

# The New York Times

## What To See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By ROBERTA SMITH and MARTHA SCHWENDENER JAN. 10, 2018



An installation view of the Celso Renato exhibition at Mendes Wood DM. Pierre Le Hors/Mendes Wood DM

### Celso Renato

*Through Jan. 20. Mendes Wood DM, 60 East 66th Street, 2nd floor, Manhattan; 212-220-9943, mendeswooddm.com.*

The story of modernism's debt to non-Western, folk and tribal art is complex and only getting more so. A new wrinkle in the narrative is the work of the singular Brazilian artist Celso Renato (1919-1992), seen in its beguiling seven-piece United States debut at Mendes Wood DM. He was a practicing lawyer and self-taught artist who spent most of his life in Belo Horizonte in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais.

Renato began painting in the 1960s and by the 1980s was working with a spare geometric vocabulary applied freehand to found pieces of wood and lumber, which he tended to use unaltered. The combination made him an odd man out with the Neo-Concretists. Like them he rejected the clean rational forms of the Concretists, but he retained the earlier group's attachment to the art object

His efforts communicate and reward empathic attention. A piece of lumber shaped like a narrow irregular house about two feet tall is cracked all the way through at the center, giving it a crevice-like door. Renato simply painted a series of bars and blocks in red, black or white around its edges, giving it a kind of frame and turning it into a votive object of a female goddess. The same blocks and bars appear on a portion of an old tree trunk. They form a narrow stack at the center of the trunk's round side, like an abstract homage to the tree it was once part of.

A work closer to a conventional painting is a square section of an old crate fence that Renato painted black with a white triangle cutting in from the top, slightly off center. But even here he applies the paint so it seems to interact with rather than disguise the irregularities of the surface. Renato worked with an almost reverential consideration of what he was painting on, creating his own fusion of art, nature and the haphazardness of everyday life and adding something of his own to the history of postwar Latin American modernism.

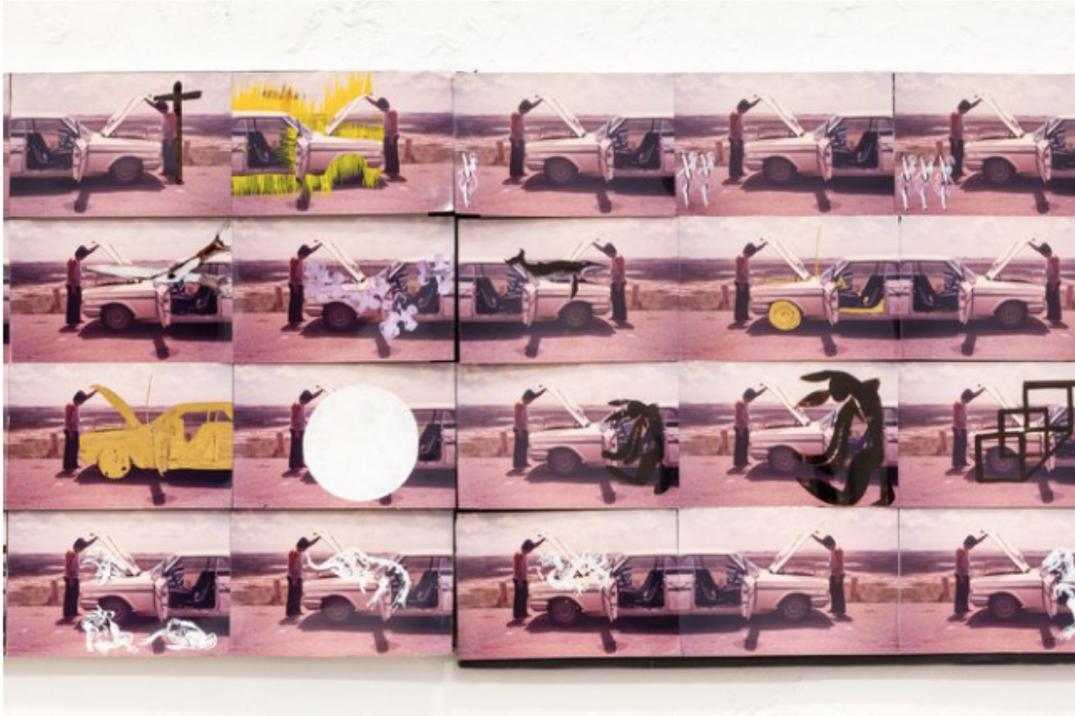


An installation view of "Unholding" at Artists Space. Artists Space, New York

## Unholding

*Through Jan. 21. Artists Space, 55 Walker Street, Manhattan; 212-226-3970, [artistspace.org](http://artistspace.org).*

In 1987, Artists Space hosted an exhibition called "We the People" (1987), which showcased work by artists of indigenous heritage. "Unholding," which takes its title from a poem by Layli Long Soldier, both pays homage to that earlier exhibition and includes work by a new generation of artists.



