily about workers creating an industrial art. So there is this relationship in the 1910s between Russia and Paris, and Russia and the Futurists. Artists like Aleksandra Ekster were traveling frequently between Russia or Ukraine and Paris and Italy. Ideas were circulating as these artists traveled. By the way, Loló Soldevilla's first teacher in Paris was also Russian, the Cubist Sculptor Ossip Zadkine, with whom she studied in 1949.

**Rail:** That ties back to the other primary theme: the cosmopolitan nature of working in this way. The word “exile” in the context of early-20th-century Paris has yet another angle because there were so many kinds of exiles who went to Paris. Not only the Russians, but black Americans, who could be considered exiles from Jim Crow; and then this second wave of exile of Cubans in the second half of the 20th century, which meant something else. The show really engages that last dimension, because the third and most recent artist, Zilia, left.

**Elliott:** The question we started with was, “What is Zilia’s relationship to Cuba?” She left in 1962. She graduated art school in 1947, and exhibited a little bit in the end of the ‘40s. Her career really took off in the ‘50s, and in that time and milieu, Amelia was the leading artist of her generation. At the same time, Loló and the geometric painters, and the gestural, abstract painters known as Los Once [The Eleven] were shocking Havana audiences with abstraction. This is where Zilia was beginning as an artist. It turns out she exhibited with Loló, with Amelia, with the gestural painters, with the geometric painters. When you look at her work, you see she’s engaging with all of these tendencies. There is the influence of the early vanguard that Amelia represents—something specific to Amelia’s practice and to other artists of that cohort—but she’s also very much engaged with geometric abstraction. So, we started with Zilia, who has been relatively unknown. She exhibited in New York in the ‘60s, but she didn’t get a lot of traction; she moved to Puerto Rico in 1970 and didn’t exhibit in New York again until 2013. Now that she is 90 years old, her career is blossoming.

**Rail:** It seems to be happening quite a bit with women artists. Carmen Herrera has a show opening soon, too—she had to wait a long time.

**Elliott:** [Laughter.] She sure did! I’m really glad she’s here to enjoy it.

**Rail:** Should we look at the work?

**Elliott:** Let’s do that! What’s really fascinating about looking at Cuban art history through the lens of Zilia is that you see the traces of artists she admired. I asked her about her relationship to the early Cuban vanguard, and she said when she was a young painter, Amelia and Loló were really important examples for her. They were both women artists who had success, and that really animated her and gave her the strength to take artistic risks. When we look at them, though, they are three artists from three very different generations.

Amelia is part of the early vanguard, the abstract painters that come in the 1950s like Loló are thought of as being a radical break from what these early avant-garde painters were trying to do. The early vanguard was very national: they were trying to import Parisian modernism and wed that with national subjects in order to create an authentic modern art in Cuba. In the 1950s abstraction was viewed as an international break with the nationalism of the past. Part of that was political in that there was frustration with the Batista dictatorship, so the national was considered corrupt. Taking an international position was a way of distancing oneself from corruption; in the case of Los Once it was very strident, but the geometric painters subscribed to that, as well. As a scholar, when I looked at this group of work through the lens of Zilia, I started to see connections that I think raise some questions about this traditional narrative of Cuban art history—the separation between the vanguard of the ‘20s to the ‘40s and the vanguard of the ‘50s. It’s a break, certainly, between representational and non-objective painting, but there are many aesthetic connections that I think are really interesting. Of course, a lot of it has to do with Cubism, and there’s a logical kind of evolution that’s happening.

**Rail:** I would love to see some of the works that show those Cubist tendencies.

**Elliott:** This is *Bandeja con fruta (Sandía)* [Tray with Fruit (Watermelon)]

(1941), by Amelia Peláez. We are not given multiple perspectives on a single form, like you might expect in a Picasso—Amelia is starting with the cross-section of the watermelon, and its color and shape are driving her composition. She's playing with patterns; she is repeating this round cross-section on the tray edge and in these motifs that are on the stained-glass windows.



Amelia Peláez, *Bandeja con frutas (Sandía)* [Tray with Fruit (Watermelon)], 1941. Oil on canvas in original frame. 28 x 35 inches. Private Collection, Miami. Photo: Sid Hoeltzell. © Amelia Peláez Foundation. Miami. Courtesy Tresart, Miami.

**Rail:** So she is playing with the picture plane a little bit. To me, this painting looks like a strangely transitional piece between the Cézanne tradition and the Picasso tradition: we have a radically flattened still life, but we are still looking at a typically bourgeois table setting. It happens to be a tropical fruit instead of an apple.

