

artillery

AMERICA TROPICAL

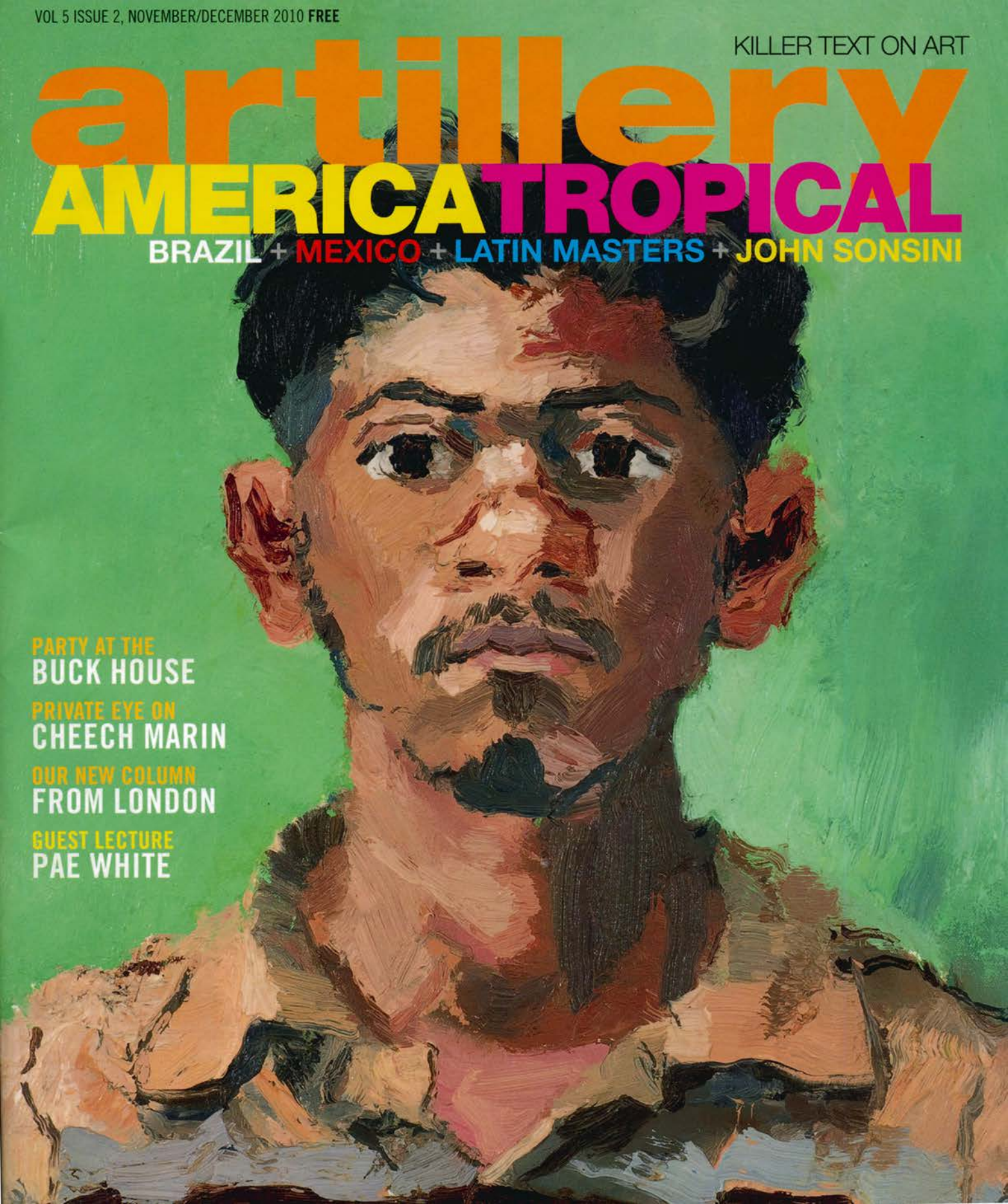
BRAZIL + MEXICO + LATIN MASTERS + JOHN SONSINI

PARTY AT THE
BUCK HOUSE

PRIVATE EYE ON
CHEECH MARIN

OUR NEW COLUMN
FROM LONDON

GUEST LECTURE
PAE WHITE



ALBERTO BURRI

Santa Monica Museum of Art

ALBERTO BURRI (1915–1995) is considered a seminal modern artist in Italy and is also thought to be a precursor and direct link to many artists and artistic movements (from early Pop art to Art Informel to Arte Povera) both in Europe and the United States. With “Combustione: Alberto Burri and America” at the SMMOA, viewers have a chance to get an overview of the artwork by this prolific and important figure.

The artwork itself is stunning. Large swaths of raw materials not then associated with fine arts were manipulated or treated physically by the artist in such a way as to create a field of action in which the residual traces of the artist’s hand vies with a sense of pure materiality. Utilizing elements such as burlap, plastic and celotex (fiberboard) Burri paints, sews, burns and coats the extended fragments, leaving behind the ineluctable imprint of human activity. Though he began as a traditional painter during his detention at a prisoner-of-war facility in Hereford, Texas, Burri quickly abandoned traditional art-making materials and began integrating discarded materials taken from the world around him. The appearance of his Sacchi series in the early 1950s, which used the burlap material from military supply sacks as a painting support, represented a radical shift in generational art-making. Burri employed the discarded debris of postwar life and industrial byproducts such as tar, sheet metal, plastic and plywood which he transformed through actions: by painting (minimally) scoring, ripping, stitching, burning and collaging. Doing so, he constructed an art world in which the sense and sentiment of existentialist philosophy was given form.

Process and chance are a part of Burri’s poetics, as in *Sacco L.A.* (1953), a medium scale, acrylic on canvas work, on which over-

lapping scraps of burlap, each distressed by time, are laid up in an uneven pattern and then small areas of paint are applied almost as though they were stains, already contained in the fabric. The overall effect is as emotionally poignant as it is technically audacious. Likewise, *Nero Plastica L.A.* (1963) a plastic combustion on canvas; the artist applied a flame to large sheets of plastic, burning through it in some places and leaving the rest with its characteristic sag and char, hanging off the frame.

Whether a viewer connects this overall mode of working to the artist’s past as a doctor in wartime or simply understands it as part of the modern artist’s tension towards reduction and essentialization, it has created powerful visual works. The artist himself was a private person during an era in which artists were increasing their public profile, so this exhibition provides a long overdue reconciliation with Burri’s involvement in the art worlds

Alberto Burri, *Sacco L.A.*, 1953



between Europe and the U.S. Particular attention to his production in America and in California (he spent over 25 years working at his home and studio in the Hollywood Hills during the winter) is an important part of the Combustione exhibition, as is the extremely well-written catalog with essays by Lisa Melandri and Michael Duncan.

Ends December 18, 2010

—John David O’Brien