

WITHOUT

MASKS



CONTEMPORARY AFRO-CUBAN ART

CURATOR / ORLANDO HERNÁNDEZ / TEXTS

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The von Christierson Collection

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Without Masks
Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art
The von Christierson Collection
Exhibition & Book

Curator, texts and editor:
Orlando Hernández

Translations from Spanish:
Gloria Riva

Design:
Luis Alonso



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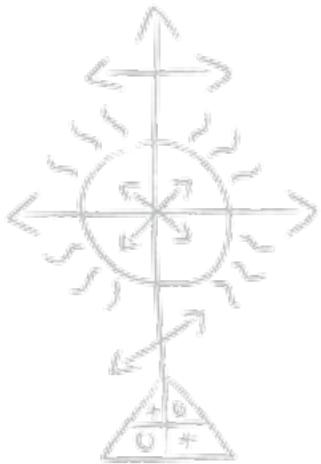
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The artists
Cllr Bafana Sithole:
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Foreword

Chris von Christierson

Without Masks: Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art

by Orlando Hernández

We have given a double title to this exhibition and its accompanying publication: a metaphoric one (*WITHOUT MASKS*) and a more descriptive one (*CONTEMPORARY AFRO-CUBAN ART*). Both titles express the thematic content of our project and the purpose we pursue. We wish to show, on the one hand, new and original representations and appropriations recent Cuban art has made based on our African heritage (preserved and developed by the religious communities known as *REGLA DE OCHA* or *SANTERÍA*, *IFÁ*, *PALO MONTE* and the *ABAKUÁ* Secret Society), and on the other hand, to identify and include creations that reflect conflicting polemic areas of our national reality that have remained silenced for so long, and are little known outside of Cuba. We refer to the existence of racial prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination which continue to injure the black and mulatto population of Cuba directly and our entire society and culture indirectly, in spite of the hypothetically non-aggressive and non-extreme nature of its manifestations, and the advances made in social equality since the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

In addition to offering an opportunity to verify the continuous presence and vitality of those ancient cultural and religious traditions of African origin in contemporary Cuban art, this exhibition seeks to fulfil the intellectual, moral and political obligation to provoke reflection on the racial problems in Cuba, with the intention of contributing to its understanding and future resolution. Beyond the purpose of "unmasking" the local manifestation of these problems, these

artworks and texts should be perceived as part of a wider exercise of enquiry that, although based on Cuban reality and art, attempts to generate comparisons with racial relations in other national contexts and the presence or absence of artistic representations which reflect them.

The existence of so many practitioners of religions of African origin in our society and in the Cuban intellectual and artistic circles may be surprising for many in a country where Marxist doctrine has inculcated scientific atheism for half a century. The existence of racial prejudice and discrimination may also come as a surprise in a society with policies based on the equal rights of all Cubans. Many believe that the State should assume all the blame for the alleged re-emergence of prejudices and discriminatory behaviour against the black and mulatto populations since it is the State that ensures that the law is upheld, controls the mass media, the press, editorials, radio and T.V., establishes curricula at all levels of education and organizes and implements Cuba's cultural policy, and it is precisely through those instruments that the population must have been educated regarding that ancient colonial disease introduced into Cuba in the 16th century as a consequence of the slave regime. Neglecting or omitting such an important issue is truly the State's responsibility, but I believe we should also examine the attitude adopted by each of us as citizens, our relations with our relatives, friends, schoolmates and colleagues, to counteract racial prejudice. Racism may be disseminated through

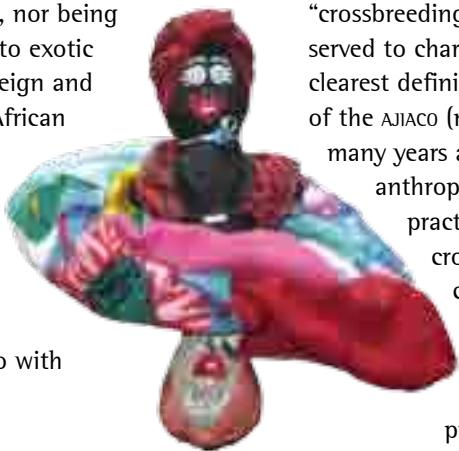
apparently innocent jokes, the habitual use of offensive epithets, paternalistic treatment or negative stereotypes of black people. In fact, according to the Brazilian anthropologist Rita Laura Segato, "THE MOST TYPICAL EXPRESSION OF RACIST PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION IS THE POSITIVE PREJUDICE DEPOSITED ON WHITE PEOPLE."¹ So we are all responsible, to a greater or lesser extent, for the unconscious and automatic reproduction of racial prejudice. If we criticize the Cuban state for abolishing racism "by decree" at the beginning of the Revolution or for thinking prematurely that the issue was settled once it established equal rights for all without analyzing the multiple social, economic, cultural and psychological causes that could keep it alive, should we wait for a decree authorizing us to confront this same racism? Or should we wait for the fulfilment of international agreements on the subject when we know that many of those instruments have proved to be slow and inoperative? The individual nature of the artistic discourses gathered here, the private or family ownership of the collection and the independent and non-institutional character of its curator emphasize the importance of individual commitment in facing these problems. However, this does not imply that we should free the State from past responsibilities and future obligations in this regard.

We believe that Cuba's African heritage cannot continue to be reduced to the religious, symbolic, aesthetic or festive elements of Yoruba, Bantú and Carabali rituals. Although these are unquestionably

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important, Ethnography and Folklore have made them central to the understanding of these legacies, detaching our heritage from the conditions of subordination, inequality and discrimination under which the Black-Afro descendants of Cuba have had to develop their traditions, affecting their development and preventing their full dissemination and understanding by the whole of our population. For a long time this view attached to religion has been assumed by many of our artistic creators, our history of art and museum collecting, thereby facilitating the public construction of an idealized, picturesque and passive image of the Afro-Cuban issue. Our African heritage – assumed and developed by blacks, mulattos and whites – does not permit being treated in a neutral, sanitized or non-problematic manner, nor being turned indolently into exotic commodities for foreign and local tourism. This African legacy should not be emptied of its antihegemonic, critical, accusing contents, whose long history began several centuries ago with



the uprisings of African and Creole slaves, with their participation in the struggles for independence, continued up to the present in various practices of opposition, resistance and cultural marooning. Nor can the issues of racial identity, negritude or black consciousness which have always accompanied the understanding of these African legacies be avoided as untimely or imprudent; nor is it possible to dodge the importance of reconstructing, disseminating and recovering the historical, institutional, familiar and personal memory that is exclusive to this historically disadvantaged sector of our population. Likewise, we believe that Cuban society and culture – and art as one of its expressions – should be understood beyond the limits set by the falsely unifying and non-differentiating “crossbreeding” concept that has generally served to characterize us, which reached its clearest definition in the culinary metaphor of the AJIACO (melting pot) popularized many years ago by the father of Cuban anthropology, Fernando Ortiz.² In practice, the overvaluation of the crossbreeding concept has had a cushioning and demobilizing effect in the face of the racism that still exists against blacks. Can we say that the processes of biological and cultural cross-breeding have allowed the attainment in Cuba of a racial democracy, as some have surmised, where reference to skin colour would make no difference? If we are truly a mixed, mulatto society why would anyone be interested in making the black component visible as something different? If we are all simply Cubans why continue to insist on the importance of our Afro-Cubanness?

Our current emphasis on the cultural and religious components of African origin

and the racial problems of the blacks and mulattos of Cuba has the main objective of granting visibility to those historically-disadvantaged social sectors in the daily exercise of white privilege, which in one way or another is still present in contemporary Cuban society. This does not mean that we are assuming a sectarian or prejudicial position toward the white or Euro-descendant population, nor does it mean that we underestimate the importance of our Chinese, Arab, Latin American, Caribbean and even American³ cultural heritage which have also shaped the social and cultural identity of our still evolving Cuban nation. We do not wish to participate in any type of segregation or racism.

The wide, inclusive, integrationist Afro-Cuban concept we have attempted to create in this project, in which black, white and mulatto artists participate equally, is not a recent historical product. Nor is it something we may attribute exclusively to the democratic ideals derived from political practice, or the letter of progressive constitutions, or the consensus reached by whites and blacks during the wars against slavery and Spanish colonialism, and not even to the progress made in social and racial equality since the revolution of 1959. These inter-racial integrative or fraternity processes were practiced long before by many sectors of our population, especially the popular classes and, to a smaller extent, our religious groupings of African origin, as early as the third decade of the 19th century, when they accepted into their ranks all racial sectors of our population.

This exhibition also seeks to make new and deeper studies of those cultural, aesthetic, symbolic and religious legacies that we share and take for granted, without forgetting that we have received them

from black sub-Saharan Africa, which will afford the population of African descent the recovery and consolidation of its own history, racial identity, social pride and intellectual self-esteem, all damaged by centuries of exclusion and contempt. At the same time we would like to highlight and encourage the insurgent and rebellious nature – in the guise of social and political claims – that has always been

present (openly or covertly) in the Cuban black and mulatto population as one of the alternatives to the Euro-centred, patriarchal, classist, elitist and racist mentality that still predominates in most world societies, including those like Cuba, where we thought it had been finally overcome.

Although our emphasis on all things African in Cuba allows us to talk with ease about Afro-Cubanness, this does not mean that black and mulatto peoples are the only object of our quest: we would also like to verify how our alleged white or Euro-descendant culture took shape in the midst of cross-breeding and transculturations with social sectors of African descent. Our concern is not about white artists assuming blackness or Afro-Cubanness superficially as the theme of their works, but that these Cuban artists are white in the only way they can be in our country, which is full of social, cultural, religious, symbolic and aesthetic ingredients of African origin and this is a process that began five centuries ago! This Afro-Cubanness also refers to Cuban men and women with less melanin in their skin. We are inclined to favour displacing the



concepts of Afro-Cubanness, crossbreeding and negritude from their merely biological and somatic positions (black or mulatto skin), emphasising instead the social and cultural condition expressed in works, attitudes and a sense of ownership, since we believe that in the long run the colour of culture is more important than the colour of skin. A person may be white from a somatic viewpoint and black from a cultural viewpoint, and being black or mulatto is not enough to automatically become the heir to African traditions or to act consistently against a racism that weighs down on the black and mulatto population of Cuba.

WITHOUT MASKS: CONTEMPORARY AFRO-CUBAN ART was initiated in November 2007 with the full backing and financial support of South African businessman and collector, Chris von Christierson and his family, who are now based in London. Since its inception, they have enthusiastically embraced the idea of a collection of Cuban art that would show the multiple imprints of Africa in Cuba's artistic culture. A collection not for private enjoyment but dedicated to fostering greater knowledge through a series of public

exhibitions and publications. Since the beginning, the intention has been for this to be a travelling exhibition, with special emphasis on regions inhabited by African populations, the African Diaspora, or by communities of African origin from different nationalities who coexist with other ethnic or race groups, and where, consequently, our project could arouse greater interest and identification with the values and problems it portrays. However, these prerequisites are by no means exclusive and should not limit the project's exhibition elsewhere. In fact, the ample dissemination of the cultural values emanating from Africa and Afro-America, as well as the multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural nature of the majority of the world's societies today, together with the regrettable proliferation of ethnic, racial and religious conflicts, suggest wide reception of this project. Its social and cultural usefulness has been our main motivation.

The collection currently consists of 99 works by 26 contemporary Cuban artists, covering a relatively short period, from 1980 to 2009, although most artworks were made in the last decade of the 1990s and the 21st century. We have chosen this brief period in Cuban art because it is in this interval that the treatment of the Afro-Cuban theme acquired deeper and better informed approaches to religious subjects, and a more reflexive and critical tone arose in relation to the theme of race. This contrasts with the relatively stereotyped, idealized or picturesque approach of earlier periods (particularly the 19th century and a large part of the 20th century).

The collection may be considered a work in progress, since it could in the future include works by other Cuban artists from different generations and explore other kinds of creative expressions not included in the

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present exhibition. The media represented in this collection include painting on canvas and wood, watercolour, drawing, printing (xylography, silk-screen, collography), collage, patchwork, installation, soft-sculpture, photography, video-installation and video art.

At this point, we cannot overlook an important issue: the collection does not currently include examples of Afro-Cuban ritual art, developed within the religious communities of SANTERÍA and Ifá, PALO MONTE and ABAKUÁ. These peculiar forms of art provide an essential understanding of those



African legacies that are only represented or “translated” in the modern western-style artistic works shown in this collection. This is a complex matter requiring the utmost care, since Afro-Cuban ritual art is not only made up of objects and images, but more complex practices involving the practitioners themselves in their various ritual activities and we would risk dramatizing or aesthetizing some of the creations by removing them from their original spaces and functions, always related to the sacred, and turning into a spectacle that which is a transcendental event for the members of those religious communities. However, we believe that in the future we should run those risks so that some elements of this

impressive aesthetic-symbolic creativity may be known within a wider and less exclusive framework than what we have called here contemporary Afro-Cuban art.

This collection of contemporary Afro-Cuban art is exceptional in that it has assembled for the first time a large and varied group of Cuban artists devoted to exploring profoundly and with originality two great themes that have previously been regarded individually, namely the cultural and religious traditions of Africa in Cuba and the multiple problems related with the racial issue.

While other exhibitions have been shown in Cuba and abroad regarding the cultural and religious traditions of African origin in Cuba, those devoted to racial subjects have been fewer. Three relatively small but important and truly inspiring exhibitions became

the pioneers in dealing with the racial issue in our country: QUELOIDES I, (Casa de África, Havana, 1997), Ni Músicos ni DEPORTISTAS, (CENTRO PROVINCIAL DE ARTES PLÁSTICAS Y DISEÑO, 1997) and QUELOIDES II (CENTRO DE DESARROLLO DE LAS ARTES VISUALES, Havana, 1999). These two themes have been supplemented with other unusual artistic representation, such as the political-military presence of Cuba in the wars in Africa (Carlos Garaicoa’s works on Angola) or the allusion to African ritual traditions and deities in Cuban art (Santiago R. Olazabal), largely due to the re-Africanizing process that has taken place in recent years in certain religious circles in Cuba. We have included some artists who have broached the subject only occasionally

but from new perspectives (such as Yoan Capote), others who have always worked with these Afro-Cuban traditions but in a discreet or barely perceptible manner, thus being left out of previous selections (such as Rubén Rodríguez). As far as we know, in spite of previous exhibitions related to the Afro-Cuban theme, there is no other private or institutional collection of this magnitude, in Cuba or elsewhere, dedicated to these topics in such an ample and diversified manner, nor with such a large-scale representation of relevant artists.

From the start we have followed rigorous criteria in the selection of the artists: most have achieved national and international acknowledgement, and the selected works have aesthetic quality. However, our interest has also taken the focus beyond the aesthetic, favouring originality and the profoundness of the sociological, historical, anthropological, religious, ethical and political messages contained in the works. This has been encouraged by the presence in recent Cuban art of reflexive rather than contemplative or hedonistic approaches, and by recent debates in the academic circles in Cuba on the racial issue. Although we have inclined ourselves more to content than procedure, or to what the artists say more than the way in which they say it, we have taken care to make both requirements coincide.

In the following 26 brief essays devoted to each artist and the works shown in this collection, I have given priority to interpreting, deciphering, explaining and giving clues related to our contexts so as to allow the viewer a better understanding of the oeuvres. I have given less space to sharing the joy, the pleasure that the works elicit or to celebrating their formal excellence or originality. At the risk of decreasing the

mystery of the artworks, I have included small photos (mostly taken by myself) to illustrate the texts, with the intention of making the sources of such works known. I confess to being more interested in cognitive than aesthetic issues. Aesthetics, style and fashion are probably the *SINE QUA NON* conditions of works of art, but I cannot conceive of artistic works unbound from knowledge and usefulness. As an art critic I have always attended more to the viewers' need to understand and less to please the requirements of a minority group of experts. From this perspective, I consider the complexity of aesthetic, formal and stylistic artifices (those related with appearance) as some of the many "masks" that art should discard in preference for more important messages that the nude or less occult "face" would be able to transmit. Doing this would increase the receptive framework of art, which has a tendency towards elitist cultural production.

This exhibition has placed on an equal footing artists who are world-famous and artists who are practically unknown, those who are professional graduates of important academies and those who are self-taught, those who have received important awards and those who have received only acknowledgement. We have also not taken into account the place of residence of the Cuban artists represented.

Lastly, I would like to clarify the order in which the artists appear in this publication. The 26 artists have been listed in an unusual way, not following alphabetical order, but instead following the hierarchical order established by age, and then starting with those who have passed away. This is the respectful attitude followed by our Afro-Cuban religious groups.

¹ Rita Laura Segato.
"Racismo, discriminación y acciones afirmativas: herramientas conceptuales".
Serie Antropología, no. 404, Universidad de Brasilia, Brasil, 2006, p.5

² Fernando Ortiz. "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad" (1939) *Estudios Etno-sociológicos, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, Havana, 1991, p 10-30*

³ Against our wish we are following here the conventional use of the term America to refer to the United States of America.

