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Jon Shapley photos / Houston Chronicle

ART

On Westheimer, 2 tons of naked ambition

By Olivia P. Tallet

Nude and voluptuous, her eyes toward heaven, the colossal bronze woman reclines next to busy Westheimer, an apple in one hand. She's the last big woman in the life of Fernando Botero, one of Latin America's — and the world's — best-known artists.

"It's the last monumental sculpture that I made and the last one that I will create," Botero, 84, says of "Reclining Woman With Fruit." A permanent injury to one of his arms means that he's no longer able to make oversize pieces.

The 2-ton woman was hoisted into place this week outside the new Art of the World Gallery at 2201 Westheimer. The gallery, owned by Houston residents Liliana Molina and Mauricio Vallejo, opened with a show of Botero's work: roughly 30 of his paintings, drawings and sculptures.

To many, Botero's paintings and sculptures are instantly recognizable for one reason: Their people and animals are notably rotund. But, the artist says, "I have never painted a fat person. I am interested in largeness, the big dimensions, the voluptuous; that's the treatment I give to all my work, both people and objects."

Like Botero, the new gallery's owners are from Colombia. "It's an honor for us to present a solo exhibition of Botero for the first time in Houston to mark the opening of our gallery," Molina says.

Their ambitions are as ample as the Botero sculpture outside.

As its name implies, Art of the World won't limit its artists to a single continent or heritage. But its roster — which includes Spain's Picasso and Cristóbal Toral, Colombia's Gustavo Vézlez and Hugo Zapata, Texas' Jesús Morales and Costa Rica's Jiménez Dereda — has a significantly Hispanic tilt.

The gallery's opening is yet another sign of Houston's emergence as the U.S. hub of Latin American art.

"Houston has become a premier center for contemporary Latin American art due in no small part to Mari Carmen Ramírez, the



Co-owner Liliana Molina's new, Latin America-focused Art of the World Gallery contains paintings by Fernando Botero. The Colombian artist also created "Reclining Woman With Fruit," top, which rests outside the gallery.

Latin American art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston," says Rex Koontz, director of the University of Houston's School of Art.

The Puerto Rican-born Ramírez, considered one of the most influential Latin American art curators in the world, arrived at the MFAH in 2001, aiming to expand Americans' perception of Latin American art beyond Frida Khalo and Diego Rivera. Since then, the museum has systematically expanded its Latin American collection, adding 550 modern and contemporary works — many by avant-garde artists barely seen before in the U.S.

"In fact," Koontz adds, Houston "has also become the place in North America for people to study that art. The ICAA (International Center for the Arts of the Americas), a research center for the study of Latin American

art housed at the MFAH, is second to none in that area."

Latin American art is also increasingly popular with Houston's collectors and galleries. Sicardi Gallery, which specializes in this region, represents artists such as Venezuelan Carlos Cruz-Diez, a pioneer of kinetic art.

And events such as the Houston Art Fair are showing a growing number of artists from that region.

Latin American artists' rising presence in Houston is sometimes visible even from the streets. The five bright-colored crosswalks that connect the MFAH's main campus are works of public art by Cruz-Diez. Another is at the front of the University of Houston's Welcome Center.

Art of the World Gallery aims to achieve similar visibility — and Botero's woman is just the start. Molina and Vallejo

say they hope to present monumental artworks temporarily in parks and shopping malls.

Molina and Vallejo moved to Houston in 2002, when Colombia was in the midst of a drug-trafficking crisis. "While everyone was putting their eyes on New York, Miami or Los Angeles for the arts, we saw a potential and a great opportunity in Houston," Vallejo says.

"Here we know very good private collections both of Anglo and Hispanic collectors living in areas like River Oaks, The Woodlands, Rice (Village) or Tanglewood," Molina says. Several collectors in Houston already own pieces by Botero.

Unlike some of the avant-garde, abstract works in the MFAH's Latin American collection, Botero's recognizable figures are big, fat crowd-pleasers. The artist says he wants his work to communicate "with everyone, from the elites to the most humble people."

Some critics have suggested that his work lacks depth. Botero said he is not interested in that line of questioning: "My artwork speaks for itself," he says. "My work communicates with people without having to have a translator on the side to explain what it means."

On Westheimer, his naked lady will recline through the second week of February. "Does (she) need more explanation to be understood?" he asks.



Art of the World Gallery's opening, now featuring a solo show by Botero, is another sign of Houston's

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