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Mad Over MADI

The Argentine Grupo Madí movement brings
a geometric *joie de vivre* to Dallas.

By Catherine D. Ansporn

Texas has traditions of private patronage carving out significant institutions for public enlightenment—from the Menil Collection in Houston to Artpace of San Antonio and Dallas' Trammell & Margaret Crow Collection of Asian Art and the Nasher Sculpture Center. One such museum, however, has been under the radar—until now. MADI Museum in Dallas is stepping into the limelight, thanks to increased interest and scholarship in Latin American art, particularly the lesser-known art movements recently revealed by the critically acclaimed 2004 exhibition “Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America,” organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Founded February 2003, 15 months ahead of “Inverted Utopias,” MADI Museum was shining the art-historical light on the avant-garde creations of the Grupo Madí, a movement begun in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1946. (The name is conjectured to have come either from a contraction of the words Materialismo and Dialectismo; letters from the name of the movement's founder, Carmelo Arden Quin; or from the Shakespeare play “Much Ado About Nothing”). MADI is considered by many to be the oldest ongoing modern art movement in the world. A recent exhibit mounted by this museum, “Celebration of Geometric Art,” highlighted 80 artists from 20 countries who are continuing the MADI tradition. In the broader historical lens, MADI's

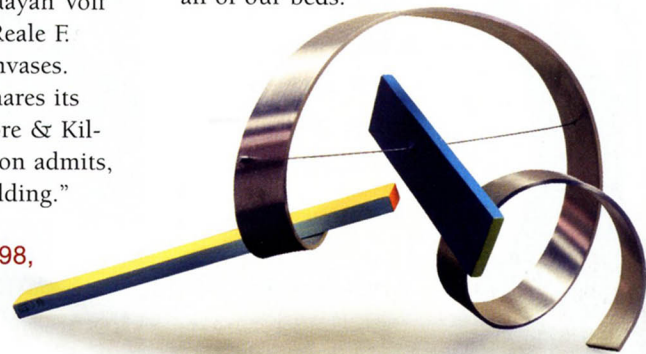
color-suffused contributions anticipate constructivist, kinetic and Op Art, prefiguring artists from Frank Stella to Ellsworth Kelly. Dallas' museum is the only one in the United States devoted to MADI, and one of the few institutions worldwide to focus on geometric art.

Occupying a two-story, 16,564-square-foot building in the upscale uptown area, MADI Museum is 10 minutes from downtown Dallas, easily accessible from the Central Expressway that bisects the posh neighborhoods of the city. From the street, the playful and exuberant facade is impossible to miss—vibrantly hued metal cutouts cavort over every surface, enveloping even windows and doors. This joyful attitude—Dr. Seuss collides with Antonio Gaudí—continues into the soaring atrium lobby, where works by diverse global artists greet the museum-goer, from a suite of neon and wood geometric wall sculptures by Japanese artist Mitsouko Mori (a recent artist-in-residence) to energetic metal constructions by Uruguayan Volf Roitman and Italian painter Reale F. Frangi's shaped acrylic on canvases. Ostensibly, MADI Museum shares its space with the law firm Kilgore & Kilgore, but partner Bill Masterson admits, “MADI is taking over the building.”

If one phrase characterizes this unforgettable private museum, it's “out of the box,” figuratively *and* literally. By all accounts, founders Dorothy and Bill Masterson fell in love with MADI art in the early 1990s—and haven't stopped collecting since “It came from meeting the artists and being introduced to their works,” recalls Dorothy, who also serves as the museum's executive director.

“We first met Volf Roitman, and he introduced us to Carmelo Arden Quin, the movement's founder.” Bill, who serves as president of the museum board, clarifies: “Volf's wife, Shelley Goodman [who authored the 2004 book on MADI founder Carmelo Arden Quin] and Dorothy were classmates in grade school and throughout high school. After high school, Shelley moved to France. We ended up meeting many of the artists through her.” He notes that the catalyst for the museum was “when our house got so full and art was under all of our beds.”

Fré Ilgen, “Untitled,” 1998,
metal and wood.