ORLANDO HERNÁNDEZ PASCUAL

(San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba, 1953) is an independent writer, poet, art critic and a researcher in popular cultures and Afro-Cuban ritual arts. He graduated in Art History at Universidad de La Habana, Cuba, in 1978. He worked as a curator and researcher in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana from 1978 to 1989. His essays on art and culture have been published extensively in catalogues, magazines and books in Cuba and abroad from the 1980's. Some of his more recent essays include: "The art victims of Havana", Parachute 125, Montreal, 2007; "The importance of being local", exhibition catalogue of Cuban artist Alberto Casado, Art in General, New York, 2005; "Unfaithful readings" (Eighteen short stories based on Carlos Garaicoa's works), exhibition catalogue of Capablanca's Real Passion, MOCA, 2005; "The pleasure of the reference", published in "Art Cuba: The New Generation" edited by Holly Block, Harry Abrams, Inc NY, 2001. As a poet he has made "Artist's Books" with Cuban artists José Bedia, Julio Girona, Gustavo Acosta, Carlos Garaicoa, Lázaro Saavedra and Ibrahim Miranda. He is member of AICA – Southern Caribbean and UNEAC. He lives in La Habana, Cuba.

(San Luis, Santiago de Cuba, 1912 - Havana, 2008)



It may seem strange, even inappropriate, to include Ruperto Jay Matamoros in a show devoted to contemporary Afro-Cuban art. Perhaps the reason for such a decision is that Matamoros belongs to the Afro-Cuban world, since he was a black artist. However, is it possible to consider Matamoros a contemporary artist? Is this not a chronological or generational, as well as a stylistic transgression? Matamoros began to paint in 1937; he was active as an artist for 70 years and died in 2008 when he was 96 years old. He was a self-taught artist, with the exception of some rudimentary knowledge acquired when he attended the ESTUDIO LIBRE PARA PINTORES Y ESCULTORES (Free Studio for Painters and Sculptors), a brief teaching experience organized by avant-garde artists during the third decade of the 20th century. However, Matamoros was never interested in modernizing or updating his artistic language. Like most popular or self-taught artists, he remained faithful throughout his career to his own expressive forms -those that some continue to mistakenly classify as "primitive" or "naïve"- and he was attached to his topics, his landscapes, his characters and the personal vision of life which he learned during his rural childhood and while performing a great many trades and occupations.

The truth is that regarding contemporary art, we have a false idea about the supremacy of innovation of language and style, and about the automatic importance attached to it by current information and academic or professional studies about art. Contemporary art seems to have acquired a status related almost exclusively to the employment of new, experimental languages, with the predominance of formal inventiveness, cleverness, wit and artifice which are often dictated by fashion and art market trends¹. As a result, a sizeable portion of artistic production classified as contemporary is conceived by many people as a sophisticated, luxurious and incomprehensible puzzle designed to entertain a minority of initiates. However, I would like to point out that this view of contemporary art excludes and discriminates against any artistic production whose language is considered dated or conventional, and thus leaves out popular or self-taught painting, not to mention other creative productions, full of aesthetic and symbolic values which are simply considered non-artistic. Not even coincidence in time has allowed popular artists to be given such credit, since the term "contemporary" has ceased to operate as a chronological concept, but rather refers to the youngest generations of elite artists closer to mainstream dictates.

Despite these bureaucratic hindrances typical of the art system, we believe that the works of Jay Matamoros are sufficiently abundant in elements of interest on the issues approached by our Afro-Cuban project to consider his contemporaneity, or his up-to-datedness, very seriously. Perhaps this is a subjective decision, but didn't Arnold Hauser tell us "of any art with which we have an authentic relationship we build modern art"?² By including Matamoros -as well as some other artists in this show- we are attempting to dismantle the false elitist and formalist concept of contemporary art in order to present an approach based more on the social and cultural importance that these works reflect or provoke.

Jay Matamoros was able to cut through a good number of generational barriers graciously, inviting an almost unwavering public interest in his work and the contents of his discourse, convinced that there is no better way of saying things than to say them with simplicity. His artistic originality was never dependent on the juggling of the language, which at times surrounded him. Nevertheless, it is not only his artistic stand that has moved us to include him in our selection.

El Labrador
(The Farmer), 1988
Oil on canvas
48 x 46 cm

The work of Jay Matamoros has received praise for its beauty, its country-life grace and the sensuality of its colouring, but the critics have always stopped at the easy frontier of the aesthetic, of appearance, obviating or neglecting its reflexive aspects, his philosophy, the depth of his knowledge of the world. As is the case with other older black popular artists that could have accompanied Matamoros in this Afro-Cuban show, specifically Gilberto de la Nuez (1913-1993) and Elpidio Guerra "Mirito" (1923-1995), our critical response echoes the stereotypical and condescending perception with which we observe the humble people, workers and farmers. We find them amusing, open, witty, but of simple minds, or shallow in contrast to, for example, enlightened artists, intellectuals who practice conceptual or post-conceptual art. However, popular Cuban painting is particularly complex and intelligent. The ornamental and picturesque may be an added value, but it is generally a conscientious, reflexive art, at times wise, deeply interested in history, politics and the social, cultural, racial and religious problems of our country and the world. From this perspective, the work of Jay Matamoros has been scantily celebrated or studied for its true but least apparent value, despite the fact that he was granted the National Prize for Painting in 2000. The two works that we will comment on, among thousands made by his hands, clearly demonstrate Matamoros's interest in reflecting issues related to our history, our traditions, even when sometimes African and Afro-Cuban issues occupy a hidden, veiled place but are undoubtedly present.



El Labrador (The Farmer), 1988

EL LABRADOR, 1988, despite its idyllic, picturesque aspect, seems to be an image taken from the years immediately after the abolition of slavery in Cuba (1886). This was a time when many former slaves, both African and Creole –some of them brought to Cuba from other Caribbean colonies such as Jamaica or Haiti– fell into total poverty and neglect, lacking sufficient ability or training to work as free men after spending so many years labouring in the sugar plantations and receiving sustenance from their masters. Many of these former slaves –some of whom had participated as soldiers and officers in the independence wars against Spain in 1868 and 1895– could only find shelter in thatched roof huts in the fields and devoted themselves to growing root crops and to animal husbandry to survive. The figure represented in the painting, with red and blue ribbons around his hat and waist (the



Haitian national flag

colours of the Haitian flag), is perhaps a Haitian or of Haitian descent. There were many Haitians in the eastern part of the country where Jay Matamoros was born and spent his childhood and adolescence, so that this painting may be a direct testimonial of their situation or something he heard of from his parents. Either way, this may be one of the many expressions of historical disadvantage still spoken about by part of the black population of Cuba who, despite equal opportunities offered since the revolution of 1959, still find it difficult to overcome their unequal starting point, as some social scientists have mentioned.³ The presence in the painting of a MAJÁ (a local non-poisonous snake) seems to confirm the Haitian-Cuban identity of the character, since this animal is part of Voodoo rituals, a religion from old Dahomey (today Benin) which is still practiced in the eastern region of Cuba and Haiti.

Ruperto Jay Matamoros

Flores de la Tierra
(Flowers from
earth), 1994
Oil on canvas
71 x 85 cm



Flores de la Tierra
(Flowers from Earth), 1994

FLORES DE LA TIERRA, 1994, is a peculiar compilation of proverbs and popular sayings about which Matamoros had already made a series of small-format paintings that he gathered in this painting in a single spike of rice. The grain of rice seems to allude to the synthesis or minimal place in which information may be stored. In this case, all the proverbs are related to the eyes and vision: "an eye for an eye"; "the master's eye makes the horse fat"; "the apple of my eye" (literally in Spanish "the girl of my eye"); "water spring" (literally in Spanish "water eye"); "at first glance" (literally in Spanish "at the flower of a glance,"), etc. In the traditional African system of knowledge, as inherited in Cuba, the summarized and metaphoric presentation of messages is very common, with proverbs and sayings occupying an important place. In the Yoruba divination systems practiced in Cuba, both Ifá and Santería or Regla de Ocha, as well as in the religion of Palo Monte, proverbs are widely used. Although many popular proverbs and sayings used by Jay Matamoros

stem from rural culture and not from Afro-Cuban religious contexts, his painting may be considered a celebration of our oral and poetic tradition, rich in symbols, to which many Africans and their descendants made great contributions. One way or another, his language is full of small symbolisms. The proximity of the sickle to the foot of the spike, for example, seems to clarify in a codified language that he is referring to gathering a crop of proverbs. Moreover, in both paintings, the flamboyant is present like in many of the artist's works; Matamoros always identified himself with the Royal Poinciana tree.

¹ Orlando Hernández "Por qué ha dejado de entusiasmarme el arte contemporáneo". La Gaceta de Cuba, Havana, no 3, May-June 2004, pp. 29-31.

² Arnold Hauser, *Introducción a la Historia del Arte*, , Instituto del Libro, Havana, 1969, p.15.

³ Esteban Morales. "Un modelo para el análisis de la problemática racial cubana contemporánea", Catauro, Cuban magazine on Anthropology, year 4, no.6, July-December 2002, pp. 52-93.

Belkis Ayón Manso

(Havana, 1967-1999)



Belkis Ayón with
Resurrection and
Perfidy, in Kind
Gallery, New York,
1998

artistic career to recreating the cultural and spiritual heritage of a religious group of African origin, known in Cuba as the Abakuá Secret Society, which has the peculiarity of being an all-male society. Despite the fact that it does not admit any woman as a member, the main protagonist of the mythology and rituals of the society was a female named Sikán.

According to scholars, this secret grouping originated from the ancient “leopard societies” known as Ngbe and Ekpe, which were introduced in Cuba by slaves of the Efik, Efut, Oru, Ekoi and Ibibio ethnic groups, among others, from the Cross River area in the Old Calabar, in the southeast of Nigeria and Cameroon. Since they were from Calabar, these slaves and their traditions were known as CARABALIES. It was probably in Cuba that the society acquired its function of “mutual aid and protection”, a function exerted previously by the “CABILDOS DE NACIÓN” in response to prevailing slavery conditions and its members’ need for protection and aid. The Abakuá Society was established in Cuba in around 1836 and it has been active until the present in the cities of Havana, Matanzas and Cárdenas and, strange as it may seem, in no other place outside of our island.

A very short version of the myth of the Abakuá -- among the several contradictory versions -- refers to Princess Sikán of the Efut (Efó, Efó) nation, who one morning went to the Oddán (or Odane) River to collect water in a vessel or gourd and unknowingly trapped a mysterious fish that would bring peace and prosperity to those who caught it, and whose strange bellow represented the voice of a deified ancestor, King Obón Tanze, who was also a manifestation of Abasí, the Almighty God. When she placed the gourd with the fish on her head, Sikán heard the sound (Uyo) and was the first to know the great secret, since she was automatically consecrated. With the authorization of iyamba, Sikán’s father, she was immediately hidden by Nasakó, the sorcerer, in a place in the bush to avoid the disclosure of the secret amongst the neighbouring nations who also wanted to have the fish. However, Sikán told the secret to her boyfriend, Prince Mokongo of the Efik, who then appeared before the Efó to claim his right to share the secret. A pact was made with them to avoid war but Sikán was condemned to death for disclosing the secret. Nasakó attempted, by means of magic, to get the fish to make its sacred sound. But the fish died and Nasakó then built a drum with the skin of the fish to resuscitate the voice, but the voice was very weak. He tried to do this with the skins of different animals; snake, crocodile, deer and ram, but the voice was never heard again. He then decided that Sikán’s blood could attract the spirit of Obón Tanze and Sikán was sacrificed by Ekweñón to invite the miracle. Sikán’s skin, however, was no good to build the sacred drum Ekwe, and instead the skin of a male goat (mbori) was used, a sacrifice carried out by the twins (abere) Aberiñán and Aberisún. When the Ekwe was consecrated, all the hierarchies and rituals of the Abakuá secret society were established. These are a meticulous representation of a very complex drama².

Very little remains of the secret character that this institution has prided itself upon over time. Ethnography has explained many details of its myths, rites, language, music, intricate graphic symbols (called ANAFORUANAS), as can be seen in books by Fernando Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera, Enrique Sosa and other specialists on the subject.³ Belkis Ayón’s art preserves those mysteries in a respectful way. She may have learned about them in these same books and in conversations with obonekues or initiates of that society, and then added others,

mixing and overlaying them. To the old mysteries that came from Africa, she added new ones, typical of a black Cuban woman of the end of the 20th century, with her troubles, concerns and ideas. And although unlike Sikán, she was not the victim of any sacrifice, she chose to commit suicide after leaving one of the most impressive artistic legacies in the history of Cuban art.

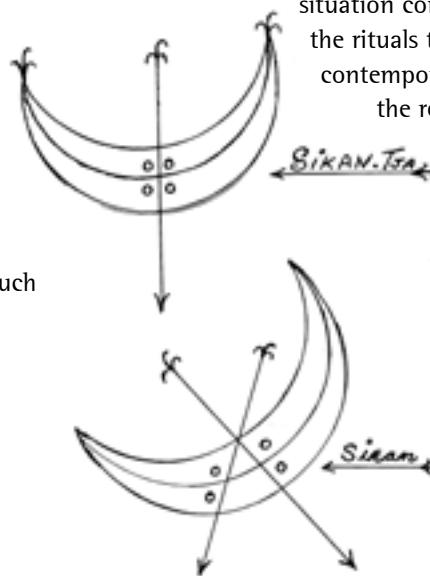
There is still much research to be done to discover the contents and purposes of Belkis Ayón's work, and this will be possible using the tools of art criticism and ethnography, as well as by getting the perspectives of the practicing members of the Abakuá Society. Approaching her work seems to require readings from the true specialists, the plazas, OBONES or INDIABONES who, being the highest religious hierarchy within this institution, have accrued the most knowledge and are therefore authorized to say what Belkis's artistic language expressed. Other transversal readings are necessary to allow us to distinguish between the real contents of the myth, rituals and Abakuá symbols which constitute the true cultural and spiritual wealth of the group and those that are the fruits of the imagination, creativity and the artist's personal interpretation. Without these comparative readings, we will always fall short of a true understanding. Belkis created a new version of the myth, a contemporary artistic version, somewhat different from the versions that tradition attributes to the ancient members of Efik, Efor and Oru, but her artistic myths were based on actual myths that still preserve their religious function in our society. It is therefore

necessary to take them into account as a starting point for a deeper understanding of her work. It is not enough to admire the uncommon beauty and technical perfection of her prints in the abstract⁴, but rather it is necessary to understand the specific knowledge that the artist had if we want to understand the meanings of those other discourses that she expressed through her prints.

Despite the fact that the references in Belkis's work are unquestionably bound to the African and Afro-Cuban tradition, and that they essentially preserve many "pre-modern", even "tribal" features, in many cases the atmospheres where the events develop, as well as the expressions and body posture of the characters send us back to traditions that we don't link easily with Africa, but with Christian Europe, sometimes reminiscent of a medieval and pre-Renaissance architecture, with allusions to the paintings of Giotto, Piero della Francesca or Fra Angelico. The solemnity, the elegance, even the gentleness in her work, refers us inevitably to such European tradition. For the first time in the representation of an all-male tradition of warring characters, bold as the Abakuá, it was possible to neutralize that violent, impulsive aspect, replacing it with correction, with manners, with a label that is very far from the African or Afro-Cuban stereotype that we know. Occasionally, Belkis even took well-known episodes of biblical history, such

as The Last Supper, and overlaid in them episodes of the sacred history of the Abakuá. What could have been Belkis's intention in such cases? Perhaps not so much syncretism with the Catholic tradition present in our traditions of African origin. There must be more than this, a less visible intention, perhaps to break down the negative clichés which still exist about this grouping - often considered a bloody and even criminal brotherhood - and to allow for a less prejudiced approach to its extraordinary aesthetic, symbolic and poetic values.

It is curious that in almost all her works Belkis herself served as model for the representation of Sikán. The shape of her body, her head, her face, her eyes constantly appear in her prints replacing the body, the head, the face and the eyes of Sikán. With this replacement, Sikán stopped being represented only by a male animal, the male goat (mbori), which is sacrificed in a substitution ritual, or by the simple signature or anaforuana with which Sikán is represented in an abstract, symbolic way. In Belkis's works, Sikán became a woman once again, a black Cuban woman with feelings, ideas and opinions. Belkis's presence as Sikán allows the ancient mythical situation constantly re-enacted in the rituals to become human and contemporary, thus making visible the real and daily content which the mechanics of every ritual tend to hide or forget.



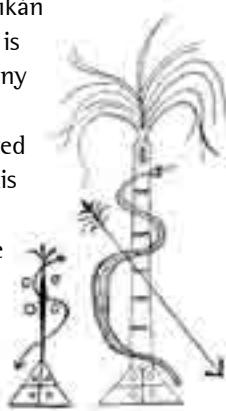
Anaforuanas (signatures)
of Sikán from Secrets
of Abakuá notebook by
Julián González Pérez.

Belkis Ayón Manso

Perfidia
(Perfidy), 1998
Collography on
heavy paper
200 x 252 cm
(7 sheets of 100 x 70 cm each)

Perfidia (Perfidy), 1998

Perfidia is one of the great works by Belkis. Despite the limited nature of our interpretations, we seem to see on the right side, Mpego, one of the OBONES, or dignitaries of higher hierarchy, holding his small and authoritarian drum and reporting, probably to king lyamba, Sikán's father, the need to sacrifice his daughter. To the left, with the body covered in fish scales, is Princess Sikán, her front and back depicted in such a way as to show that she hides the coveted fish Tanze in her right hand. Below, to the right, with a signature or anaforuana in the back that represents his hierarchy as a sorcerer, Nasakó offers a white rooster as an offering, since this is the first animal that Nasakó sacrificed to purify the fish in the episode of the bush. Another character offers him what could be the light of a candle, gunpowder or incense to remove bad spirits. All this is to make the spirit of Sikán appear, without which it is impossible to carry out any ceremony. It is probably this set of offerings, tinged with blackmail, that Belkis alludes to in her title, since such offerings have previously implied no more or less than the sacrifice or the ritual death of Sikán.



