



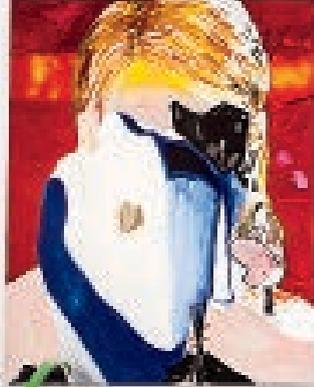
An installation at the Fundación Proa, in La Boca, by the English artist Jeremy Deller.

The Cultural Makeover of Buenos Aires

Over the past decade, a vibrant art scene has quietly blossomed in Argentina's capital, bringing galleries and museums, restaurants and bars to previously undiscovered neighborhoods. **Laurence Lowe** goes wandering.

On a brisk early-spring evening in September, stylishly dressed artists and art lovers gathered in a white-walled warehouse space, greeting one another with pecks on both cheeks. The scene could have passed for East London or New York City's Chelsea, but this was the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Villa Crespo. The gallery was Ruth Benzacar, the city's most prestigious, where the sculptor Marina de Caro, who also had a retrospective up at the Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art (MAMBA), was opening a solo show. The gallery-goers wandered among de Caro's small, organic forms, snacking on little bags of trail mix.

Though it lacks the glitz of São Paulo and Mexico City, Buenos Aires has emerged as Latin America's contemporary art destination *de cayetano*—an Argentinean expression that means “to do something without telling anyone.” What its scene lacks in mega-galleries and blockbuster exhibitions, it makes up for in its intimacy, hospitality, and sense of community. But until recently, Ruth Benzacar, which represents renowned Argentine artists like neosurrealist Jorge Macchi, conceptualist Leandro Erlich, and sculptor Adrián Villar Rojas, was the only gallery in town worth visiting. “The community of artists has always existed, but we’ve never had the kind of gallery circuit that you find in Chelsea,” said Mora Bacal, who now runs Ruth Benzacar with her mother, Orly Benzacar, the →

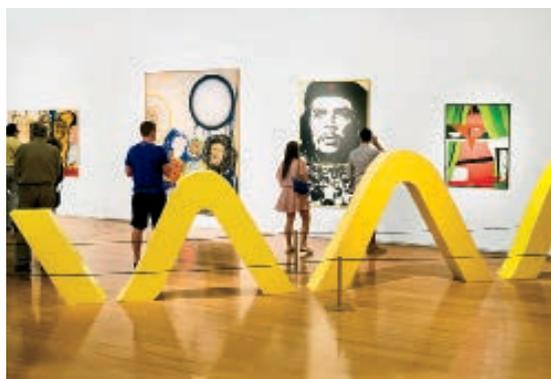


daughter of the founder. “We felt we needed to shake things up.”

Last year, the duo rocked the Buenos Aires art community by relocating from the Central Business District to this hangar-size space in the industrial barrio of Villa Crespo, which is quickly becoming the city’s art epicenter. The neighborhood “used to be all mechanics,” abstract artist Pablo Siquier told me outside Ruth Benzacar. When artists began moving to Villa Crespo, enterprising real estate agents attempted to rebrand the neighborhood, which borders trendy Palermo Soho, as “Palermo Queens,” prompting an outcry from its working-class residents. The old name remains intact, but Villa Crespo has changed: you can now find more than a dozen galleries nestled among the body shops and mom-and-pop trattorias, including Document Art, dedicated to 1960s Latin American conceptual work, and Nora Fisch, a contemporary space whose eponymous gallerist returned home in 2010 after nearly two decades in New York. There is also Bar 878, a popular Brooklynish, speak-easy-style watering hole, and I Latina, a pan-Latin American restaurant with a tasting menu. Two unassuming spots draw old and new residents alike: La Cava Jufré, a magical wine bar run by an amateur photographer named Lito, and Salgado Alimentos, a pasta factory that becomes an Italian kitchen in the evening.

On the same block as Ruth Benzacar, I spotted a mural commemorating the recent nationalization of an Argentinean energy company, accompanied by the words *ya recuperamos*—“we recovered.” The phrase also applies to the role of art in Buenos Aires since Argentina’s economic meltdown in the early 2000s. Amid the chaos of a debt default, mass

Clockwise from left: A painting by Argentine artist Alejandra Seeber at Barro; a sculpture by the late avant-garde Argentine artist Oscar Bony at the Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art; a mural by Czech artist Jan Kalab.



The scene at the gallery could have passed for East London or New York’s Chelsea.

protests, and the spectacle of five presidents in two weeks, young artists began spray-painting and stenciling their feelings on the walls of the city, establishing Buenos Aires as a street-art mecca; today, the nonprofit Graffitimundo offers tours of skyscraping works by the likes of Jaz and Pastel. Less visibly, the economic situation created a kind of hothouse for a diverse new crop of Argentine studio artists, who generally abstain from zeitgeisty statement-making, defining themselves less by a common style than by their shared resourcefulness.

Most of them trained not at art schools but through *clínicas*—the traditional mentorship model in Buenos Aires, in which an established artist works with up-and-comers. Guillermo Kuitca, arguably Argentina’s most famous artist, runs one such *clínica*. “It used to be that the first thing you bought when you sold your first work was a plane ticket,” said Kuitca, who, like many artists of his generation, rose to prominence by showing his work in New York. He lives in the →



Artist Catalina León in her home studio in Villa Crespo.

leafy northern barrio of Belgrano, in a gracious town house that contains his studio. “I wanted to present myself in a different role,” he recalled. “Not as someone who puts objects on a wall, but as an artist who talks with other artists.” More than 100 students have passed through Kuitca’s *clínica*—“our CalArts,” he joked. Many, like the

installation artist Eduardo Basualdo, have found success abroad while maintaining studios in Buenos Aires.

Villa Crespo isn’t the only part of town where art is flourishing. In Palermo, ArteBA—at 25, Latin America’s oldest art fair—has expanded under its new president, tech entrepreneur Alec Oxenford. “In New York, you have Jeff Koons,” Oxenford explained. “In London, Damien Hirst. But the Buenos Aires art scene is more a collective thing than an individual thing.” The same attitude drives the five-year-old Faena Art Center, a sprawling converted flour mill near the Puerto Madero waterfront conceived by real estate developer Alan Faena as a platform for homegrown talent as well as international stars. In nearby La Boca, the dramatic 2008 expansion of the Fundación Proa, a two-decade-old contemporary art museum housed in an elegant 19th-century mansion, offers a reason to come to the historic but impoverished barrio besides the tango dancers, portrait painters, and iconic colorful tenements along the crowded Caminito. I found Proa’s light-drenched top-floor café, with its spectacular view of the port, a perfect place to stop for lunch during my wanderings.

But the best new art spot I visited in La Boca was Barro, Benzacar’s biggest rival, where a spectacular installation was on display by one of Kuitca’s former pupils, Nicanor Aráoz. It consisted of scenes of hallucinatory violence: lurid bodies in various stages of dismemberment, a neon-lit, manga-inspired cat with a phallus curving from its mouth. Aráoz, who was shyly standing by, explained that he saw the tableau as a meditation on the relationship between torturers and their victims. Later, one of the directors, Nahuel Ortiz Vidal, touted Barro as a “new type of gallery that can work in a global world with global artists and global ideas. It’s an obvious project, but new for Buenos Aires.”

Earlier in the afternoon, I had gone to Prisma KH, a cutting-edge *Kunsthalle* a few blocks away, to see the studio of Catalina León, another of Kuitca’s ex-students. As we looked at her pieces, which ranged from abstract embroideries made with weathered fabrics to upright panels covered in earth and plants, León expressed ambivalence about the rapid growth of the Buenos Aires art scene. Her community is “becoming more professionalized, and I think we’re in danger of losing something,” she said. “We don’t have a big market, so we don’t produce for the market. It’s more heterogeneous and open here.” León is happy for more of the world to discover the city’s artists, she added, as long as the attention doesn’t ruin the family atmosphere. “I hope we can keep our innocence.” ■

TWO DAYS IN B.A.

DAY 1 VILLA CRESPO

Begin at avant-garde gallery **Slyzmud** (slyzmud.com), then continue to the venerable **Ruth Benzacar** (ruthbenzacar.com). On nearby Calle Serrano, grab lunch at **Malvón** (malvonba.com.ar), a café and bakery with garden seating, then visit warehouse art space **La Ira de Dios**

(lairadedios.com.ar). Shop for leather goods at **Murillo 666** (murillo666.com.ar), then dine at **Salgado Alimentos** (salgadoalimentos.com.ar), where the fresh pasta is always worth the wait. Afterward, drop in at **La Cava Jufré** (lacavajufré.com.ar), where beloved owner Lito offers a wide selection of wines. Keep the night alive at **Café San Bernardo** (5436 *Corrientes*), a pool-and-Ping-Pong hall founded in 1912 that

is favored by hipsters and taxi drivers alike. Finish with a nightcap at the speakeasy-style **Bar 878** (878bar.com.ar).

DAY 2 LA BOCA

Wander the sprawling **Faena Art Center** (faena.com) in Puerto Madero before taking a 15-minute taxi ride to La Boca. Visit **Fundación Proa** (proa.org), a contemporary art museum in a 19th-century mansion, where you can grab lunch in the café. Check out

the brightly painted tenements of **Caminito**, then make a pilgrimage to **Estadio Alberto J. Armando** (bocajuniors.com.ar), a.k.a. La Bombonera, home of the soccer club Diego Maradona played for. Next, check out two art spots: multipurpose creative space **Prisma KH** (prisma-kh.com) and gallery **Barro** (barro.cc). For dinner, don’t miss **El Obrero** (64 *Agustín R. Caffarena*), a crowded *parilla* serving classic grilled meats.