**Elliott:** It's a traditional still-life composition, which was the preferred subject matter of the Cubists. The other thing I'll point out is that the frame is original, from 1941, and Amelia was involved in the construction of the frames. Sometimes she refurbished old frames, she applied a lot of the same sort of painterly techniques that you can see on the canvas. She often had a really thick impasto and she'd scrape the paint. She did the same thing with the frame; she'd paint the frame and then scrape it,

bleeding the relationship between the painting and the world.

**Rail:** Which is what the shutters, which appear as another motif in her work, would do as well.

**Elliott:** Exactly. I love that she was interested in the frame as an object because I think all three of these artists were interested in bringing art out into the world and bringing art into three dimensions.

**Rail:** In your catalogue essay you talk about their aesthetic concerns transcending and connecting each others' work. It's a show of three women, it's difficult not to foreground the gender aspect too much; but these are certainly things that are (or would have been) associated with women, they are household objects, tables—

**Elliott:** There is definitely a domesticity to Amelia's artwork.

**Rail:** But it is interesting to consider the aesthetic tendencies that persist across all of the work. I am curious about some of the similarities, or connections, that you see between Amelia's work and the others'.

**Elliott:** The impulse to design the composition around geometric patterns is really important. I mentioned the three-dimensional objects: all three artists share an experience and interest in architecture, which plays out in the work in terms of an interest in light and space. For Amelia the *mediopunto* (the top, arched part of the window that is characteristic of Cuba's Spanish colonial architecture) is a hallmark of her painting; the function of the

*mediopunto* is to let light into the room. A more typical combination of hers would be these still lifes. This one is from 1949 but this type of composition—with the half-moon stained glass window and the columns with shutters on the side and a table beneath it—often with kind of a trapezoidal shape, is very typical. She starts this in 1941, and she comes back to it in '49.

**Rail:** So these are motifs that she worked with throughout her career.

**Elliott:** That's another connection with Zilia and Loló. These artists return to the same motifs over and over again.

**Rail:** In Cuban literature of the 20th century, there is a pronounced focus on the baroque (for example in José Lezama Lima and, later, in Alejo Carpentier, and others). You wrote about Amelia's baroque approach to color; can you elaborate on that?

**Elliott:** Let's start with Aleksandra Ekster, Amelia's teacher in Paris. Ekster's contribution to Russian modernism was threefold: Ekster proposed what she called "Dynamic Color Theory," which fundamentally was about animating the composition through vibrant color contrasts, and rhythmically repeated pops of color (Amelia's color choices are thought to stem from colonial stained glass windows, but I think Ekster's color theory has at least as much to do with it); it was about Cubism and the fragmentation of forms, designing the composition around a series of planes that were typically in a kind of organized swirling fashion, which connects it to the Futurist movement. Thirdly, her compositions were often organized around a diagonal axis and had a sense of irregularity; take, for example, Tatlin's Monument to the Third International (1919 – 20), there are scholars who have argued that it was influenced by Aleksandra Ekster's ideas about composition.

**Rail:** That's interesting—if we think about coming back to contemporary woman artists, with Tatlin's Whisper Tania Bruguera references that history as well, so these lineages just keep circling back on themselves.

**Elliott:** There are all kinds of references. Amelia is thought of as a baroque painter, as having ushered in a generation of so-called "baroque" artists of the 1940s, who followed her lead in creating semi-abstract paintings based on the motifs of Spanish-colonial architectural tradition. When Lezama Lima writes about Amelia's painting in a 1940 exhibition catalogue, he remarks on what he calls a "hostility between carnality and structure."

**Rail:** He's the best!

**Elliott:** Yeah! [Laughter.] He's the best. But try to translate his art criticism—

**Rail:** I don't envy that task.

**Elliott:** That turn of phrase has been quoted by later scholars to say that that's one of the fundamental aspects of her so-called "baroque" painting. I think, though, that this "hostility between carnality and structure" or "structure" and "movement" emanates from Ekster's studio in Paris. That is the kind of work—those are the kind of ideas—that she was starting to play with. Amelia said that Ekster was her most important teacher. She is coming back and working with those lessons over and over again, and it's informing her artwork.

The first time that Amelia's work was really called baroque was in 1945, by Robert Altmann in Lezama Lima's journal *Orígenes*, who argued that she was mining ornament from 19th-century architectural traditions. Now, in Cuba, 19th century architecture is neoclassical, right? However, there was also an argument made by architectural historians at this time,

which said that there was a persistence of a baroque ornament in these neoclassical works by artisans who were interested in that kind of decoration, and this was an active resistance to the neoclassical.

**Rail:** The idea of aesthetic resistance is really compelling. My paternal grandfather was an anthropologist, and I'm told his dictum was, "La cultura resiste." In Spanish that's sort of a semantically polyvalent statement: there's the meaning of "resist" in the active, almost militant way, but also the idea of "persisting," of finding a way, of remaining. It's grass growing through stones.

**Elliott:** That's the argument that's being made by architectural historians. I would point out that Lezama Lima writes about the baroque, but it's after Amelia. He was friends with Amelia's family and he came to visit many times in the thirties when she was developing this kind of work.

**Rail:** So are you going as far as to say that Amelia's visual vocabulary—

**Elliott:** —influenced or inspired Lezama's baroque poetry and prose? I think so. I think so! I mean, I think it's up to literary historians to do that analysis, because I'm not going to weigh in on Lezama's poetry or prose, but I can tell you that he visited her house in the '30s when she was beginning to develop her architectural vocabulary and he was interested because her uncle was [the Cuban poet] Julián del Casal—

**Rail:** —who was obsessed with Moreau, which draws us into the Symbolist movement in France, but which also has this aspect of resistance, of decadent madness. Moreau was also interested in the effect of tattooing or inscribing the work as a kind of overlay on the paint, which appears in Zilia's work as well.

**Elliott:** And then, Lezama was really interested in Julián del Casal so he would come to visit to talk to Amelia's mother about her brother—who was Julián del Casal.



Loló Soldevilla, *Sin título* [Untitled], 1954. Collage on paper. 11 x 9 inches. Courtesy Latin Art Core Gallery, Miami.

**Rail:** del Casal's name popped up when I was doing research on these artists, and I remember thinking, "Could it?—no."

**Elliott:** Yes!

**Rail:** And it was! It's a small island. [Laughter.]

**Elliott:** Let's look at Loló. She moved to Paris in 1949 as a cultural attaché. This untitled collage, from 1954, is part of a series of homages to different European thinkers, poets, and artists (such as Malevich, Rimbaud, Arp). The reason I particularly love this one is that I think it is in dialogue with Hans Arp's *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance)* (1917), which is at MoMA. When you look at Arp's collage, it's a very static sort of arrangement of squares on the page, but I feel like with Loló's trapezoids you get the sense of falling, as if they are squares falling through the air.

**Rail:** They optically create that three-dimensional illusion that actually, strangely, goes back to Amelia and the way she collapsed that table. Even though the works are not





Loló Soldevilla, *Carta celeste: noches en el cosmos* [Celestial Letter: Nights in the Cosmos], 1958. Oil on canvas. 26 3/4 x 27 1/2 inches. © Loló Soldevilla. Photo: Fernanda Torcida. Courtesy of Pan American Art Projects, Miami.

visually similar in an obvious way, which is something you put so beautifully in the catalogue, there are these oblique aesthetic links. They're not super obvious, but they're there.

**Elliott:** Yes! We spoke before about the importance of light and the mediopunto in Amelia's work. Here Loló refuses to depict the light, but the way the light falls on the work is very much part of it. It's just up to the viewer to engage in that, which I think is unique. I love the painterly-ness of this; I think Loló loved the paint as much as Amelia loved the paint. Amelia's all about thick impasto and scraping, and she's really interested in materials in a way that a constructivist artist or a concrete artist is interested in materials, but then she refuses to be limited by that. So, if we look at *Carta celeste: noches en el cosmos* [Celestial Letter: Nights in the Cosmos] (1958), there is a very clear representation of Loló's connection to the moon and the night sky that is lovely and poetic.

**Rail:** This almost looks Japanese—it's astonishing. It's dominantly a moon motif, but this has to be a gold sun in the front. So what are we looking at, really?

**Elliott:** It also suggests an eclipse, the absence of light.

**Rail:** It's an extremely complicated, dynamic rendering that is executed in a minimal way. It's very elegant. It's interesting to see these natural elements rendered with this very restrained vocabulary. With Caribbean aesthetics there is an almost stereotypical expectation: we are used to this flourishing, bright-green ocean thing. This minimal celestial concern is basically the opposite of that.

**Elliott:** The other thing that is really engaging about her work is that the objects were meant to be manipulated. You can see that this one twists and turns, and I think, while there's not the space to rotate things around, we're meant to touch it.