Anaforuana
(signatures) of Nasakó,
from Lydia Cabrera book
Anaforuana, 1975



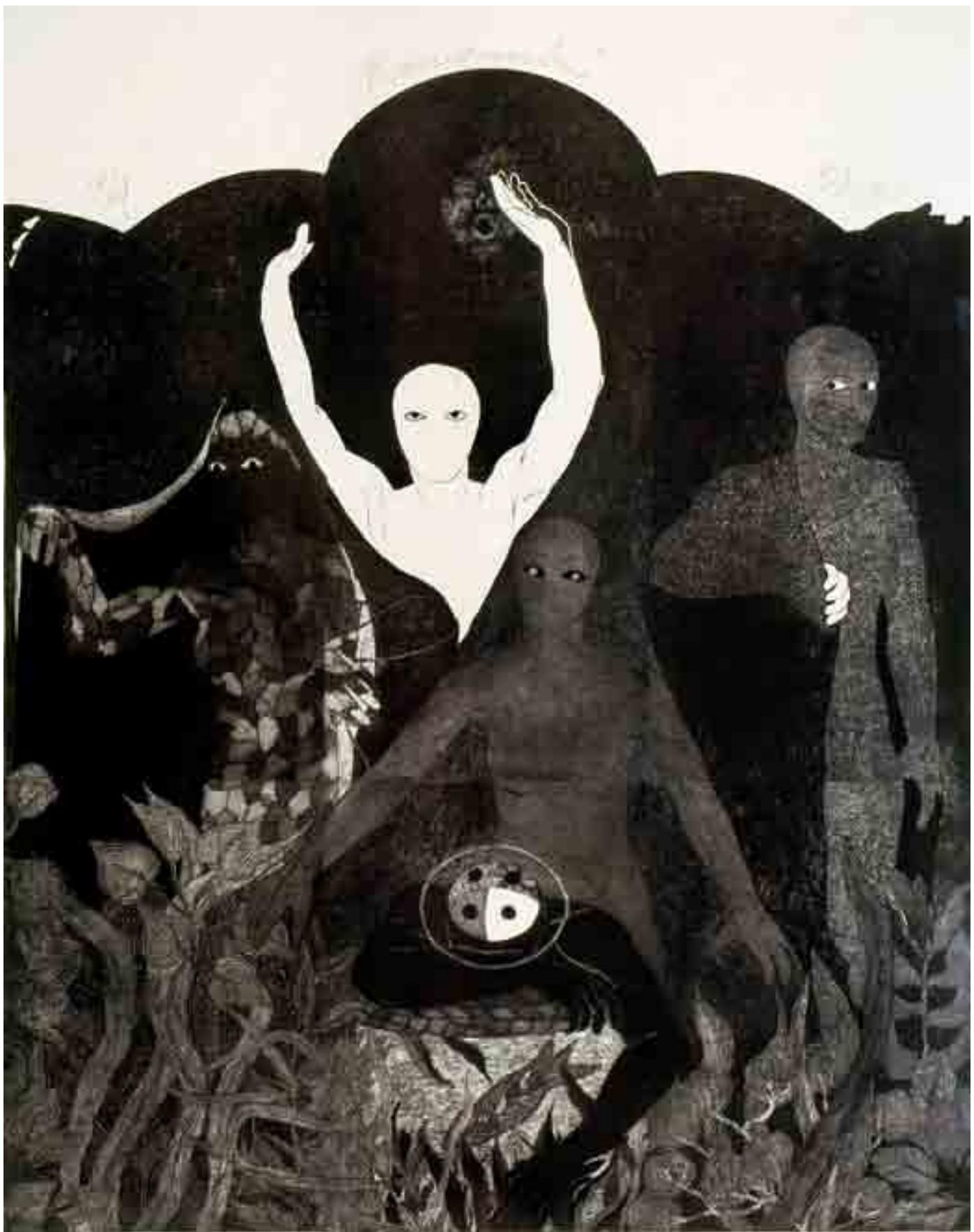


Nuestro deber
(Our Duty), 1993
Collography on
heavy paper
94 x 68 cm

Nuestro Deber (Our Duty), 1993

The twins Aberiñán and Aberisún seem to be represented in *NUESTRO DEBER*, 1993, in the foreground, one holding in his hands the head of the sacrificed goat, and in the other the head of Sikán, since they are at present (especially Aberiñán) responsible for the sacrifice of the male goat representing her in the ritual. In the background, the white figure would represent Sikán's own spirit. In this ceremony of killing the male goat, Aberiñán always approaches the place of the sacrifice dancing and refuses to fulfil his mandate, comes closer, makes a first attempt and withdraws horrified, embarrassed, until finally he is forced by the drum of Nkríkamo to commit murder. Perhaps in this work Belkis reflected a plea of pardon on behalf of those that have carried out the sacrifice, not only of a woman, but of the first consecrated member of that secret fraternity. There is in no hate in this action the executioners seem to be saying, but simply the discharge of a duty. However, did Belkis really accept this remote excuse?

Belkis Ayón Manso



Resurrección
(Resurrection)
1998
Collography
on heavy paper
263 x 212 cm
(9 sheets of
100 x 70 cm each)

Resurrección (Resurrection), 1998

RESURRECCIÓN, 1998 is another of the many monumental and powerful works by Belkis Ayón. It could refer to the momentous moment when the INDÍSIME, after having been initiated and transformed into obonekue, is born to a new life in the ABAKUÁ society. The signature painted on the shaved head of the kneeling character seems to indicate thus. The curtains could represent those of the IRIONGO or secret place where the EKWE, the sacred drum of the ABAKUÁ, is hidden and after which the different spirits appear from the bush, the river, which needed in this ritual. The figure at the back of the recent initiate is probably the spirit of SIKÁN who comes to protect the new initiate. High up, almost in darkness, an opened-mouth mysterious face seems to mimic the sacred sound made by the EKWE, a drum that is not tapped, as wisely pointed out by one OBONEKUE.

Perhaps we cannot disregard that all these complex mythical stories narrated by Belkis Ayón may have another reading, and refer to situations of her daily life, or the intimate, emotional, psychological life of the artist, or perhaps they are comments on women's rights, defensive arguments about gender equity, but what is evident is the existence of a consistent poetic language, well informed about Afro-Cuban religious traditions and performed with a great technical mastery and beauty.

¹ See her web site www.belkisayon.com/

² We have based our information on the version of the myth in Tato Quiñones essay, "La leyenda de Sikán: origen del mito abakud". In Ecorie Abakuá, Ediciones Unión, Havana, 1994.

³ On the Abakuá secret society, refer to, among others: Lydia Cabrera, *La Sociedad Secreta Abakuá narrada por viejos adeptos*, Ediciones Universal, Miami, Florida, 2005; by the same author, *La lengua sagrada de los ñáñigos*, Colección del Chicherekú en el exilio, Miami, Florida, 1988; and Anaforuana, *ritual y símbolos de la iniciación en la sociedad secreta Abakuá*, Ediciones R, Madrid, 1975; also, Enrique Sosa Rodríguez, *Los ñáñigos*, Premio Casa de las Américas, Ediciones Casa de las Américas, Havana, 1982.

⁴ Orlando Hernández. "La respetuosa arbitrariedad de Belkis Ayón." Catálogo XLV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, La Biennale di Venezia, Istituto Italo-Latino americano, Rome, June-October, 1993. (fragment in Italian); Catálogo exposición Angel Ramírez / Belkis Ayón, *The new wave of Cuban art - 1*, Gallery Gan, Tokyo, Japan, March 31, 1997 (fragment in English and Japanese); Catálogo exposición Belkis Ayón. Origen de un mito, Galería Villa Manuela, UNEAC, October 2006 (text entirely in Spanish).

Pedro Álvarez

(Havana, 1967- Tempe, Arizona, United States, 2004)



Pedro Alvarez
with detail of
African Abstract,
2003

When I look at
Pedro Álvarez's
work, I have the

uncomfortable feeling that I am losing an important part of the game in which he was involved. My interpretations always leave me dissatisfied. And neither am I entirely content –I apologize for this– with the readings made by some of my colleagues.¹ I have a feeling that there is much more that we can't really decipher, although at times it seems that we understand the fundamental mechanisms of his creation. Such dissatisfaction has been confirmed time and again in the course of our conversations, when I have dared to discover, for example, a level A or B, and maybe vaguely a level C, but suddenly, the artist himself reveals to me a much more extensive, invisible, underground sequence of readings that could go on to an F or a G. Isn't this a disheartening situation for an art critic with a certain experience? Even indulging my natural ignorance, I believe that there are always two things that conspire against me: the jocular, humorous character and the relative ease with which one can identify many of the references he uses in his paintings, some taken from our local history or depicting contexts, objects or characters that are well-known universally. Pedro's work almost always allows us to identify all its ingredients (and this is true above all for the privileged Cuban spectator), but the relationships that he established among them is precisely what is disturbing and disconcerting. In fact, all this is only the raw material, the necessary bricks for the building of his elaborate theory of art, a strange building that, far from remaining

uncompleted because of his early death, we have not been able to size up in all its dimensions, which means that it has gone on growing on its own.

In one of my texts I mentioned that his work sought to continue "disrupting chaos"² (the chaos already created by the Revolution). His works were meditated, studied in all their details, and whatever was chaotic or disorderly was only on the surface, or the result of our incompetence or lack of information to understand the new type of order that he was suggesting with those purported disorders and promiscuities.

I believe that Pedro Álvarez was intentionally and systematically trying to destroy (or at least undermine, using his great sense of irony and sarcasm) many of those conventional links that some supposedly respectable disciplines, such as history and Cuban history in particular, have established in their discourses and books, and that apparently prevent us from understanding the roots of many of the problems that affect our immediate contemporaneity. Although a large portion of the images that Pedro used in his paintings belong to previous historical periods (19th century, the 1940s and 1950s) his true concern was always the present, today, now which was the 1990s, a turbulent period for Cuba with the collapse of the socialist camp and the termination of subsidies from some countries, especially the USSR. At this time, old problems and conflicts re-emerged, such as social and economic inequities, prostitution and racism, just to mention a few. This period was officially baptized with a rather grandiloquent title: Special Period in Time of Peace. I never understood what type of peace was being referred to. What difference can there be between the everlasting war which threatened us and prevented our freedom of expression, fearing to "discover our weaknesses" and to "give weapons to the enemy" (especially to the U.S. government) and that purported peace which had already begun to eat us away?

Pedro Álvarez's favourite artistic tool (and we must acknowledge that his project had a big dose of scepticism and anarchism) was the collage, but a *sui generis* type of collage that did not involve the traditional manual mechanism of cutting and pasting images extracted from books or magazines, nor even the reproduction of such cuttings pictorially. Álvarez confronted, at a conceptual level, historical times distant from each other, antagonistic ideologies, incompatible aesthetic tastes, opposing ethical stands, different disciplines and cultural practices, with the purpose of making us accommodate or reorder such images correctly, so that we could discover how much was absurd, artificial and fake in the previous classifications that history (always politicized and thus not very objective) had accustomed us to, and had ended up by seeming completely normal.

In order to speak of contemporary situations and to make critical comments about the Cuban reality, Pedro Álvarez made complex circumlocutions, somersaults between past and present, between such disparate situations and characters as Walt Disney's Cinderella and Cecilia Valdés, a Cuban antislavery novel of the 19th century written by Cirilo Villaverde, so that his artistic discourse could end up seeming ambiguous and even inscrutable. How could this be critical art? How did he make his elaborate jokes and sophisticated ironies become messages social and political messages, or debates on the emergence of stereotypes or colonial traits within the socialist revolutionary mentality or direct attacks against the persistence of racist or discriminatory elements in our society?

Pedro Álvarez's art was undoubtedly a critical art, committed to the problems of his time, although often the artist himself attempted to disengage jokingly from this reductive labelling: "WHY SHOULD THERE ALWAYS BE SUCH TIRESOME INSISTENCE ON CRITICAL CONSCIENCE AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY? (...) TO PAINT YOU HAVE TO HAVE FAITH. FAITH MAY REST IN THE BODY, TECHNICAL PARAPHERNALIA, THE TOPIC, EXPRESSIVE CATHARSIS, IN POETRY, IN SOCIAL JUSTICE, IN BEAUTY OR IN MONEY, BUT IT IS NECESSARY TO HAVE FAITH. IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN ANY OF THESE REASONS, YOU DON'T PAINT. IF YOU BELIEVE IN ALL, YOU ARE VERY CLOSE TO HAPPINESS" "(...)AMONG ALL THOSE THINGS THE ONLY TANGIBLE ONES ARE THE FIRST AND THE LAST, THAT IS TO SAY, THE BODY AND MONEY, AND IT IS THROUGH THEM THAT YOU HAVE TO CHANNEL THE OTHERS"³

But in an interview with Cuban art critic Suset Sánchez;⁴ unpublished up to 2006, Pedro also expressed: "MY INTENTION WAS NEVER AESTHETIC IN THE FIRST PLACE, BUT IDEOLOGICAL... THAT IS TO SAY THAT DISCOURSES ON AESTHETICS ARE SECONDARY...THE AESTHETIC DISCOURSE HAS BEEN A SORT OF ALIBI THAT I USED TO BEGIN TO SAY THINGS, SO THEY HAD THE IMPOSING PACKING OF ART, OF PAINTING. IT SEEMS TO WORK, BECAUSE PEOPLE BEGAN TO PAINT LIKE CRAZY IN THE 1990s, BECAUSE THERE WERE NO JOKES AT ALL TO BE MADE. I BELIEVE THAT WE HAD RUN OUT OF JOKES AND, ON THE OTHER HAND, YOU HAD TO SELL, YOU HAD TO BEGIN TO USE ALL THE MATERIAL THAT YOU HAD TAKEN FROM SCHOOL, OR THAT YOU HAD BOUGHT IN THE BLACK MARKET, SINCE THERE WAS NO MONEY, OR ANYTHING."

We do not have enough space here to explain how the Cuban artistic language of the 1990s, especially the visual arts, used the game of metaphors, puns and subtleties in its discourse, as a way of expression under a situation of official repression and censorship, but let us note

that, despite everything, these unpleasant situations ended up enriching the art of that generation to which Pedro Álvarez belonged. Perhaps we should be grateful? Anyway, for a better understanding of many works of that period it may be necessary to have contextual references, which could seem like a kind of betrayal for the lovers of ambiguity or the universal significance of art.

Among the many conflicting areas addressed in Pedro Álvarez's painting, the problem of racial discrimination against black people occupied an extremely important place, as can be seen in the following two works.

Pedro Álvarez



War is Over, 1999
Oil on canvas
114 x 146 cm

War is over, 1999

In WAR IS OVER, 1999, Pedro Álvarez selected three materials from his plentiful and heterogeneous file archive: a UNICEF logotype from the 1970s taken from a postage stamp, a colour illustration from a Cuban pack of cigars from the 19th century and a photograph of an American-style interior from the Cuban middle class of the 1950s. With these three elements he created a trans-historical scene by means of which he expressed the irony of the illusion of supposed "racial harmony" in Cuba. The figures of different skin colours joining hands seems to represent a childish, naive dream that floats above the black couple lying on the floor intoxicated inside that modern mansion. Has racial conflict really

ended for them? Probably, they are not the owners of the mansion but rather servants, like those domestic slaves of colonial times, who have taken advantage of the master's absence to get drunk, as portrayed in Victor Patricio Landaluze's racist paintings (Bilbao, 1930 - Havana, 1889) that Pedro so often referred to in his paintings.



In the reign of the freedom and necessity, 2003

The image of the bourgeois, middle-class interior was repeated in *IN THE REIGN OF THE FREEDOM AND NECESSITY*, 2003, which continued to present an ideal of American-style comfort under Cuban socialism, more than the aesthetic uniformity provided by the apartment buildings typically built by the movement of micro-brigades. Two figures dressed as former colonial officers (probably from Spain or the United States, the two powers that ruled over Cuba in different periods) contemplate at a distance the drunken scene in which three black characters dressed as domestic slaves try to kill a turkey. The concern for drink and food seems to be the distinguishing element

dividing not only the classes but the races to which both groups belong, the latter devoted to the rude necessities of the body, while the distinguished military are so distant from them in the enjoyment of their "freedom" (freedom provided by power?) that one of them even requires the help of a spyglass to contemplate the scene that is happening a few steps away.

Perhaps these simplified readings would make Pedro Álvarez smile, but I hope he would not refute me entirely.

In the reign of the freedom and necessity, 2003
Serigraphy on heavy paper, with touches of direct painting
79,5 x 108 cm

¹ The first and most detailed publication on Pedro Álvarez and his work is *The sign pile up, Paintings by Pedro Álvarez*, Tyler Stallings (ed), UCR Sweeney Art Gallery & Smart Art Press, CA, USA, 2008, with essays by Tyler Stallings, Kevin Power, Antonio Eligio Fernández (Tonel), Orlando Hernández and Ry Cooder.