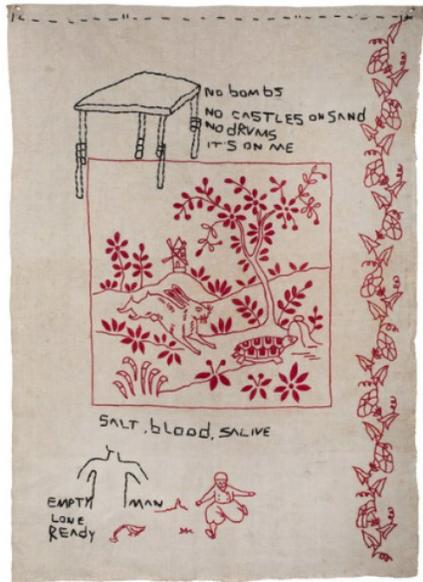
"Stalled," a photo collage with Sharpie and acrylic paint by Pena Bonita, part of the show "Unholding."  
Daniel Pérez

Artists in the earlier show included Kay WalkingStick, who has three paintings here that think about landscape through an indigenous lens, and G. Peter Jemison, whose drawings here on brown paper bags include wry and blunt titles like "Party Bag" (1982) and "Hunger on Reservations While Children in Africa Starve" (1981).

Newer works include model buildings from Alan Michelson's "Prophetstown" series, one of which is covered in facsimiles of newspapers from the 19th century with articles and dialogues pertaining to the fate of indigenous people. "Culture Capture" (2017) by Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil and Jackson Polys is a terrific video that turns a visit to an ethnographic museum into a delirious walk through the history of colonialism.

The booklet accompanying "Unholding" enlarges the project with essays that look at how postmodernism, multiculturalism and other '80s movements only scratched the surface of what it means to function as an indigenous artist in the New York art world. One short sentence near the front of the booklet suggests just how much is at stake: "Artists Space acknowledges its location on indigenous land." A simple statement, but one with huge historical and tragic implications.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER



José Leonilson's "Empty Man,"  
made of thread embroidered on  
linen. Bezerra Dias Family

## José Leonilson

*Through Feb. 3. Americas Society, 680 Park Avenue, Manhattan; 212-249-8950, as-coa.org.*

José Leonilson's (1957-1993) work is cryptic, coded and often hard to read — even if you understand Portuguese. Like a personal poetry project, the paintings, drawings and embroidery works of this Brazilian artist, who died from AIDS-related causes in 1993, are filled with meandering lines of text and small images: trompe l'oeil scars, foliage, pictograms. Surprisingly, "Empty Man" at the Americas Society is the first solo exhibition in the United States to showcase his work, and it is a great introduction.

Mr. Leonilson's early pieces fit in very much with a 1980s return to the figure in the work of the famed "three C's" of Italian painting: Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi and Sandro Chia. Like those artists, Mr. Leonilson painted curious figures in bright flat fields of color, adding bits of language, in keeping with a postmodern era in which semiotics and other theories were central elements in art. Travel and wandering were a constant theme too, as Mr. Leonilson exhibited his work in Europe and toured Amsterdam, Paris and Madrid.

The later works here are what make Mr. Leonilson stand out as an artist. In his sewing with thread or copper wire on crepe, velvet, cotton or voile, stitching takes the place of brush strokes and the works become stand-ins for objects in everyday life: satchels, handkerchiefs and embroidery samplers. With the artist aware of his illness and confronting his fate, the small fabric works become a catalog of personal objects — perhaps memorials for oneself. "Empty Man," from 1991, is a simple work with red and black thread on a neutral ground. "Empty Man Lone Ready" it reads in one corner — a spare, enigmatic phrase that nonetheless gets its meaning across. Two years later, Mr. Leonilson would die.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER