

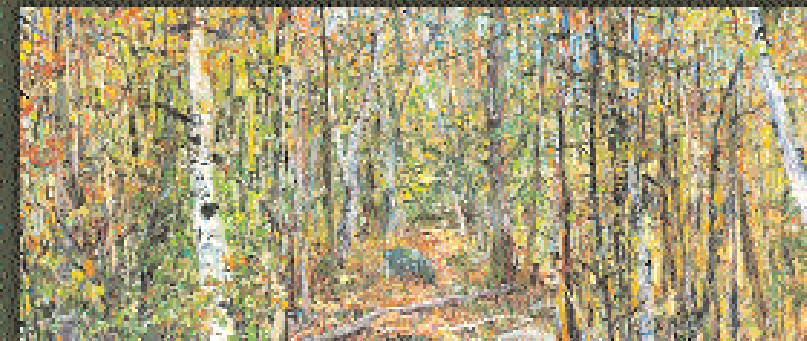
encounters



LILIAN GARCIA-ROIG



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October 5 — November 30, 2008

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The *Encounters* series of solo exhibitions is organized by Peter J. Baldaia,
Director of Curatorial Affairs of the Huntsville Museum of Art,
to highlight outstanding regional contemporary art

on cover: *Stained Glass Woods, WA (detail), 2007, oil on canvas, 48 x 132 inches overall*
above: *Fall Paths, NH, 2007, oil on canvas, 60 X 144 inches overall*
opposite: *Birch Melt, NH (detail), 2007, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches*

Impassioned Nature: Lilian Garcia-Roig and the Unclaimed Landscape



above: *Unbounded Autumn, NH, 2006*, oil on canvas, 30 X 24 inches

opposite: Lilian Garcia-Roig painting on-site at the MacDowell Colony, New Hampshire, 2006

Lilian Garcia-Roig paints the unclaimed landscape with engaging energy and assured bravado. She works in large scale directly on-site, painting for many hours at a time to capture the essence of a particular locale — whether it is the autumn woods of New England, the coastal rain forest of the Pacific Northwest, the palmetto scrub of the Florida Panhandle, or the Appalachian valleys of Northeast Alabama. Garcia-Roig's aesthetic uniqueness stems in part from her ability to paint traditional subject matter abstractly and expressionistically yet retain the representational quality that her subject matter demands. From a distance, her compositions appear as dense, conventional spaces. Yet up close, they dissolve into active networks of lush pigment ranging from thick, gestural patches to areas of raw canvas. "In my works," she says, "I want the viewer to discover how the landscape reveals itself in cumulative and unexpected ways. Ways that will hopefully create a desire to engage directly and positively in our own environment and to do so before it is too late."





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Painted Paint Rock, AL, 2008
oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches overall

I recently spoke with the artist in her expansive studio in Tallahassee, Florida, as we reviewed and discussed works for the upcoming exhibition.

Peter Baldaia: I understand that you have a background as a photorealist. When did you begin exploring the notion of straddling the two realms of representation and abstraction in your work?

Lilian Garcia-Roig: Growing up in Houston, I was fortunate to have a real artist as a teacher in high school. He was a photorealist at the time, so I learned the technique. In my senior year we were allowed to paint. I thought I'd paint like a photorealist, but the materiality of the medium was very interesting to me. I immediately wanted to mix the paint with my palette knife and apply it directly to the canvas. It was suddenly obvious to me that I really liked paint!

At Southern Methodist University in Dallas, I experimented with painting in a purely abstract mode. These works were ultimately unsatisfying, though, because they were so dependent on my mood that they seemed self-indulgent. I was always asking myself, “When do I stop? When is it right?” I didn't know the answer. I began a series of paintings in which figures emerged from the background, combining elements of realism and abstraction. But there was the issue of how to balance the figure with the ground. The place where I was able to rectify the two realms was at Skowhegan.

PB: How so?

LG: While I was a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, I received a highly competitive fellowship for a residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine. It was available to only one student, and everyone vied to be selected. When I arrived at Skowhegan I was still doing figurative work, but I found myself spending a lot of time walking in the woods

surrounding the school. I had never lived in a place with so much natural variety, and so I decided to paint the landscape. I would go into the woods with a backpack filled with paints, palette and a 18 x 24 inch canvas — everything that I could carry with me — and paint on the spot. As I began these works, the image and ground problem that I was having with my figurative work disappeared, because the dense landscape was simultaneously image *and* ground. I also found that I could push and pull more — I could have a patch of color that literally sat on the surface, but depending on its size, shape, and context, could be perceived to visually recede.

PB: So landscape suddenly made sense as subject matter?

LG: Yes. I was limited with the figure, because of certain parameters. When I started abstracting, it became too distorted. Landscape is not defined in that way. It's not solid; it's moving and changing with the light. With landscape I know what I'm looking at, but I never know what the painting is going to end up looking like.

PB: How did you fare as a young artist in residence at such a prestigious school?

LG: Skowhegan selects 65 artists from thousands of applicants each year, with most coming from New York and Los Angeles. The year I was there, Ross Bleckner, Italo Scanga, Melissa Miller, and Andrew Tavarrelli were also in residence. A number of visiting artists came through as well, and you could sign up for a private studio visit with them or a public critique. I opted for a studio visit with Juan Sanchez, because I thought we could talk more intimately about our shared Hispanic backgrounds. But I signed up for a public critique with Barbara Kruger.



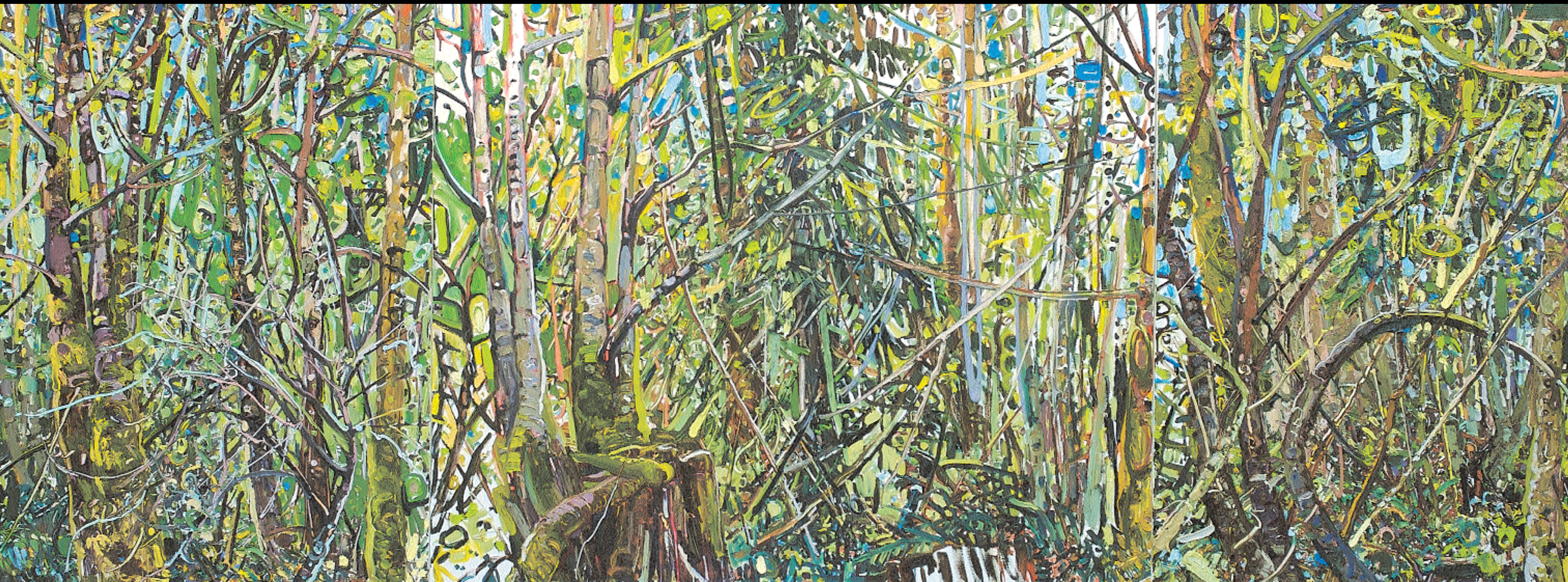
St. Marks Triptych (left to right: Fallen Tree, Charred Gateway, and Fan Palm), 2005, oil on canvas, 48 X 36 inches each

PB: Any particular reason?

LG: I really admire the conceptual thinking behind her work. It's far removed from the discipline of painting, so I thought it would be interesting to hear what she had to say about my new direction. The critique was held in a big barn. Each artist put up their work and talked articulately about the concepts behind it. When it was my turn, I simply put up the three or four landscapes I had completed up to that point, and sat down. Someone in the audience said rather indignantly, "Well, you need to explain your work — what are these about?" I described my interest in image and abstraction, in having space and losing it, in the imagery emerging from the paint. I apparently didn't explain myself that clearly, because Barbara stood up and said, "Well — this is an example of someone who is not eloquent about her work." But, she went on to say, "She doesn't have to be, because her work is eloquent *for* her." It was a great validation that Barbara Kruger felt my work had enough of its own visual language that it didn't need to be explained to death. That's the moment I began to think of myself as an artist rather than just a student.

PB: What happened after Skowhegan?

LG: I eventually secured a teaching position at the University of Texas in Austin, where I remained for nine years before moving to Tallahassee to teach at Florida State University. I never yearned to be a teacher, but I learned quickly that I was a good one. Ninety per cent of it is getting students to slow down, focus and really look at what they're doing — and giving them the tools to better execute their work. I really enjoy teaching, and it has allowed me to subsidize making more work. That's a nice place to be.





PB: How did your work develop in Texas?

LG: The landscape in Texas is very different from that of New England. It's not nearly as dense. I became interested in enlarging the scale of my paintings there. It took time to work up to 30 x 40 inches in size. It's much harder on a number of levels. There's more information to capture, and since I paint wet on wet, there's the issue of the paint drying too rapidly or getting too muddy. It's definitely a struggle. People have said to me, "It must be so much fun, being out in the woods and painting." Let me tell you, "fun" is not the word that immediately comes to mind! When I work, it's like diving into the edge of disaster every time. But it's not all drudgery. When I was in Jackson County, Alabama, painting for this show, I spent time exploring in addition to painting. So I do take breaks and scout out new locations that might have future potential.

PB: As your paintings become larger and take longer to complete, how do you handle the changing light conditions that come with working from the same subject for many hours?

LG: It has forced me to break some conventional rules of picture making. For example, if the light is coming from a certain direction, I'll render it that way. But often I'll refocus on a section after the light has shifted, and that changes the way I will paint it. Unless it's a problem, that's how it stays. Picture making is often based on static images. It's about keeping the "still life" aspect of the scene. You don't often think of the time-based nature of action art combined with plein air painting, but that's what I do. Most plein air artists are still chasing Monet, trying to capture a distilled sense of light or time. But I'm not, because I want my works to have an expanded sense of time. I want the whole darn day!

PB: Your works are also distinguished by a heightened palette, an almost hyper-real sense of color.

LG: I think it's partly due to the sustained viewing that comes from spending so much time in the landscape. When I'm working intensively in a daylong plein air session, looking at the same tree trunks for example, there's a surprising range of warm and cool colors present, especially in the mid-tones. But they're not evident all at once — they change fairly radically depending on the light. Because I'm there all day, I can key into the full spectrum of colors within the landscape, and still have my paintings remain recognizable. A viewer once observed that our memory of places is more like a series of condensed highlights than a single photograph. Others have told me that my landscapes are the first they've seen that capture the experience of actually being in the woods. Maybe having them more heightened makes them more real for the viewer.

PB: Are there contemporary artists that you particularly admire?

LG: Chuck Close is one of my painting gods. You can read about his work, but until you're in the presence of his large paintings you can't comprehend what an incredible visual delight they are. He and I work absolutely differently. He's very methodical and his works are photo-based. His magic is in how all those colors can blend into a very static image, and also become an active perceptual experience. If I could have one major contemporary work of art, it would be a Chuck Close portrait. Of course, I'd love it if it were a portrait of me. A real big one — the bigger the better!

PB: Who are your heroes from the past?

LG: If I could have anything from the art historical past, it would be Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. How could anyone not want that? I also love Sargent's watercolors for their bravado. He's not afraid of making very bold brush marks, knowing full well that if they aren't right, he can't get back to the white of the paper. I love when artists tell me, "Your paintings make me want to go into the studio to paint." I think it's because they are, at the end of the day, about the love of painting.



"You don't often think of the time-based nature of action art combined with plein air painting, but that's what I do."

previous:
Stained Glass Woods, WA, 2007,
oil on canvas, 48 x 132 inches overall

opposite (detail) and above:
St. Marks Inlet, FL, 2007,
oil on canvas, 40 X 30 inches



above: *Hyperbolic Nature #1*, 2008,
oil on canvas, 60 X 48 inches

opposite: *Hyperbolic Nature Central Diptych*, 2008, oil
on canvas, 60 X 96 inches overall

PB: The centerpiece of your exhibition in Huntsville is a tour-de-force group of fourteen large paintings, *Hyperbolic Nature*, sequenced together to create an encompassing panorama. Is this your first such installation?

LG: It's the most ambitious to date, but not the first. At Skowhegan, I painted over thirty small canvases that I arranged on three walls of my studio. I was very excited about it. What's nice about doing a series like this is that one painting may or may not work next to another, because I complete each painting individually. Sometimes things come out of paintings that I didn't intend. And that's okay — it wasn't what I wanted, but it's still interesting. I like moving to the next one, because oftentimes once you step away from your expectations, you can more fully appreciate what the *painting* has to say. The first painting in the new installation is a good example. I didn't approach it thinking it was going to have such a yin-and-yang feeling, with tangled vegetation in one side, and the other side relatively open. I originally found myself fighting it, because my initial concept was to communicate a feeling of overwhelming growth. Then I thought, "Let me leave it alone." When I placed it at the beginning of the installation, it worked!

PB: Were all of the individual components of *Hyperbolic Nature* painted around Tallahassee?

LG: The paintings of palmettos and charred palms were all executed in the coastal scrub around St. Marks, which is 30 minutes south of Tallahassee. The ones with tangled vegetation were done about a mile from here. When

I work in environments like these that haven't been claimed and changed, I feel at home. They're everybody's place.

PB: The immediacy of the way you handle paint in your landscapes gives them the quality of living, breathing things. It also creates a very engaging viewing experience, because it takes time to really see and digest the sheer volume of information contained within.

LG: I've found that people appreciate the "no guts, no glory" approach I take with my painting — how the imagery makes sense when viewed from a distance, but how loose and raw the paint appears up close. Viewers are often amazed that I can apply paint so abstractly — squeeze it directly from a tube — and get away with it. Looking deep, the idea of "more is more" in my work — of often wanting to include everything but the kitchen sink — ultimately comes from my Latino background. Although it may not be obvious, I think the desire to be both representational and abstract in my work has something to do with being bicultural — with growing up in one world and assimilating into another. In college when I was experimenting with representation and abstraction I was constantly told, "You need to choose between the two." But I've always thought, "Why do I have to choose? I like both!"