² Orlando Hernández. Pedro

Álvarez: seguir desordenando el caos. Catalogue for the exhibition Cecilia Valdés in Wonderland, Gary Nader Fine Art, Miami, USA, May 1999.

³ Pedro Álvarez. Come ñame usted? (Do you eat yam?) Malaga, June 2001, in: *El Maquinista de la Generación, segunda época*, No. 13, February 2007, Malaga, Spain, pp. 134-135

⁴ Suset Sánchez, "La historia como carambola", unpublished interview of Pedro Álvarez, published in www. cubaencuentro.com, Madrid, April 2006.

Manuel Mendive Hoyos

(Havana, 1944)



Manuel Mendive¹ is one of the most outstanding personalities in

the entire Cuban artistic milieu. He may be considered the Dean of Afro-Cuban contemporary art, preceded in prominence only by Wifredo Lam, with whom he is not stylistically related. From the beginning, he was one of a kind, an atypical figure, not easily identifiable with any national or international artistic trend, unless –in his initial stages- we go back to the popular plastic expressions associated with the religions of African origin in Cuba, or to Africa itself.

Mendive began his artistic career in the early 1960s with a very personal style. According to art critic Gerardo Mosquera –the first to study his work in depth –Mendive's style “springs all of a sudden”, “effortlessly” and “overnight” began gaining celebrity and travelling the world.² From then on, his work has evolved and thrived steadily. Moreover, as in the beginning, at each stage he found the appropriate language and used whatever artistic expression allowed him to express his ideas and feelings with total freedom. His paintings on wood, canvas or paper, his sculptures or ensembles in iron, brass or other materials, his body painting, but especially his monumental performances, have not only invaded the most important galleries and museums of the world, but the streets, the squares and the cities, creating multitudinous complex shows, similar to popular festivities and religious rituals.

Manuel Mendive's long and successful artistic life has not, however, been driven only by aesthetic motivations, or linked to the changing demands of the market and the fashionable trends of art, but by deep convictions of human, social, philosophical and religious character, intertwined with the Afro-Cuban traditions he has always been a part of. The religion of the orishas has been at the heart of Mendive's artistic production, although this is not always evident in his works. While some people believe –even perhaps the artist himself– that the local colour of his religious affiliation may jeopardize his universal message, I do not feel this to be a true risk, especially when we consider the increasingly global character that the religion of the orishas has acquired in recent years in Latin America, the United States and Europe.

Manuel Mendive was the first artist that the religion of the orishas had in Cuba and he has been its most consistent ambassador. It is true that other artists before him used some symbolic elements of the ritual atmosphere, and that they represented some of its deities. However, Mendive's work disseminated for the first time and in an intense and powerful way, the sacred energy called *ACHÉ*, of the centuries-old religion of Yoruba origin that we call Santería or Regla de Ocha. This aché was transmitted in the ceremonies. More than the personal recreation of an already well-known and accepted iconography and religious symbology, or the pictorial reproduction of some *PATAKINES* or stories of mythical characteristics, I believe this aché was presented through the special way in which Mendive used colours,

Vessels with the
four ritual paintings,
Regla de Ocha.



especially white, red, blue and yellow, which concentrate the aché which belongs to OBBATALÁ, CHANGÓ, YEMAYÁ and OSHÚN. He also used a spontaneous, free, creative style to appropriate the mysterious mechanics with which this religion operates, linking this to the countless transformations that happen in nature and in life itself. In such a way, the gigantic alternative universe created by Mendive has become an artistic equivalent to the essential messages of this religion. Whether Mendive paints or carves a head, a fish, a pumpkin or a scene apparently devoid of all religious content, his spirituality, his Afro-Cuban religiosity will always be present. This has been recognized in Africa itself, especially Nigeria, the place of origin of this religious tradition, where the work of Mendive has been most appreciated.

Even during his stage of local colour, and historical and social topics, during which he represented life aboard slave ships, the subsequent condition of runaway slaves, or the hazardous life in PALENQUES³, topics that characterized part of his work during the 1970s, his religious vision of the world was always present, a vision that has been part of the daily philosophy of Mendive as an initiate, as SANTERO. This is not so much a deliberate purpose as a natural impulse that has nothing to do with the folkloric demand of the foreign market, or proselytizing interests that this religion of Yoruba origin has never employed.

It is bizarre that Manuel Mendive's work has been shown openly since the 1960s in a society where new expressions of a socialist political ideology and of scientific atheism prevailed. Religious thought of African origin was studied from a scientific

perspective by ethnology and folklore, but was repressed and censored in daily life by the country's rigid system of official thinking. This contradictory situation continued from 1959 to 1991 when the political and constitutional discourse of the Cuban revolution began to be more permissive.⁴ Manuel Mendive's art, together with the first shows of the National Folkloric Group and the publications of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore were –in separate but adjacent fields– the few expressions of Afro-Cuban religiosity that were tolerated openly in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. It was a given that both art and folklore were demystified, or ultimately, that they represented the cultural and artistic values of the poor sectors that the revolution defended. Even when these art and folklore expressions included ideological remnants incompatible with the Cuban revolutionary project, they deserved to be rescued from imminent extinction, which, incidentally, never took place; quite the opposite.

Mendive's powerful painting was able to provide not only aesthetic joy, but also a feeling of ethnic pride and cultural reaffirmation. The Afro-Cuban black, white and mulatto population could see in Mendive's paintings what was not allowed in real life, what they had to practice secretly since colonial times. Thus in addition to its huge artistic merits, I believe that Manuel Mendive's work had sociological or political value, even if the artist himself was not aware of this at that time.

Manuel Mendive Hoyos



Marcha del Pueblo Combatiente, 1980
(March of the Combative People)

A work such as MARCHA DEL PUEBLO COMBATIENTE, 1980, which, at first glance, seems to refer exclusively to the political mobilizations of those years to support the revolution, reflects two parallel circumstances: on the one hand, the presence of more black and mulatto people in this scene speaks in favour of a celebration of the black racial identity or black consciousness of the artist, an issue that for a long time was left outside the analyses of the work of Cuban artists. On the other hand, it is also interesting to observe the mythical atmosphere surrounding the paraders, especially the sea, the kingdom of YEMAYÁ, where you can appreciate another very different kind of "march", this time

not of revolutionary citizens, but of big fish, dead spirits and other supernatural presences that float like clouds under the surveillance of an anthropomorphic sun that cannot be any other than OLORUN, one of the most important expressions of the creation, of OLODDUMARE. For Manuel Mendive this religious discourse is so important that it occupies half the canvas. Thus politics and religion acquire true balance, speaking two different languages in the same image.

Marcha del Pueblo
Combatiente
(March of the
Combative People),
1980
Acrylic on wood
64,5 x 104 cm



Osun de Paloma
(Dove Osun),
1992 - 93
Sculpture in iron with
painted rages and feathers
158 x 60 x 86 cm

Osun de Paloma, 1993 (Dove Osun)

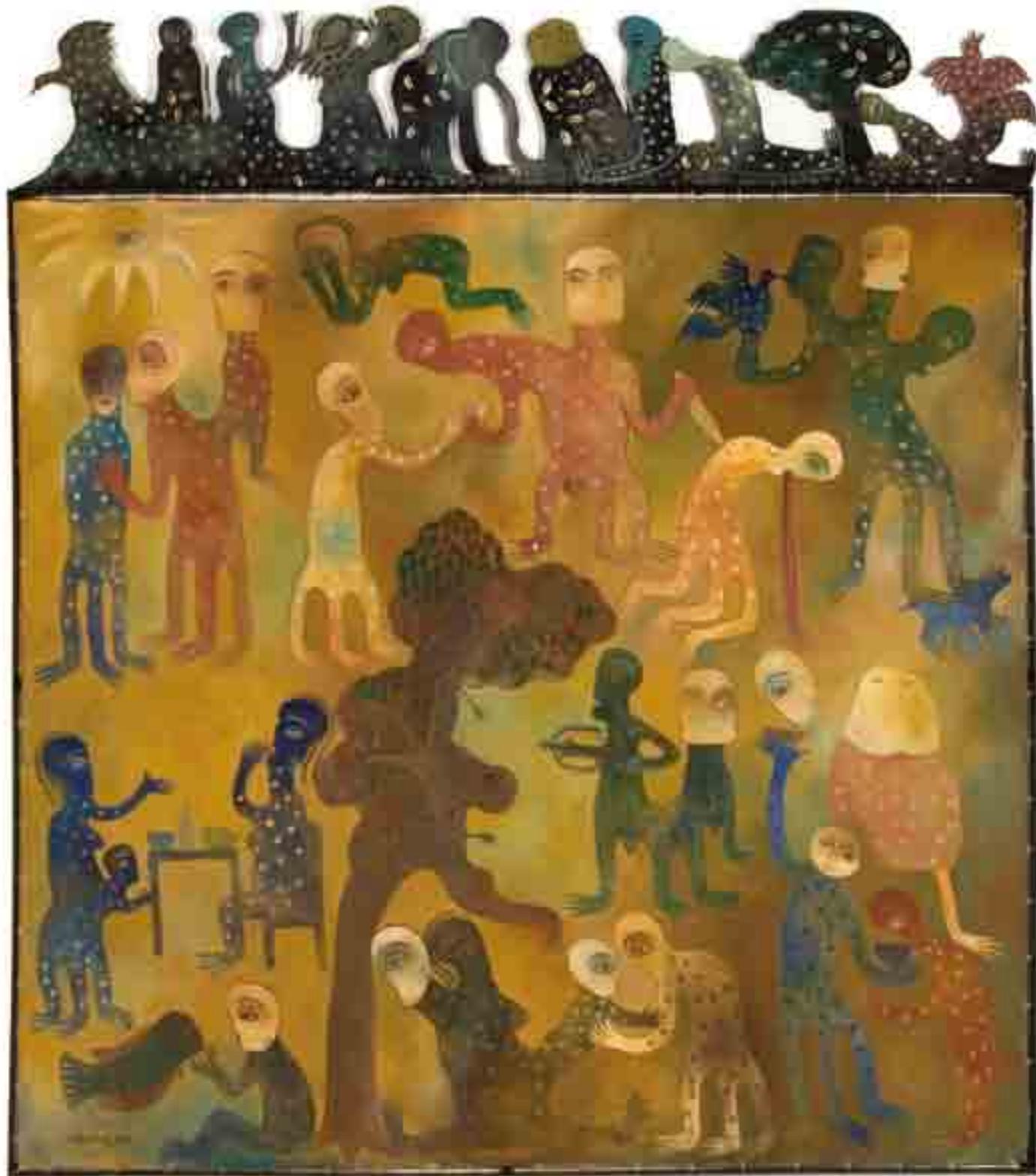
The sculptural work OSUN DE PALOMA, 1993, makes direct reference to Osun, vigilant of Olofin, the supreme deity of the Yoruba religion. Equally vigilant of the believer's head, OSUN's main function is to warn the initiate of the proximity of lkú -death- or of other dangers, such as loss of balance or madness when for any circumstance its material foundation, or the object that represents it, abandons its upright position momentarily or falls. It is for that reason that its base is always sufficiently heavy to avoid this. Osun usually appears crowned by a rooster (it is said that that rooster was vigilant of the house of OBATALÁ who deprived him of his position for not fulfilling his duty initially), but when it is dedicated to the deity ODDUÁ (or ODDUDUÁ) that is also considered a representation or manifestation of OBATALÁ, or when determined by the odu or by the person's Ifá sign, an opened-wing dove is placed in the upper part and the object reaches the height of its possessor, or may be extended or reduced by means of a mechanical device to perform different functions, and then it is known as Osun of

extension. We do not know if this work was made at the time of Mendive's consecration to this powerful deity, ODDUÁ, to implement a recommendation appearing in his sign of Ifá or if Mendive being an OMO-OBATALÁ, or son of OBATALÁ, simply wanted to dedicate this work to reconsider the old non-compliance of Osun and thus win his favours and reaffirm his own balance in the world, as religious man and artist. Are we not all in need of this type of blessing in these unbalanced times? The work bases its artistic effectiveness on the simplicity and elegance of its structure, and on the similarity with the image of the real Osun that the believers use. When making his source of reference so evident, it should be considered as a homage paid by the artist to Afro-Cuban ritual art.



Dove Osun
with necklace
of Oddudúa,
Regla de Ifá.

Manuel Mendive Hoyos



El Ojo de Dios te Mira,
(God's Eye is Looking at You),
2007
Oil on canvas and painted
metalwork with caurie shells
203 x 176 cm

Manuel Mendive Hoyos

El Ojo de Dios te Mira, 2007 (God's Eye is Looking at You)

Looking at EL OJO DE DIOS TE MIRA, 2007, we would like to say that we are in presence of a mature work, but in the case of Mendive that moment of full maturity was actually reached many years before. This is, however, a great work of philosophical intensity, that reflects a more comprehensive understanding of human behaviour and better use of the artist's religious and artistic knowledge. The work is a reflection on the strange duplicity of our actions, or the peculiar ethical conception that we have inherited from the old wisdom of the Yoruba, where right and wrong are not completely separate and opposed entities, but rather coexist in the same complex unit, visible not only in the behaviour of human beings, but in the behaviour of the orishas themselves, especially ESHU-ELEGBARA or ELEGGUÁ, represented here with two faces.

This important deity occupies a central place in the Yoruba pantheon and opens or closes our paths at his whim, allowing us or preventing us from reaching our goals. In this work, Mendive describes some of the situations in which a character (anyone of us) is forced to behave kindly or maliciously,



capable of helping some and at the same time of attacking or killing others, of demonstrating love or hate, of being compassionate towards some or indifferent or implacable towards others. Ultimately, OLOFIN is a witness of our actions, represented here -like in many other works of Mendive- through the face of the sun, OLORUN. The impressive beauty of this painting -crowned by a sculpture in painted iron fretwork- is not only meant to please us aesthetically, but to arouse deep introspective reflections on our actions and on the many mysteries that surround human existence. Perhaps neither art nor religion can offer solutions to these questions, but at least they expose them to possible understanding.

Eshu-Eleggua,
Regla de Ifá.

¹ See his web site www.mendiveart.com

² Gerardo Mosquera. "Manuel Mendive y la evolución de su pintura" En Exploraciones en la plástica cubana. Editorial Letras Cubanias, Havana, 1993.

³ Palenque: runaway slave settlements, known as quilombos in Brasil.

⁴ Lázara Menéndez. La santería que yo conozco....Société suisse des Americanistes. Bulletin 59-60, 1995-1996, pp.57-62.

Julián González Pérez

(Regla, Havana, 1949)



The municipality of Regla lies on the eastern shore of the

bay of Havana. When it was founded, at the end of the 17th century, it was a small fishing village, populated by dockworkers and humble people dedicated to chores of the sea. Even now, it has a slow and silent pace very different from that of the city of Havana, to which it has always been linked by a picturesque boat service crossing the bay from Luz wharf, in Old Havana. Like Guanabacoa, its adjacent town, Regla has always been an important centre of religious Afro-Cuban activity. The first chapter of the Abakuá Secret Society was established in Regla and the famous Church of the Virgin of Our Lady of Regla, patron saint of the Bay of Havana, is located there. Besides its Catholic functions, this church is a place of religious pilgrimage linked to the cult of Yemayá (the goddess of the sea for SANTEROS and babalawos), which is also worshipped as Mother Water by PALEROS and as OKANDE by the Abakuá. It is customary after attending mass in church on festive days, for the parishioners (many of whom are also practitioners of the religious Afro-Cuban cults), to perform small ceremonies or

leave offerings on the seashore to pay homage to Yemayá, owner of the sea and mother of all the orishas.

Born in this town, artist Julián González Pérez became a member of these religious groupings from childhood and his artistic life has developed linked to these groups. He has painted murals in the MUNANSOS or temple-houses of the PALEROS, made tattoos for the obonekues or new initiates in the Abakuá society and has sewn the attires of ÍREMES as well as ritual objects for that cult. He also makes canes and small handicrafts to sell to tourists for extra income. His long life as a TATA NKISI MALONGO or priest of PALE MONTE BRIYUMBA and as a member of the ABAKUÁ Secret Society has granted him great prestige in these activities, since Julián is a reliable expert in the intricate symbolisms and the formal and material requirements of these objects for their appropriate ritual use.

Julián's own sacred objects and
the place where they are



Iremes abakuá,
handicrafts by Julián.

installed, surrounded by allusive murals painted by him, also have great artistic refinement, and this differentiates him from other priests whose objects and altars are more basic or who are less interested in aesthetic appearance. His facility as a tattoo-artist using traditional techniques, is also well known in popular environments, which some regard contemptuously as marginal. Although for the moment he has stopped making tattoos, he has made hundreds throughout his life and is known as the only pupil of a legendary tattoo artist, a religious man known as "Salaito". Unfortunately, the history of tattoos as an artistic expression in Cuba has only just begun to interest some researchers, although with less emphasis on this popular type of tattoo developed by



Nganga shrine of Julián, Palo Monte.



Julian's tattoos.