**Rail:** The circles aren't totally perfect; you can feel the human hand in it.

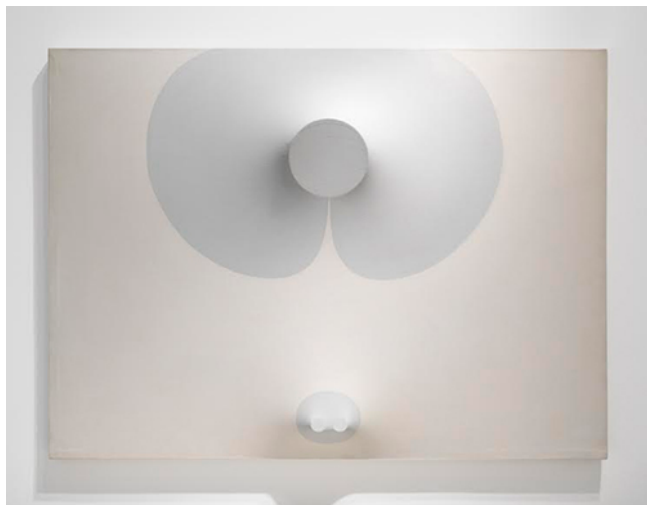
**Elliott:** It's geometric, but there's movement. In *Sueño astral* (1957) there is movement and in the collages there's movement.

**Rail:** Let's talk about Zilia.

**Elliott:** Zilia mines all of this and then just does something radically different.

In a way she's doing that three-dimensional thing: she's building her armature, she's stretching the canvas over the top, she's creating an object. She executed her first three-dimensional objects in the '50s, and we have examples in the exhibition starting in 1968.

**Rail:** So she was painting first? Or she always made objects?



Zilia Sánchez, *Topología erótica* (de la serie Amazonas) [Erotic Topology (of the Amazons series)], 1968. Acrylic on stretched canvas. 41 × 60 × 12 inches. © Zilia Sánchez. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

**Elliott:** She was painting first. The earliest works we have in the exhibition are from the '50s, and they are traditional, flat works on canvas.

**Rail:** Now, with Zilia's *Topología erótica* (de la serie las Amazonas) [Erotic Topology (of the Amazons series)] (1968), we've gone into these very restrained palettes—where Loló is black and white. These are more subtle interactions of color because the big gestures are happening spatially, rather than chromatically.

**Elliott:** The subtle color, flatly applied—it's very restrained and controlled and polished, the way we think of geometric abstraction. But in a way, these works are very soft and sensual. I feel like the canvas is almost like a fabric draped over a human body.

**Rail:** It's interesting because they do they feel very soft; there are these qualities that are stereotypically connected to the feminine—

**Elliott:** —At the same time you can tell it's taut, it's stretched, and it's hard.

**Rail:** There is muscle in it; there is a strong body making it. It's really fascinating how she decided at some point that it needed to come out of the canvas, and certainly that is a thing that happened in mid-century art, but not always this successfully or un-hysterically. [Laughter.]

**Elliott:** And she began this practice in the early '50s in Havana; it's really remarkable. She left in 1962, and lived in New York and in Madrid, where she did restoration studies and worked in restoration.

**Rail:** So she is very knowledgeable about the technical workings of painting, which really jumbles the gender aspect in an interesting way, in terms of what people assume women are doing creatively, and are capable of doing—she works the wood herself.

**Elliott:** (Nods) It has both the gestural feel of Amelia and the linearity of Loló; it's very much a merger of those two tendencies of the 1950s. Also, gestural abstraction and geometric abstraction come through in her drawing.

**Rail:** And there is the resistance in that, too: "I don't have to do it one way or the other." Why choose?

**Elliott:** Exactly. To me, *Amazonas* (1993) is a feminist art historical statement, at least the way that I look at Cuban art history. For example, Carlos Enríquez, like many Cuban artists of his generation, did highly sexualized nudes, especially *mulatas* (women of mixed race). Zilia, despite, as you know, appearing very fair, refers to herself as a mulata. Enríquez did at least two landscapes in the '40s where the mountains are in the form of breasts; here, I think she is answering him. "I'll show you a woman's breast:" the shield of an Amazon warrior.



Zilia Sánchez, *Amazonas*, 1993. Acrylic on stretched canvas. 52 1/2 × 42 × 11 inches.  
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

**Rail:** It's its own kind of mountain that does something more original than a landscape does anyway.

**Elliott:** She is embracing the sensuality that has been a strong part of Cuban art in the generations before her, but taking control of it, in a certain way, to create something that is emblematic of female strength.