The museum showcases the Mastersons' permanent collection—most of it, they emphasize, acquired directly from studios rather than dealers or auction houses. An ample first-floor wing serves as gallery space for rotating traveling exhibitions (currently three annually) and houses the museum's permanent collection. The museum store offers MADI works for sale, from editioned pieces under \$200 to constructions priced at more than \$5,000.

Roitman, a key figure in the movement—and architect of the MADI Museum—transformed a 1974 commercial structure, in consultation with Austin architect Bill Martin, into the current space, which epitomizes the MADI definition as outlined by Dorothy: “MADI art comes out of the frame. It's often three-dimensional, each color is distinct, sometimes it's curved, sometimes it has more than one piece you can arrange—but never square or rectangular—sometimes it's kinetic.”

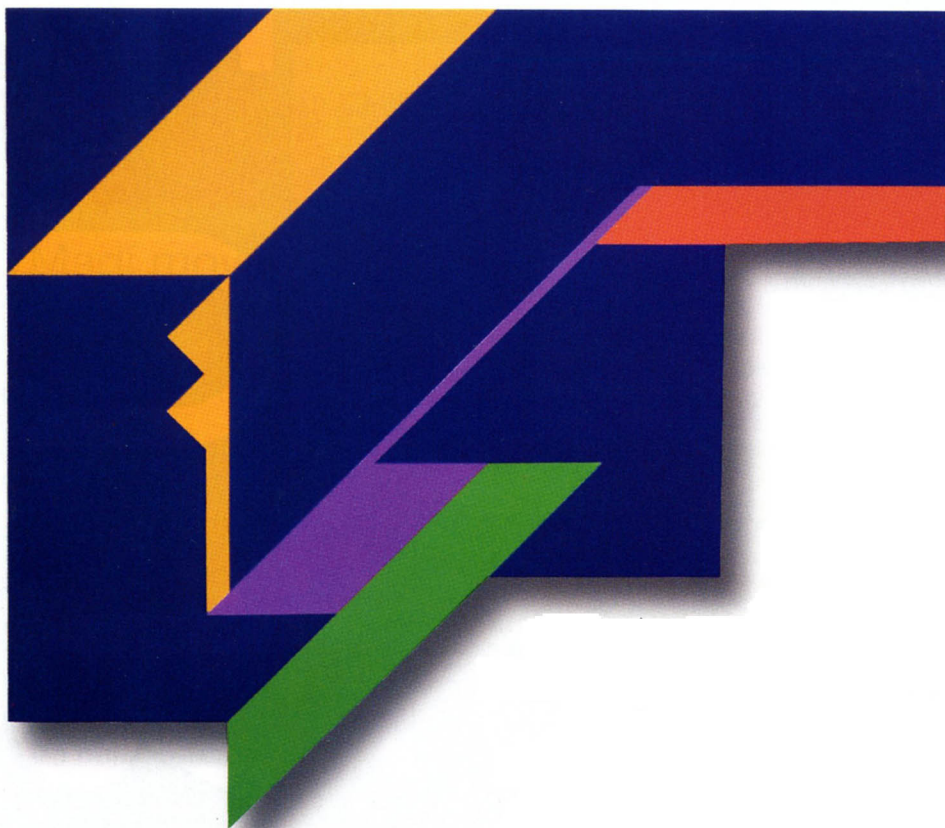
“When MADI started, it was revolutionary—a movement in Argentina as part of a reaction against the Perón regime,” Bill explains. “It included not only painting, but also music and dance. We have acquired the publication *Arturo*, the first MADI publication [summer 1944], which may be the only one left. MADI [as outlined in *Arturo*] originally was to be a new way of life. It was going to cover furniture, decoration and every aspect of architecture.”

In many ways, the Mastersons' museum continues the original artists' encompassing mission. Entrance is free, and the museum offers MADI art classes to school children and seniors, MADI concerts, MADI book signings and a burgeoning artist-in-residence program for local as well as international MADI artists.

“It's very cheerful art,” Dorothy says. “It's always uplifting and has a lot of energy.” ♦

MADI Museum, 3109 Carlisle St., Dallas, TX 75204. (214) 855-7802. www.madi-museum.org.

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Joan Pedragosa, “Peculiaris Tabula XVI,” 2004, acrylic on PVC.