above: *Birch Melt, NH, 2007*, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

opposite: *Hyperbolic Nature #15 (detail), 2008*, oil on canvas, 60 X 48 inches



Biography

Born in 1966, Havana, Cuba
Lives in Tallahassee, Florida

Education

- 1990 MFA University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA
- 1988 BFA Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX

Professional Experience

- 2001–Present Professor of Art, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL
- 1991–2001 Associate Professor of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX

Selected Exhibitions

- 2008 *A Mysterious Clarity (Burggraf, Garcia-Roig & Messersmith)*, Gulf Coast Museum of Art, Largo, FL; Brevard Museum of Art, Melbourne, FL
- Deep Into the Woods* (solo exhibition), Grace Museum of Art, Abilene, TX; Michelson Museum of Art, Marshall, TX
- Encounters: Lilian Garcia-Roig* (solo exhibition), Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL
- More is More*, Byblos Gallery, Verona, Italy; SCOPE Basel, Basel, Switzerland
- 2007 *Cumulative Nature* (solo exhibition), Carol Jazzar Gallery, Miami, FL

- More is More: Maximalist Painting Tendencies in Contemporary American Painting*, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL
- Solo Exhibition*, Valley House Gallery, Dallas, TX (also 2004, 1999, 1997, 1994)
- The Red Clay Survey: 2007 Exhibition of Contemporary Southern Art*, Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL
- Viewing MacDowell: Works by Recent MacDowell Colony Artists*, Sharon Arts Center, Peterborough, NH
- 2006 *Lilian Garcia-Roig: Thick Brush Painting Installation* (solo exhibition), McKinney Avenue Contemporary, Dallas, TX
- underCURRENT/overVIEW 8*, Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, FL
- 2005 *Cintas Fellowships in the Visual Arts Finalists*, The Americas Society Art Gallery, New York, NY
- Florida Focus: Northern Tropics*, Gulf Coast Museum of Art, Largo, FL
- 2004 *Rogue Nations: Cuban & Chinese Artists*, MACLA, San Jose, CA
- Transitory Patterns: Florida Women Artists*, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC (traveled)
- 2002 *Flora*, Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science, Tallahassee, FL
- Time/Frame*, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX
- 1999 *Lilian Garcia-Roig* (solo exhibition), San Angelo Museum of Art, San Angelo, TX

- 1997 *Fresh Ink*, Austin Museum of Art, Austin, TX
- Landscapes: Changing Perspectives*, El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, TX
- 1995 *Six Contemporary Texas Artists*, Tyler Museum of Art, Tyler, TX

Selected Awards and Fellowships

- 2008 *Individual Artist Fellowship*, State of Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, Tallahassee, FL
- 2006 *Artist Enhancement Grant Recipient*, State of Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, Tallahassee, FL
- Milton and Sally Avery Fellow*, MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH
- Painters & Sculptors Grant Recipient*, The Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York, NY
- 2004 *Featured Artist, Hispanic Heritage Month*, State of Florida, Tallahassee, FL
- 1999 *Invited Visiting Artist*, Ludwig Foundation of Cuba, Havana, Cuba
- 1994 *Artist in Residency Fellowship*, Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT
- Fellowship Award in Painting*, Mid-America Arts Alliance/National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC
- 1992 *Arch and Anne Giles Kimbrough Fund Award*, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX
- 1990 *Charles Addams Memorial Prize in Fine Art, Fellowship Recipient*, Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME

Museum and University Collections

- ASU Art Museum, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ
- Austin Museum of Art, Austin, TX
- Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX
- El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, TX
- International Museum of Art & Science, McAllen, TX
- Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, TX
- Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, TX
- Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland, FL
- San Angelo Museum of Art, San Angelo, TX
- Tyler Museum of Art, Tyler, TX

For further information, visit www.liliangarcia-roig.com

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— Lilian Garcia-Roig





Huntsville Museum of Art