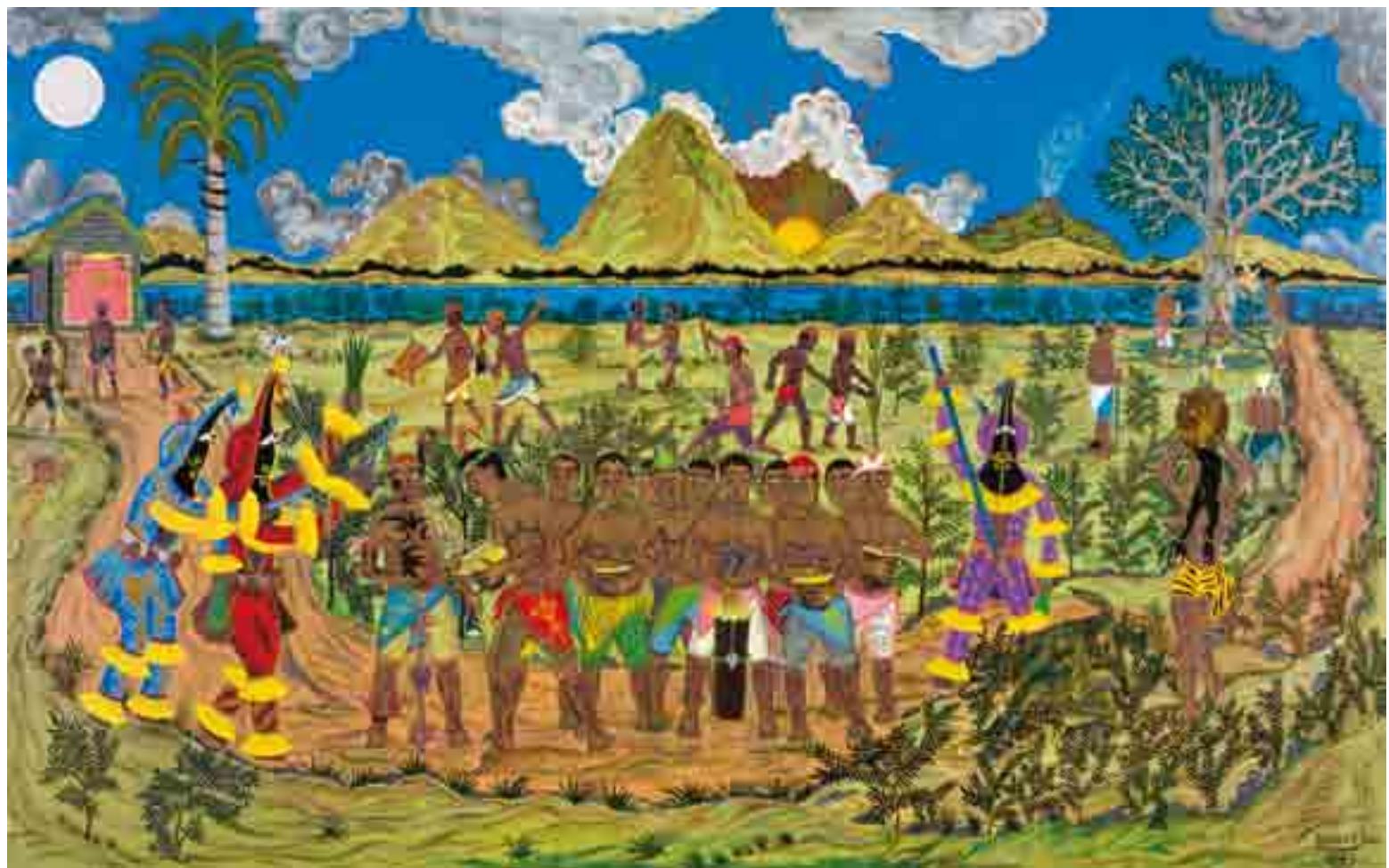
Julián and his teacher. Julián has painted many works, most of which decorate Afro-Cuban ritual spaces or have been commissioned by collectors, but so far he has not had the opportunity to hold a solo exhibition to allow the general public to appraise his extraordinary artistic worth.

Julián González Pérez has lived all his life and developed his artistic work in this context, so that he is virtually unknown in galleries and museums. There are a few exceptions: several years ago the Municipal Museum of Regla commissioned two large paintings representing ABAKUÁ and PALO MONTE, which are on permanent display. Julián has also collaborated with

the museum, offering his knowledge to researchers and making replicas of ritual objects to show in its Afro-Cuban rooms. The other exception dates back to 2001, when the world-famous curator Jean Hubert Martin chose him to participate in the Altars of the World exhibition held in the Kunst Palast Museum of Düsseldorf, Germany, where the artist built and consecrated IN SITU an extraordinary PALO MONTE altar.

However, being out of touch with the illustrated artistic milieu is not something that seems to trouble Julián, since the buyers of his art do not generally frequent those elitist places. In fact, those that should be worried (or embarrassed) are the Cuban cultural and artistic institutions and their specialists. These continue to exclude and discriminate against many popular creative talents, especially those related to Afro-Cuban ritual art, for not complying with the requirements of the art system, which is still based on western tradition; evidence of their strong colonial, Eurocentric, elitist and racist heritage.

Julián González Pérez



Bríkamo Mañongo Usagaré,
2008
Oil on canvas
95,5 x 152 cm

Bríkamo Mañongo Usagaré, 2008

BRÍKAMO MAÑONGO USAGARE, 2008 is a realistic representation of an Abakuá ritual including most of the important characters of this grouping, identified by their attire, the symbolic signatures or anaforuanas inscribed on their aprons, or by the drums or other attributes indicating their rank. In the left-hand corner, we find the FAMBÁ or temple where the secret ceremonies take place. On both sides is the palm (UKANO MAMBRE) and the ceiba or silk-cotton tree (UKANO BEKONSI), under which important events took place during the emergence of the ABAKUÁ religious-fraternal grouping, both with the corresponding signature that is traced before beginning any ceremony. All the signatures that are made with yellow chalk mean life, while those made with white chalk are used for funeral rites. To the right, we find SIKÁN, also carrying on her

head a vessel marked with its corresponding signature, with the head of TANZE, the fish, sticking out. The artist has represented the natural environment in full; the river, the mountains, the animals, the plants and other details that are an important part of the myth and the ritual. No element of this painting lacks symbolic meaning, so that it can be considered a small treatise or painted text where all the content can be clearly identified.

It is intriguing to find a massive presence of black people in this painting, although even from the 19th century many white men were accepted in the ABAKUÁ religion practiced in Cuba. Such membership was made possible thanks to the intelligence of a controversial religious Cuban man, Andrés Facundo Cristo de los Dolores Petit, tertiary of the Franciscan Catholic order, who was also Isue of the first ABAKUÁ chapter of white men and founder of the KIMBISA Rule of Sacred Christ of Good Voyage, one of the branches of the PALO MONTE religion. As Julián is white and at the same time ABAKUÁ OBONEKUE, what reason

did he have for this unusual exclusion of white people? Perhaps it is a sign of respect and acknowledgment of the African origin of this religion? The answer may lie in the title of the painting itself, since the word BRÍKAMO refers generically to all the people from Calabar in Africa; MAÑONGO means bush, and USAGARÉ is the geographical place in Africa where it is said that the first PLANTE or meeting of this association took place. Thus, it seems that the painting does not portray an ABAKUÁ ritual in Cuba, but a ritual of the CARABALÍ in USAGARÉ. How could a white man have participated in such a remote ceremony?

As Belkis Ayón and Julián González are the two artists that have dealt most with the Abakuá topic in our artistic milieu, it may be useful to briefly compare them, although their language and style are totally different, even opposed. Contrary to what happens in Belkis Ayón's work, Julián González Pérez's work does not use individual imagination in case this will influence the accuracy or the precision with which the historic memory must be represented from an artistic point of view. Julián probably considers that using imagination is reckless, questionable or incorrect, which could alter the historical truth of the myth and the ritual. In Julián's works, everything is in open daylight, seemingly without mystery. Nothing is hidden, but is instead represented in an objective way, perhaps because since Julián is a member of this secret society, its mysteries have been revealed to him and he participates in them more naturally. Ultimately the two artists are united by the same respect for this old religious institution inherited from black Africa and preserved up to the present in Cuba.

Bernardo Sarriá Almoguea

(Cienfuegos, 1950)



Painted tile
by Bernardo,
2008.

The life of artist Bernardo Sarriá has not been easy.

Quite the opposite. To be black and poor (and there is no milder way of saying it) have not been good ingredients to provide for his well-being up to now. In fact, this is a fatal equation, avoided in Cuba, whenever anyone tries to explain objectively and without euphemisms the current unfavourable economic situation of many Cuban men and women from this sector of our society. The general needs and shortages of our people are even harsher for the black and mulatto population of Cuba and this is not a coincidence. According to official thought, such a correlation would be unacceptable given the equal rights and opportunities that were granted to all Cubans –without racial distinction– by the Revolution of 1959. But the truth is that being black and poor are still closely related and this is not only reflected in the general trend of low incomes, poorly qualified professions and occupations, or in lower quality dwellings and slums, but in many other psychological, educational, cultural and household factors that a few Cuban specialists have recently begun to analyze. “Cumulative disadvantages” have dragged on since slavery and the neo-colonial period, and have not yet been overcome, and include as an important component the scourge of racial discrimination. The racial dimension of poverty and its speedy reproduction under the current crisis (which began for us

at the beginning of the 1990s) are a complex reality demanding a more detailed analysis in Cuba.¹

To reduce the impact of such painful situations, Bernardo Sarriá has used two basic resources: his extraordinary artistic creativity and his confidence in the support of the ORISHAS and EGUNS. Initiated in SANTERÍA (he is a “son” of the powerful ORISHA AGGAYÚ) Bernardo trusts that “DIOS APRIETA, PERO NO AHOGA” (literal in Spanish “God has a strong grasp, but he doesn’t choke you”), although many times he has felt asphyxiated by his low wages, wretched living conditions and the lack of interest that the official institutions have paid to his art. The basis of such indifference is not his status as self-taught artist, but rather the unusual character of his works. From the point of view of materials, language, style and subject matter, his works do not fit easily with the average taste, and are different (sometimes radically) from the works of more conventional or picturesque Cuban popular artists that the State generally promotes in its galleries and sells to foreign tourists.



Mannequin,
by Bernardo,
2006.

Yet Bernardo’s art, his religious faith and optimism have allowed him to withstand these difficulties. Entrenched in his root vegetable stall, property of a state company, Bernardo does not give up so easily. His work place – which has changed its location over time – has always become his own workshop and a space for the permanent exhibition of his varied creations. These include not only drawings and paintings on

Vira Mundo Taita José,
painting and chess pieces
on long playing record
by Bernardo,
2002.



canvas and cardboard, but small sculptures or ensembles made with bottles or using old acetate disks, conveniently painted, melted and bent, to which he adds toys, necklace beads, buttons, commercial labels, shoes, eyeglasses, lighters and any item in disuse that he finds appropriate. His aesthetics find parallels in some artists from the south of the United States and Africa but, in Cuba, he is an exceptional case. His turbulent creativity has gradually expanded to the facade of his place of work, which Bernardo generally fills with graffiti and a wide array of social and political or antiracist messages, and extends into the street, where, during important occasions (especially the Havana Biennial), he builds exuberant installations with stone, iron, cloth, fruit, tubers and an infinity of waste materials. The local police have tried unsuccessfully to evict such works in the belief that they affect public decorum or may be seen as witchcraft offerings, but the neighbours enjoy and respect these creations of "The Sorcerer" as, half jokingly, they have baptized him. A sort of defiant and provocative attitude or public claim of his rights as an artist and as a citizen has gradually permeated his natural tolerance or simple resistance. Moreover, this self-employed exhibition has never had the objective of promoting the

sale of his works, but rather the more modest aim of sharing his ideas, opinions and experiences as an artist, since the regular visitors to his vegetable stall are not potential buyers or art collectors, but humble buyers of potatoes, sweet potatoes and pumpkins.

On very few occasions Bernardo's works have been shown to the art public; the first time in 1996, in an independent gallery called ESPACIO AGLUTINADOR in the house of two vanguard artists, which was the centre of the most advanced (or daring) art that Havana has had². Since I was lucky enough to discover him, and to have been collaborating in such an unofficial space, it was my pleasure to introduce him there. I also wrote about his work³, drawing attention to Bernardo's ethical and political decision to show his art at his work place, as an artist who had been excluded from the Havana Biennial in a report commissioned by Art Nexus magazine in 2001.⁴ I suggested his inclusion in the group of artists presented in the only existing publication on Cuban popular painting in 2004⁵. Unfortunately, none of this seems to have done much good, except to assuage his occasional despair somewhat or to sporadically feed his illusion, his optimism.

Bernardo has always been interested in the social, political and racial life of Cubans, the massive illegal migrations to the United States in which hundred of Cubans have died, HIV, prostitution and racism against



Painted bottle
with glasses, gourd
and feathers
by Bernardo, 2003.

blacks. He mixes historical references with anecdotes from his life, sometimes using a humorous tone, other times dramatic overtones or shocking, grotesque images, at times sexual, filled with double meaning and many times focused on the Afro-Cuban religious world. These variants generally appear mixed in the same work, establishing complex connections that are difficult to decipher and about which the artist himself is usually reluctant to give many explanations or provide clues. He prefers the viewers to unwind his reels on their own.

Born in this town, artist Julián González Pérez became a member of these religious groupings from childhood and his artistic life has developed linked to these groups. He has painted murals in the MUNANSOS or temple-houses of the PALEROS, made tattoos

Bernardo Sarria Almoguea



Diloggún,
2008

Oil on canvas
with sewn cowrie shells
130 x 140 cm

Diloggún, 2008

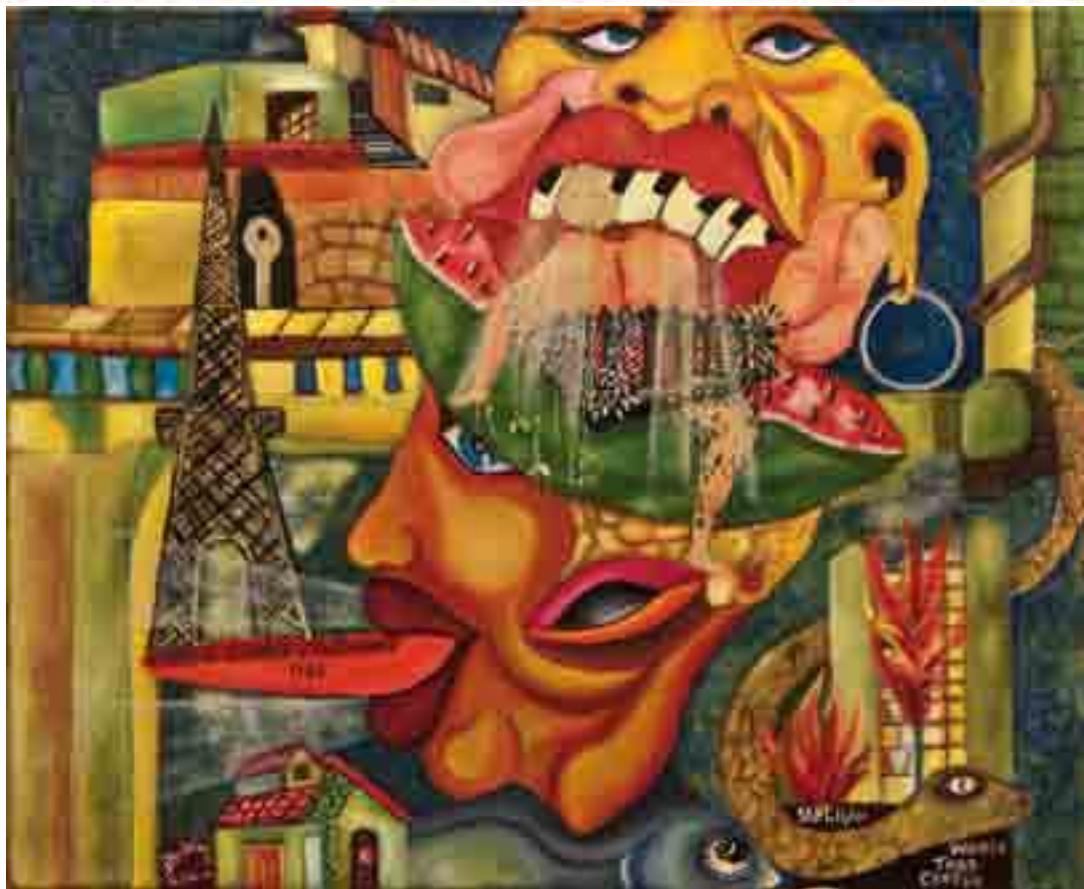
In this work Bernardo Sarria has grouped and recreated in his own way the twelve letters or signs characteristic of the Yoruba divination system, commonly called in Cuba “the shell” or DILOGGÚN (from the Yoruba MERINDILOGÚN, meaning sixteen), widely used in SANTERÍA or REGLA DE OCHA to hear the “voice” and the will of the ORISHAS. This divination practice is carried out by IYALOSHAS and babaloshas and especially by the ORIATÉ or specialist in oracles. The ORIATÉ interprets its meaning according to the amount of shells that fall -in two successive throws- in a “conversational” position, that is to say, with its natural opening upwards, thereby obtaining an ODU or double sign to know what the ORISHAS have to say about the problem raised and the actions recommended to solve this problem. Although the ORIATÉ generally knows the meaning of the sixteen signs of the shell, the rule is that beyond sign number twelve, one should go to a BABALAWO or Orula priest. This priest is the only one authorized to interpret the remaining signs, but this time

not by using shells, but by means of an instrument called EKWELE, EKPWELE or chain of Ifá, or by the handling of seeds of a type of palm called IKINES. Bernardo, as a SANTERO, has respected this tradition and has used only twelve signs instead of sixteen in his painting.

From the upper left quadrant, he has deployed these twelve signs following their hierarchical order. The signs are known as OKANA, EYOKO, OGUNDA, IROSO, OSHÉ, OBARA, Odí, EYEUNLE, OsÁ, OFÚN, OJUANI and MEYLÁ. Bernardo was inspired not only to express some of the traditional meanings of these signs that have been gathered in brief proverbs and stories where ancient Yoruba (and Cuban) wisdom are condensed, but also to introduce his own interpretations, desires, discomforts, memories, and fantasies because, apart from being a religious man, Bernardo is, above all, an artist. If the first sign, OKANA, speaks of “three people that die suddenly” (hence the three crosses

that appear in the said box), the third sign, OGUNDA refers to surgical operations, autopsies and war (since it is a sign governed by the ORISHA OGGÚN). The artist has painted a person whose abdomen was opened by a dagger instead of a scalpel, since it is an enemy (a son of OGGÚN) who has tried to rob Bernardo of the right to his dwelling. Ordinarily incapable of violence, Bernardo expresses his strong feeling of antipathy in this painting. Finally, to emphasize his message in each case, Bernardo has sewn to the cloth the amount of shells representing each sign, making the square structure of his work and the independence and pictorial intensity of each one of the twelve images more attractive.

Bernardo Sarria Almoguea



La caída de los ídolos
(The Fall of the Idols),
2009

Oil on canvas
56 x 72 cm (Top)
60 x 73 cm (Bottom)
116 x 73 cm (Diptych)



Mi mundo
(My world),
2009
Oil on canvas
40,3 x 50,2 cm

In other more recent works, Bernardo has dealt with domestic migratory problems, mostly from the eastern area of the island to the capital, which have generated new situations of racial discrimination against the so-called orientales, even by the police who consider them illegal persons and have made attempts to return them to their places of origin. According to Bernardo, the "clock has stopped" in the eastern area of Cuba, which was the "cradle of the Revolution". It has not developed at the same rate as Havana and is under much more difficult economic conditions, forcing its inhabitants to migrate to where they can find work and money. Such an invasion has generated distrust in the population of Havana and has transformed the people from the eastern part of the country into objects of derision due to their habits, the "singsong" intonation of their language and their copper-coloured skin. The strange thing is that not only whites, but also many blacks and mulattos from Havana who themselves have been punished for centuries by racism, seem to have found in discrimination against the orientales a kind of revenge and oppose their

right to improve their living conditions by migrating to the capital city, just as many Cuban whites, blacks and mulattos have migrated (both from the eastern provinces and from Havana and the entire island) to the United States, for both political and economic reasons. This problematic issue is new in the Cuban visual arts.

Some popular artists more in tune with the market have advised Bernardo to be more judicious and to start painting tropical landscapes, typical corners of old Havana, or simply fruits or sensual mulatto women, which is what many tourists are looking for, but Bernardo never learns. He'd rather go on fantasizing in his vegetable stall, pleased by the mysterious beauty of his orishas and turning the daily problems that surround him into raw material for a critical and controversial art, although his only public continues being the one that every morning passes along asking him if there are any potatoes, sweet potatoes or plantains. Bernardo is convinced that Olofin can grasp him strongly, but that he will not allow him to suffocate.

¹ María del Carmen Zabala Arguelles. "Análisis de la dimensión racial en los procesos de reproducción de la pobreza", 2008. <http://bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/ar/libros/clacso/crop/zabala/20zaba.pdf>

² Espacio Aglutinador. Publication financed by the Prince Claus Foundation, the Spanish International Cooperation Agency and the Spanish Embassy in Cuba, Havana, 2005.

³ Orlando Hernández. "Bernardo Sarría: el rey de las papas", catálogo exposición Espacio Aglutinador, Havana, 1996.

⁴ Orlando Hernández. Carta de La Habana. Desde el jardín. Art Nexus, no. 40, April-June 2001, pp. 72-75.

⁵ Gerald Mouial. Arte mágico de Cuba. 51 pintores cubanos, Editorial Arte Cubano, Havana, 2004.

Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal

(Havana, 1955)



When Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal entered the artistic scene

in the mid-1980s, the knowledge of Ifá began gradually to move beyond the esoteric domain, where it had remained under the sole control of the BABALAWOS from way back, and started to circulate within the more liberal artistic circles. The knowledge of Ifá became the subject of public exhibits and art criticism being reproduced in catalogues and magazines, thereby becoming part of the art market. Something similar happened with SANTERÍA, PALO MONTE and ABAKUÁ. This situation may not be very common outside the Cuban context, above all with the high level of professionalism and articulation of contemporary artistic languages. More typically, these traditions are reflected by the so-called popular or self-taught artists, as in the case of Vodou in Haiti or RASTAFARIANISM in Jamaica and other Caribbean countries.

Thus far, the REGLA ARARÁ (more frequent in the province of Matanzas), Vodú (of Haitian origin and practiced in different areas of Camagüey and Oriente) and the various forms of Spiritualism, especially ESPIRITISMO CRUZAO ('crossed Spiritualism' practiced in the eastern provinces of Cuba), have not had the same impact on our visual arts, although they do preserve their aesthetic-symbolic value and artistic expression in their respective rituals. Perhaps it is only a matter of time for some of those expressions to enter the contemporary Afro-Cuban art world.

Since all are cultural as well as religious traditions, the transition from one system to another has not been incongruent at all, nor does it seem to violate the distinctive secrets of ritual practices. However, Rodríguez Olazábal's works reflect a high conceptual level and a deep knowledge. As an ORULA or ORÚNMILA priest, that is to say, as BABALAWO (in Yoruba, "father of the secret"), he has had access to a great number of ideas and information on many cosmogonic, philosophical and mystic aspects of the Ifá religion. This knowledge has up to now remained far from the public domain, for example the concept of Ori, or personal divinity, or of deities such as IYAMÍ OSHORONGA or AJÉ SHALUGA, has remained practically unknown by most of our intellectuals and art specialists. Such specialists are more familiar with the popular divinities of the Yoruba pantheon (OBBATALÁ, YEMAYÁ, ELEGGUÁ, CHANGÓ and OSHÚN). Although it is true that Olazábal comes from a long-standing religious family, to which these notions and African deities were perhaps known, we cannot discard the influence of what some term the "re-Africanization" or "Yorubization" of these religions, especially of SANTERIA and Ifá. Since these religions had their original integrity affected by syncreticism with Catholicism during colonial times and the long disconnection from Africa, much information has begun to be recovered¹ in recent years.

The causes of our current ignorance of many aspects of these religions of African origin deserve a brief comment. The Yoruba cultural tradition, as well as the Kongo (BANTÚ) and the CARABALI, among others, have been present in our country since the 16th century, when the bearers arrived in Cuba in ships to become slaves of the Spanish invaders. More than five long centuries of conflicting coexistence on our territory did not allow these traditions an equal footing with those imported from Europe and North America. Despite the gradual progress made since the abolition of slavery, the independence from the Spanish colonial power, the emergence of the democratic-bourgeois (neo-colonial) republic and, later, the Cuban revolutionary and socialist process, the sad reality is that these traditions of African origin continue being a part of the most subordinate, excluded and discriminated sector of our society and culture. The transcultural processes have not been as deep and comprehensive as many had assumed. Is it possible to compensate for this imbalance or deficiency once and for all? By this time, shouldn't all Cubans know much more about these traditions whose wide range of knowledge and artistic, poetic and philosophical expressions are still mostly amassed and safeguarded in religious institutions? Many people in our country do not know the meaning of words like OPON Ifá, IROFÁ, IRUKERE, OSORDE, EBBÓ, ADDIMÚ, SARAYEYE, OPARALDO, or what their functions and goals are, although such ceremonies are performed daily in our own neighbourhoods or close to our homes. Most people do not know how to say dog, dove, hen or rooster in the Yoruba

language spoken daily in Cuba, although they know those terms in English or in other European languages. Shouldn't these cultural elements have a larger presence in the curricula of our education system, in our television programs, publications and conferences, preferably guided by the true intellectuals of those religious-cultural groupings and not by means of elaborations or translations made by ethnologists and other specialists, often personally disconnected from these cultural practices? It is true that many elements have already become a part of the Cuban culture, but many others resist becoming fully integrated. They preserve their confidential, secret condition, maybe as a defensive strategy, or because they have functions linked to the sacred, representing different forms of understanding and struggling against the problems of the universe and society, perhaps necessitating continued recognition of their autonomous, independent and sovereign character.

The truth is that even within the religious system that some call Ifá-ORISA, there are hierarchical levels that cause knowledge to be distributed irregularly among the worshipers of SANTERÍA on one side and of REGLA DE Ifá on the other, namely, between SANTEROS and BABALAWOS, although both are part of the same religion of the orishas. This irregular distribution prevents the former from having access to a wide array of knowledge and secrets kept by the latter. Even among the BABALAWOS, not all end up having access to or understanding all the details of this deeply complex system. As the ODU of Ifá OGBE Di confirms, "wisdom is distributed". How can we pretend that the general art public has true access to the knowledge expressed in the works of Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal when such a small portion of the distributed wisdom has been received?

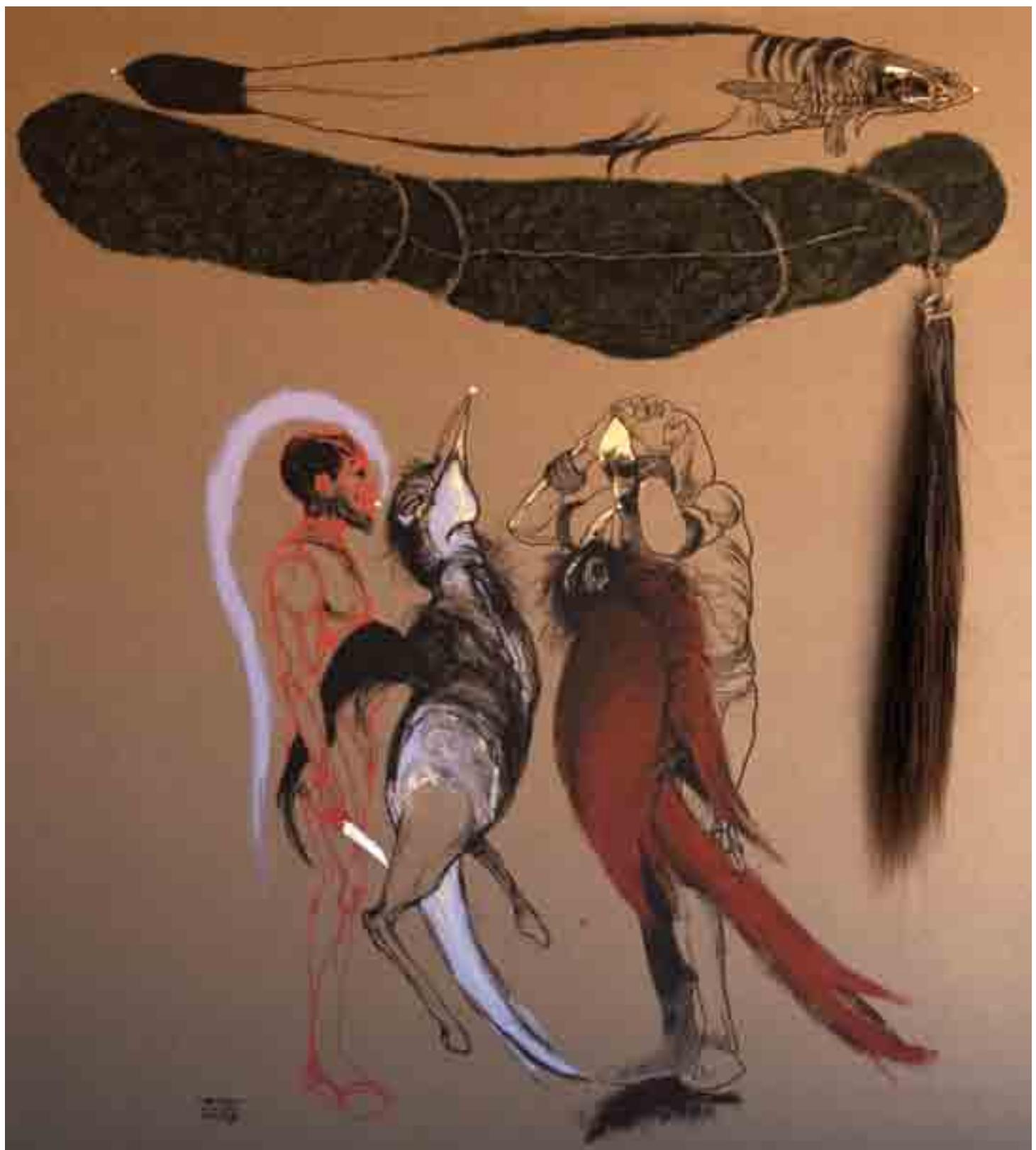
Although it is difficult to say this, a part of the artistic mystery surrounding Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal's works, and also those of Manuel Mendive, José Bedia and Belkis

Ayón -just to mention the most outstanding who represent the four main traditions of Ifá, SANTERÍA, PALO MONTE and ABAKUÁ- has its origin in our ignorance, our lack of information, or in the superficial, folkloric character that we have sometimes given them. However, the other part of this mystery is the fruit of creativity, originality and the artistic imagination developed by these important artists. Should we resign ourselves to having access only to the formal, stylistic and aesthetic, without trying to dwell deeper?

Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal's work provides a powerful intellectual incentive to approach the complexities and the beauty of the Yoruba culture. This is a philosophy and a system of knowledge that has been preserved in the 256 odus (sacred signs) of Ifá that the Cuban BABALAWOS learn and use daily, although, as we have said, a variety of barriers hinders the full enjoyment of the complex knowledge that this priest-artist manages with so much ease in his works.

But we can look at this from another perspective. Perhaps, instead of considering Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal's art as contemporary Cuban (or Afro-Cuban), derived from traditions of African origin, what he has been doing is simply a new art of Ifá. The artist has deftly appropriated the languages and methodologies of the traditional western culture to transmit his messages, to express a millennial wisdom. And although it is very different from the art of ritual spaces, this new expression of the art of Ifá has similar symbolic, allegorical, metaphoric, aesthetic and even learning functions, on the different aspects of life. While this new stage of the art of Ifá may be oriented towards the members of this religious-cultural community that we can no longer understand in the narrow context of one national culture, we need not feel disadvantaged. Isn't the western contemporary art that is exhibited nowadays in galleries and museums something complex, full of mysteries and secrets, inscrutable and incomprehensible for the majority of the public?

Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal



Oro Baba,
2002

Acrylic, collage, horsetail
and fish skull on canvas
200 x 180 cm

Oro Baba, 2002

According to Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal, the work ORO BABA refers to the close relationship between two secret societies of African origin, one of them female: the society of IYAMI OSHORONGA, (which for all we know, never became established in Cuba) and the male society ORO (with a deity known in Cuba as ORUN and not

established as a society either). Both deities and their worshippers were entrusted with the surveillance and punishment of those who broke away from taboos or did not obey tradition, or were involved in immoral actions that endangered the stability of the community, especially unscrupulous BABALAWOS. In the painting, the female secret society is represented by the birds, since IYAMI OSHORONGA is also known as the lady of the birds, through which she sends her sorceries, and the ORO society is represented by the male figures, the fish and the shrouded body. Beyond this brief description, perhaps Santiago is making an ethical reflection on the importance of doing things the right

way, not only in the Ifá environment, where many BABALAWOS use their religious knowledge in a commercial way instead of helping the community to understand and solve its problems, but also as a stern warning to our society as a whole.



Orun shrine,
Regla de Ifá.

Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal



El valor de las cosas
(The value of things), 2009

EL VALOR DE LAS COSAS could refer to two issues, one spiritual and the other material. On one hand lies the value of the messages of the ORISHAS expressed through the shells (DILoggún) as a method of divination used by Cuban santeros or iworos, and on the other, the value assigned to the cowry shell, formerly used as currency in Africa. Which amongst these values should be paramount in the life of a religious person? Monetary affluence or spiritual wealth? This seems to be the question posed by Santiago, to be applied beyond the religious context.

El valor de las cosas
(The value of things),
2009
Mixed media on linen
150 x 118 cm



Iporí,
2009
Mixed media
on cardboard
112 x 76 cm

Iporí, 2009

This expressive and synthetic work refers to a short but important ceremony of *Ifá* where the spirits of our family's ancestors are fed. The ceremony consists in the sacrifice of an animal, from which some drops of blood are allowed to fall on the big toe of the right foot if the offering is made to a male ancestor, and on the left if made to a female ancestor. The big toe (*IPONRÍ*, in Yoruba language) is the point of communication of our body with the ancestors. The work seems to point at the importance of remembering those who preceded us, and whose spirits always accompany us. The importance of the dead is so great in *Ifá* and in *REGLA DE OCHA* that they are the first to receive offerings and sacrifices before starting any ceremony. It is usual to hear a Yoruba sentence "*Ikú LO BI OSHA*" in religious Afro-Cuban spaces, meaning "the dead gives birth to the saint".

¹ On this polemic process of "re-Africanization", refer to the article by Professor Lázara Menéndez, "Un cake para Obatalá", *Revista Temas*, 1995.

Ricardo Rodríguez Brey

(Havana, 1955)



Some of the most important contemporary Cuban artists have been living abroad for a long time, with the result that their new works are not shown in Cuban galleries and museums. Such estrangement makes it difficult to follow the evolution of their work closely. It also prevents their work from exerting an influence on or inspiring new generations of Cuban artists and from being enjoyed by local audiences. One of the most critical cases, next to that of José Bedia, is Ricardo Rodríguez Brey¹ who, having been one of the most outstanding artists of the vanguard of the early 1980s with the famous exhibition VOLUMEN I, has become invisible in our artistic milieu since 1991 when he relocated to the city of Ghent, in Belgium.

The massive emigration of Cuban artists began in the early years of the Revolution, largely in response to the enforcement in 1961 of a new cultural policy, which was governed by the statement "inside the Revolution, everything, against the Revolution, no rights"², considered by many artists as an unacceptable limitation of their creative freedom. The migration of artists and intellectuals reached a height at the beginning of the 1990s, mainly due to an increase in economic difficulties affecting the population in general, and prompting even the younger generations to follow that course, although some travel to the island regularly and exhibit and market their works in our galleries.

For some enthusiasts of global culture, this situation seems unavoidable and normal, since it has always existed (as demonstrated

by the pioneer cases of Wifredo Lam or Agustín Cárdenas), but there is no doubt that something stops happening within the cultural scene of a country when its most talented artists stop being present, either personally or through their works. Perhaps this situation has represented an advantage for these artists, many of whom have been able to develop their work under better material and market conditions, with more galleries to exhibit their works. Some are today internationally renowned artists, but this is a disadvantage from the perspective of the society and culture that has been abandoned. This is even more unfortunate in the case of artists whose works were dedicated, in a profound and intelligent way, to explore issues related to problems in their society of origin or with the artistic enquiry of local traditions, as is the case with the religions of African origin in Cuba. Since with the interruption of their research, many new artistic discourses aimed in the same direction then begin again, leaving the new generations of artists unable to consult their predecessors and learn from the mistakes they already made.

Ricardo Rodríguez Brey in fact began his artistic career relatively far from the Afro-Cuban traditions, although his ancestors were of Nigerian origin and close to Yoruba religious traditions. His beginnings had to do, strangely, with the visions of American flora and fauna by the famous German scientist of the 18th century, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), who is considered in Cuba the "second discoverer" after Christopher Columbus, and who Rodríguez

Brey assumed as a mythological more than historical figure³ to establish his discourse on Cuban and American identity, placing himself in a Western rationalistic, taxonomic or classificatory perspective. His drawings of the mid-1980s, grouped in an extensive series called "LA ESTRUCTURA DE LOS MITOS" (The structure of myths), seems to be a transcription of the travel journals of this European scientist, full of handwritten annotations and illustrations of animals and plants native to Cuba and Latin America - sheets of paper with time-worn edges or small orifices or traces made by the imaginary attack of implacable tropical insects. This series, as well as his previous one from 1980, titled EL ORIGEN DE LAS ESPECIES (The origin of species) which he also dedicated to the famous British biologist and naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882), were for a long time Rodríguez Brey's most distinctive work. They works were conceived as conceptual art, in which the use of drawing, writing and collage with stencil prints granted the works an aspect similar to that of a document, with a poetic and even romantic touch removing all possible coldness.

But in none of these series was there anything related to the Afro-Cuban traditions, which would begin to appear later, especially after his show titled SOBRE LA TIERRA (On earth), held in 1987. It is in the works exhibited in this show and later ones that Brey began to explore the topic of Afro-Cuban religions, although always in a reflective, contained, synthetic way, perhaps fearing too narrative or picturesque representations. I remember an image

representing an iron stew pot dedicated to Oggún, and the concise drawing of a stone that could have represented the material foundation on which the orishas settle, reproduced in a coarse cardboard catalogue (with no reference to date or place) with an introductory text by art critic Gerardo Mosquera, from which I extract some fragments:

"ONLY LATELY ARE WE SEEING ARTISTS WHOSE WORK RESPONDS NOT SO MUCH TO THE FORMS, THE MAGIC, THE CEREMONIAL, THE FABLES AND THE MYTHS OF AFRICAN ORIGIN AS TO THE GENERAL IDEAS THAT SUSTAIN THEM, IDEAS OF UNIVERSAL PROJECTION. THUS, IN ELSO, BEDIA AND OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE THE INTEREST IS MORE TOWARD THE ABSTRACTIONS AND THE ESSENCES THAT DETERMINE THE SENSE OF ALL THEIR WORK... BREY IS JOINING THIS LINE NOW, WITH EXTREME REFINEMENT. MANY WILL NOT NOTICE THAT THESE DRAWINGS OF SUCH "WESTERN" AND OBJECTIVE FIGURATION, CARRIED OUT WITH AN ORIENTAL DELIGHT, INTERPRET THE CONTENTS OF THE CUBAN SANTERÍA. AND THIS IS BECAUSE THE ARTIST WORKS OUT THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASE, WE WOULD SAY, OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE WORLD THERE PRESENT, OPENING IT TO THE SIMILARITIES WITH THE THINKING OF OTHER CULTURES. THEREFORE, HIS PROCEDURE IS MORE CONCEPTUAL THAN MORPHOLOGICAL."⁴

Later, Brey began to not only produce his habitual sober drawings on paper and Bristol board, but more intense works, more colourful, with sgraffito on the acrylic painting that he applied through gestures, recalling the painting of aborigines with which he came into contact on a trip that he made to Australia in those years. That was also the moment when he began his

first large sculptures and installations, in which he says he began to work with fear of too close references to artists of his generation, such as Juan Francisco Elso and José Bedia, who had already made incursions into such expressions. Without abandoning drawing and works on paper, the sculptures and installations ended up being Brey's predominant form of expression while in Europe, where the visible references to the Afro-Cuban tradition seem to have disappeared almost totally. It could be said that Brey's interest in reflecting aspects of the Afro-Cuban religions only lasted a few years and may not return. Not only because of the social and cultural atmosphere of his place of residence at the moment (although we should not disregard the fact that Belgium - as Brey reminds me - was the colonial power of Congo), but because of an internal evolution, his work is becoming more and more cosmopolitan or universal. His aesthetic research has led him to take advantage of the ambiguity or the intrinsic meanings that the images, objects and materials are capable of generating and to distance himself more and more from cultural references. Whatever there is of Africa or Afrocuba in his current works will not be on the surface or will require intellectual effort by the spectators, or comments that the artist may decide to disclose. As he writes, "An ELEGGUÁ is something you have, it is not shown"⁵

Ricardo Rodríguez Brey



Naturaleza muerta
con un muerto
(Still life with a dead man),
1988

Drawing. Pencil and
watercolor on paper
70,5 x 50,5 cm

Naturaleza muerta con un muerto
(Still life with a dead man), 1988

La sombra (The shadow), 1988

The works shown here are similar, so much so that they seem to be part of a series dedicated to the topic. Both make reference to a common practice in our religious atmosphere related to reverence for the ancestors, influenced by Spiritualism. The spiritual theories of the French Allan Kardec, introduced in Cuba in the second half of the 19th century, were quickly modified and adapted to existing ritual needs and practiced in an orthodox way by very small groups. The religion of the ORISHAS found in the Spiritualism many useful resources as to caring for and being in touch with the spirits of the dead. There is no SANTERO, BABALAWO or PALERO who does not have in his/her own house a BÓVEDA ESPIRITUAL (ancestor shrine), with seven glasses of water, a crucifix, a rosary, a candle in its chandelier, a small ball of CASCARILLA, white clay or EFÚN, a small bottle of eau de cologne, some pictures of deceased relatives, all arranged on a small table with a white tablecloth where there is usually a vase of flowers. If not all of this, the religious person has a glass of water (with or without flowers) in a high place as spiritual assistance devoted to the memory of one or more deceased.

Bóveda
espiritual
(Ancestor
shrine).





La sombra
(The shadow),
1988
Drawing on paper
70 x 50,5 cm

In these works, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey makes reference to this practice. According to the artist, one of his friends, artist Juan Francisco Elso "had died recently and the only way of uniting reality and spirit in harmony was through these flowers and glasses."⁶ The flowers have to please the spirits with their perfume for them to assume a benevolent character. Lilies are often the flowers preferred in these spaces, with their buds closed so that they start opening in the course of a few days and put right any difficulty that may arise. Sunflowers seem to attract the light, acting as a kind of a radar that allows the spirits to reach a higher illumination and thus rise above their old bond with matter, although it is also a flower dedicated to the ORISHA OSHÚN, owner of the sweetness of honey. The delicacy of Brey's drawings is appropriate to the subject, since the issue is to represent the presence of the immaterial, the spirits, who are shadows flying over the flowers in both cases. In NATURALEZA MUERTA CON UN MUERTO (Still life with a dead man), the artist employs a delightful pun with "still life", one of the traditional topics of academic painting. In fact, except in the case of Brey, very few Cuban artists have tapped the topic of spiritualism (one example is Marta María Pérez), due perhaps to the plain and unvaried character of its imagery.

¹ See his web site [www.ricardobrey.com](http://ricardobrey.com)

² Fidel Castro. "Palabras a los intelectuales". Assembly hall of the Jose Martí National Library, Havana, Cuba, June 1961.

³ Benjamin Buchloh. Interview with Ricardo Rodríguez Brey. *New art from Cuba. Catalogue of exhibition in Amelia Wallace Gallery, SUNY/College at Old Westbury, US, 1985.* p.16

⁴ Gerardo Mosquera. Catalogue of the exhibit "Sobre la tierra", Wifredo Lam Centre, Havana, Cuba, 1987. Also see "África dentro de la plástica caribeña", *Plástica del Caribe, Papers of the II International Conference of the II Havana Biennial, Editorial Letras Cubanas, Havana, 1989*, pp.137-164.

⁵ Personal letter from Ricardo R. Brey to the author, January 24, 2010.

⁶ *Ibidem* footnote iv.

René Peña

(Havana, 1957)



René Peña's work is much more complex and clever than

his splendid photographs suggest at first sight. Although it is true that his images hold their own very well, his comments and texts sometimes help to reveal part of this complexity. Peña's reluctance to be classified as an artist with a special interest in racial problems, for example, is illustrative. In his impressive MAN MADE MATERIALS series, 1998-2001, Peña focuses on the physical attributes of black people; their skin, noses, lips and buttocks, which racist ideologies have used as "racial markers" and which continue to be used as "inoffensive" stereotypes that identify black people. (Can it be true that only blacks and mulattoes have those noses, buttocks and lips? I am not so sure.) But as Peña points out, this series and his work in general is incorrectly interpreted, or "racialized", due to the simple fact that he is a black artist who portrays himself. If a white artist had done the same thing, this would have a different meaning.¹ According to Peña, then there would not be any racial content and we would not need to look for expressions of "negritude" or "black consciousness". Apparently, René Peña blames our gaze (our "WHITE GAZE"?²) for the alleged racial content. But when we speak of "white gaze" can we exclude the gaze of black people who see in his photographs not only a human being, a man, but a black man, a representative of their own race? This type of acknowledgment or identification doesn't occur with white people, who have always been considered



Untitled,
(from "Man Made
Materials" series),
1998 - 2001
Digital print
40 x 50 cm

(mainly by themselves) as the normal, standard representatives of the human race, and not as members of any particular race. As if through a rear-view mirror, Peña makes us not only interested in the beauty or the attractiveness of his photographs, but rather guides our gaze towards our conscience, towards the often uninvited presence of preconditioned reactions. "I am only a common person, a human being who has decided to photograph parts of his body, that is all", Peña seems to be telling us with a hint of mischief, which leaves us feeling that perhaps this is not so. I believe that René Peña's main focus of attention lies precisely in his ability to manipulate our insecurity, our fears and prejudices, even within the context of the racial problems from which he tries to disengage himself. "IMAGINE A GUY LIKE ME, PROUD OF BEING BLACK IN A COUNTRY WHERE THAT IS NOT ANY VIRTUE. IT IS NOT LOGICAL THAT THESE THINGS OCCUR."³ Can such a statement be true or is there irony in his voice when making this assertion on the illogicality of racial pride in a country where discrimination against blacks persists? With Peña one can never be very sure.

Peña's work pleases, excites and generates identification and racial pride among the black population, but at the same time

Untitled,
(from "Man Made
Materials" series),
1998 - 2001
Digital print
40 x 50 cm



Untitled,
(from "Man Made
Materials" series),
1998 - 2001
Digital print
40 x 50 cm



Untitled,
(from "Man Made
Materials" series),
1998 - 2001
Digital print
40 x 50 cm



refutes, problematizes and makes fun of the customary assumptions of racial pride and black consciousness. His work pleases black people because the image of a black person nearly always occupies a central place in a provocative, slightly insolent manner. But then he refutes this by making comments which introduce the annoying doubt that perhaps he is referring to something else. Faced with the aesthetic excellence of his works, such uncertainty could be of fleeting importance, but the fact of forcing us to revise, scrutinize and examine our opinions is of great artistic relevance.

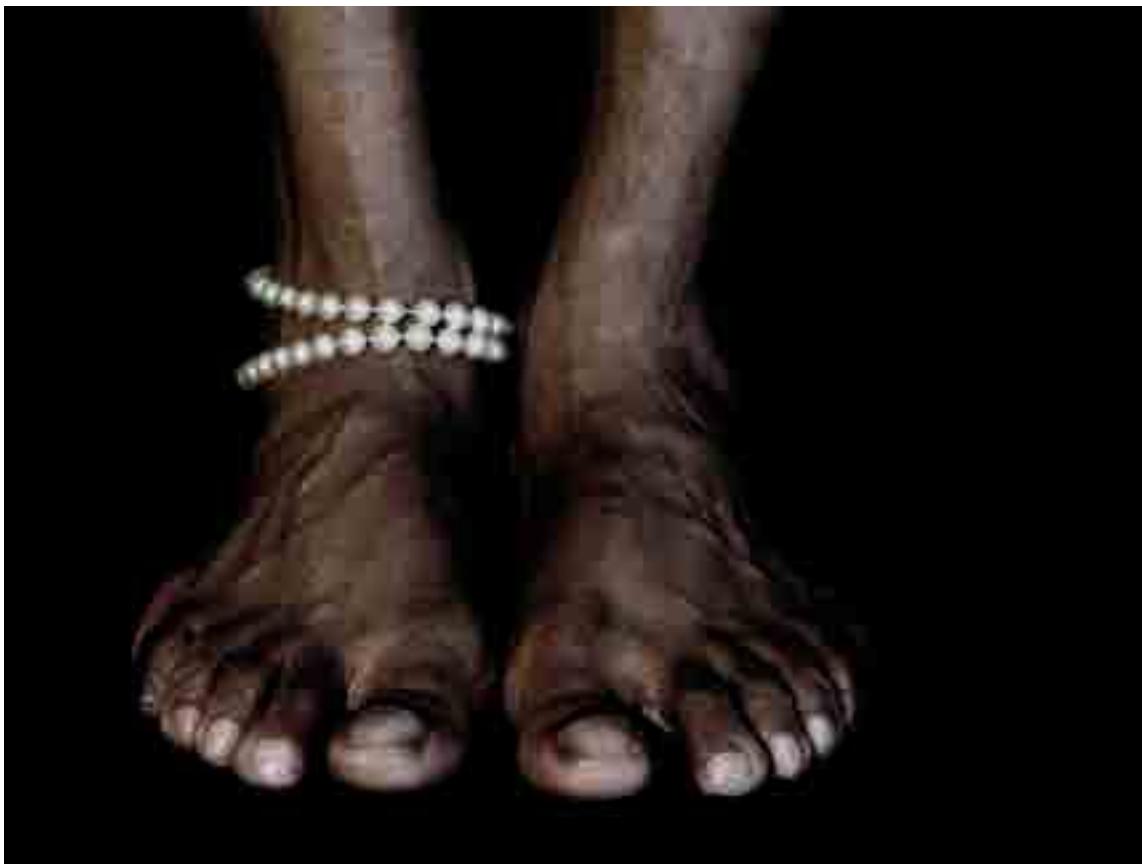
In fact, René Peña feels somewhat terrorized when the critics or his spectators start to give meanings to his works that tie him to a narrow value system, which is often not what he intended, since his works are related to a wide range of social issues or problems, not just racial or gender-oriented. "THE FOCUS OF MY INTEREST DOESN'T RESIDE IN THE PHYSICAL ASPECT OF SOCIETY, BUT IN ITS SOUL, THE ONE THAT DOESN'T HAVE A FACE, LADEN WITH BELIEFS, FEARS, SEX, HATE, VICES, IMPRECISIONS, GLUTTONY, CUNNING,

CARESSES, RACES, STEREOTYPES, GOLD, INSTITUTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS, LOVE AND CONTRADICTIONS,"⁴ he says . Hence, he has been extremely cautious in his titles, which are almost always titles of the series, and not of individual works. But in one of his best known series, COSAS BLANCAS (White Things), (2000-2002) to which many later works could be added, the contrast of the white objects used is marked in relation to the black skin of the model. Isn't he forcing our gaze to become interested in the racial conflict generated by such black-white contrast, although the images can also be referring to many other issues? Despite my respect for his justified mistrust regarding the reductive nature of our interpretations, I believe that all readings are conditioned by contexts, and there is no way to disregard racial problems in such a context. This is a universal problem, in Cuba and in any other place where his works circulate. A white, fluffy pillow on the head of a black person makes us think that the white race (its culture, customs, education, and laws) continues to push, smother and exert



Untitled,
(from "Man Made
Materials" series),
1998 - 2001
Digital print
40 x 50 cm

René Peña



Untitled, 2007
Digital print laminated on PVC
100 x 133 cm

pressure (even with something as light and inoffensive as a pillow) on black people. And when we see a necklace of white pearls (probably plastic, of course) tied to his ankle, we are led to consider possible allusions to homosexuality or trans-sexuality (since it is evidently a male foot), or to a juggling of the ACHABÁ or CHAIN OF OGGÚN that many Afro-Cuban religious people use on their ankles. But we also think that the artist has made a sarcastic reference to consumerism, the new deluxe model of the old slave fetter that still keeps blacks captive in our society. It is truly very difficult to avoid racial readings.



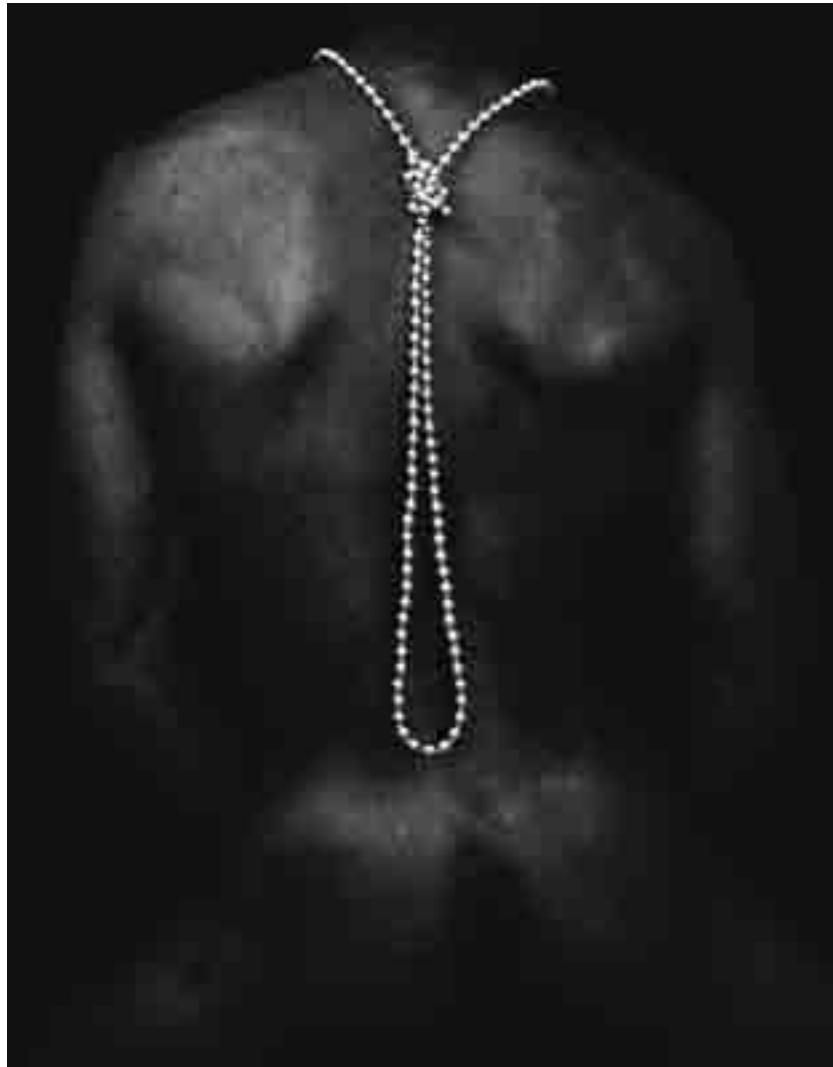
René Peña defends himself –and he is entitled to– from those interpretations that he considers reductive. He prefers viewers to make their own personal, intuitive assessments, not guided or imposed upon by the specialists, although within the art system this is increasingly difficult to achieve. He is conscious that each image generates many possible readings, some of which can take directions different from those that the artist intended. But how can one control the free flow of meanings? Nevertheless, Peña also criticizes the critics who try to discover his true intentions. Since he does not accept one thing or another, the situation becomes uncomfortable.

Withe Pilow, 2007
Digital print laminated on PVC
100 x 133 cm

Untitled, 2007
Digital print laminated on PVC
100 x 133 cm

His message is: look at my works, but don't think I will make things easy for you. I believe that this nonconformity, this conflictual, belligerent, rebellious posture has a function, an artistic objective.

Let us broach the issue of the body. In photography, to use your own body to communicate ideas is not something that should be taken lightly. We have already seen it in the work of other photographers, such as Marta María Pérez, or María Magdalena Campos, or in performances, such as those by Ana Mendieta or Tania Bruguera, and we see it repeatedly with dancers and actors. We all use our bodies to say things to others through our facial expressions, corporal movements, postures, clothes, adornments, tattoos, necklaces, haircuts or hairdos, all of which carry information about our social and cultural status, religious affiliation and sexual preference. But the color of our skin also says a great deal to others. Things that we are often not keen to say, but that are inevitably read by others. The color of our skin sends stronger messages than those we seek to transmit. To decide to use your own body as the medium, the language, the artistic discourse –especially when this body belongs to a black, male person— and in a photographic atmosphere where white and mostly female skin has prevailed (Ana Mendieta, Marta María Pérez,



Cirenaica Moreira, Tania Bruguera, just to give local examples) must be an interesting challenge for René Peña, the artist. This challenge, like a big hot potato, he hands over to his spectators. It is up to us to peel, boil and mash the potato or to keep on holding it until we burn our hands. Personally, I prefer to burn my hands.

¹ René Peña, "Es más fácil buscar diferencias que similitudes". Interview by Colombian critic Christian Padilla, Bogota, Colombia, 2008.

² On "white gazes" see Frantz Fanon, *Piel Negra, Máscaras Blancas*, Instituto del Libro, Havana, 1968, pp. 144-145 and passim. "Estoy sobre-determinado desde el exterior.

No soy el esclavo de las "ideas" que los otros tienen de mí, sino de mi parecer(...) Las miradas blancas, las únicas verdaderas, me disecan. (...) Siento, veo en estas miradas blancas que no es un nuevo visitante quien entra, sino un nuevo tipo de hombre, un género nuevo.

Un negro!

³ María Matienzo Puerto. "Breviario para etiquetar la obra de René Peña". Interview. Esquife electronic magazine, no. 65, February-March, 2009.

⁴ René Peña, Dossier, CD, 2007.

Moïses Finalé Aldecoa

(Cárdenas, Matanzas, 1957)



The work of Moïses Finalé (who settled in Paris around

1989 and then placed an extravagant dieresis on the i of his name) has always been based on cultural references of multiple origins¹; many stemming not only from Cuba and Afro-Cuba, but from ancient Egypt, India's classical period, pre-Columbian Mexico, popular Haiti and, of course, black or sub-Saharan Africa. Finalé uses these cultural references in a liberal, whimsical manner, with no intention of creating a discourse of historicist, reflexive or intellectual character, as did many Cuban artists of the previous generation, such as Elso, Bedia or Brey. On the contrary, the painting of Moïses Finalé has followed a sensual, voluptuous, hedonist trend, motivated above all by decorative effects. Perhaps his main objective has been a search for elegance, mystery and beauty. I refer here to that European concept of beauty established during the 18th century taking its aesthetic references from the Greek, Roman and Renaissance cultures; only much later –at the beginning of the 20th century– did Europe begin to look for other extra-European sources of beauty.

I do not believe that Moïses Finalé has felt uncomfortable or embarrassed by his defined aesthetic vocation (which some could describe as aesthetician), not even when a new generation of Cuban artists –such as Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas, Glexis Novoa and Aldito Menéndez– began to imbue their works with a sense of social and political commitment; neither much later, when art in Cuba began its transition towards post-

modernism. Not even more recently when, at the beginning of the 1990s, some resumed such social commitment to attack racial prejudices and other signs of moral and political regression in our society. Moïses never changed his course, convinced that his compass was working well. This does not mean that his work is conservative or outdated, nor can it be said that his work is unconcerned about its context or the changes and problems of his time. Yet his true dramas and tensions have referred more to the interpersonal, psychological and sexual issues of his fictitious characters and to the formal and stylistic problems and conflicts that each work presents. In this sense, his aesthetic is closer to the joy of living or the mystery of creation than to the burden of existence.

One of the most persistent features of Moïses Finalé's work is the creation of atmospheres and scenes in which small groups of mainly female characters, alongside animals and objects, are absorbed in ambiguous, enigmatic relationships, or exhibit stilted positions, with gestures, postures and grandiloquent, theatrical contortions, in which eroticism, sex and sometimes lust play an essential role. To create those mysterious atmospheres and scenes, Moïses has, almost from the beginning, used elements characteristic of our Afro-Cuban religions, especially the most popular of them, SANTERÍA, which he has mixed with objects and symbolisms taken from other religious beliefs or popular superstitions. In all his work, we find altars, statuettes, knives, necklaces, tools and attributes of the ORISHAS, the inevitable



Motivos para iniciados
(Motives for Initiates),
1998
Acrylic on canvas
and metal sculpture
191 x 151 cm

conical head of ELEGGUÁ, as well as canes and masks. His work is full of disguises and masks, crowns and costumes meant to create drama and evoke atmospheres in which concealment, lack of definition, and camouflage emerge. His masks were initially the masks of stick-up bandits (like the famous Zorro), bridal veils, masks reminiscent of Venetian carnivals, culminating in the masks of black Africa or in their imaginary versions.

The Africa that appears in Moisés's works stems mostly from the heritage of

Picasso's early Cubist period and from other representatives of European Modernism from the beginning of the 20th century. It is an imaginary, invented Africa, a mysterious and exotic Africa that, rightly or wrongly, has nurtured the work of thousands of artists around the world and fed a wide range of popular imagery. An Africa which we should be careful not to renounce or reject completely as untrue or apocryphal, since this would force us to throw overboard many decades of Cuban, Caribbean and Latin American as well as "universal" art,

in which there are already such prominent figures as Picasso and the Cuban Wifredo Lam. For that reason, it may not be sensible to embark on a settling of accounts, no matter how much we defend the necessary process of decolonization of our mentalities, subjectivities, creativities and aesthetic tastes. In the long run, these expressions have turned out to be less harmful to our cultural identities than other artistic visions that have appropriated the traditions of European or North American origin and have disregarded any representation of Africa, the

Moïses Finalé Aldecoa

African and the Afro-American. We should rather consider its positive side, the fact that the presence of such a fictitious, invented Africa, built largely by our imaginations (with the support of cinema, literature and the media) has become a form of identification, sympathy, admiration and a celebration of its societies and cultures, its objects, symbolisms, spiritualities and religions. This has generally been assumed with honesty, passion and pride by many artists of our part of the world. The real Africa –or the many Africas that make it up– is still located in the future, or in a present to which most of us unfortunately do not have access.

Moïses Finalé represents, better than anyone else in this collection, this form of naïve, joyful artistic fantasising about Africa and the Afro-Cuban that some may label too picturesque or exotic. In truth, it is not offensive or disrespectful, since its function, like the other elements in his creative system, has not been to problematize but rather to display beauty. Some may criticize this conception of beauty as being Eurocentric². Surprisingly, such images of Africa exist even within our Afro-Cuban religions and this is due, among other things, to the long-standing social, cultural and religious disconnection from the African continent which has deprived us of knowledge of the multifarious African cultural expressions and societies, its religious developments, objects, art, music and languages. This disconnection has facilitated the emergence of a “Cuban Africa” or “Afro Cuba” which, in many ways, has ignored elements of the real Africa.





Dias de Boda
(Wedding Days),
1997
Mixed media on canvas
(Diptych)
266 x 400 cm

¹ The most complete publication to date on the life and work of this artist is Moïses Finalé, with texts by Zoe Valdés, Editions Cercle D'Art, Paris, France, 2000.

² On the question of beauty related to African and Afro-American traditions, refer to the anthology by Sarah Nuttall, Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics, Prince Claus Fund, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006.

Find our contribution to this debate in "Meditaciones (más o menos rancorosas) sobre la belleza", 2007. <http://www.criterios.es/pdf/orlandochezmedit.pdf> Revista Criterios (Havana) www.criterios.es and its translation into English "Meditations (more or less rancorous) on beauty", in a publication by Ernesto Oroza/ Gean Moreno, as part of an installation made for the South Florida Cultural Consortium Media and Visual Arts Fellowship Exhibition, University Galleries, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, U.S., Sept-Oct 2009.

José Bedia Valdés

(Havana, 1959)



coherent and original as that of José Bedia. Although he is one of the most outstanding examples in the history of art in Cuba and Latin America, and he has also received international acknowledgement, his true importance has not yet been fully recognized. In his paintings, drawings and installations, José Bedia has not only used a hive of cultural references from Cuba, but also from Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa, focussing on those that western civilization, with its technological vanity and false idea of progress, has considered underdeveloped, backward or pre-modern. According to Bedia, his work is an attempt to rescue, through the discursive strategies of contemporary art, the dispersed fragments of that old wisdom which, to a greater or lesser extent, all those societies have in common, and which are of great importance to complete the deficits of our unbalanced contemporaneity¹.

Bedia's creative method, seemingly spontaneous, intuitive and at times naive, is not only the product of previous rigorous study, but of the assimilation of formal, material, aesthetic, symbolic and historical elements from those cultures that have inspired him and that he reflects either in a simple drawing or painting or in one of his monumental installations. The often simple and schematic appearance of his works and the generally austere and synthetic character of his discourse follows the principle of doing more with less, concealing

Few Cuban artists have developed a body of work as

a conceptual and philosophical depth and an abundance of uncommon information, the result not so much of bookish study as of his contact and direct identification with the systems of knowledge of those cultural groups that some call native, aboriginal or traditional.

The first figurative anthropomorphic representations of the powerful and invisible MPUNGOS of the Afro-Cuban religion of PALO MONTE, as well as fragments of its myths, graphic symbols, philosophy and the atmospheres and objects characteristic of its rituals appear in José Bedia's art by the mid-1980s. Something similar had happened in the 1960s and '70s with Manuel Mendive and the orishas of SANTERÍA or REGLA DE OCHA, with Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal in the 1980s regarding the many unknown aspects of the REGLA DE IFA, and with Belkis Ayón in the 1990s and the myths, characters and ritual events typical of the ABAKUÁ Secret Society.

This sequence of events is important in the history of Cuban art, because in these four decades –characterized by an atheist or scientific materialist thought, which was preceded by the preponderance of Catholicism as the official religion– the four best preserved religious traditions of African origin practiced on our island began to be represented within our traditionally western visual arts. In three cases (Mendive, Olazabal and Bedia), the artists themselves are initiates and even priests of these religions. All have a high degree of artistic excellence that has allowed their works to circulate not only nationally, but internationally, and to disseminate –amongst the learned, cultured art of the elite– much of the

ethical, aesthetic, philosophical, spiritual and religious content typical of these traditions. This seems more important than the process of modernizing the languages and styles in which all the artistic vanguards in Cuba have been involved since the 1920s. This is important for Cuban art as well as for the development of the spirituality of our people. It is an arrival point, or at least a step in the direction towards our Afro-Cuban cultural identity.

These religious groups have never requested the presence of these representatives, and they probably do not understand their relevance fully, since –with some exceptions– most believers belong to popular sectors that do not frequent galleries and museums. But since art is a system that has been able to monopolize greater social and cultural prestige than these religious beliefs of African origin, the works of these artists have fulfilled another less visible function: that of exerting influence and gradual pressure on the prejudiced habits of thought of the society in order to achieve acceptance and lend prestige which was lost or snatched from them, both in Cuba and the rest of the world. Or at least, of moderating the unfair intolerance that still weighs on them. Ethnographic studies –that should likewise be considered unrequited representations or translations– have played a similar role, and have served as additional sources of study for the traditional religious groups themselves.

José Bedia's artistic decision to represent PALO MONTE – a religion with few icons and a poor visual tradition, considered primitive, with malicious practices, dedicated to witchcraft – was a true novelty within our

Tata Nganga Alberto Goicochea,
José Bedia's godfather.



cultural milieu. It was also daring to make public some ritual aspects belonging to a group that has always kept much of its knowledge secret. For the first time, many elements of this tradition began to make their appearance, until then known only by believers or a few specialists. Previous allusions in our visual arts to this religion of Bakongo origin, characteristic of the lower Zaire, Cabinda, Congo Brazzaville and Angola²; known under the generic denomination of conga or Bantú tradition in Cuba, had been very scarce, and were limited to the use of some of their signatures or graphic symbols, generally with ornamental purposes. Added to his personal knowledge of PALO MONTE (Bedia was consecrated as TATA NKISI MALONGO or priest of this religion in 1983), was an obsessive interest in historical and ethnographic studies that soon turned his work into one of the most complex and best informed within the artistic vanguard of the 1980s.

The small group that made up this vanguard, which some called the new Cuban renaissance, was divided into at least two sectors with somewhat different interests. One was more inclined to update their artistic language and style in line with the most advanced international art, while the other, led by Juan Francisco Elso, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey and José Bedia, saw in the original,

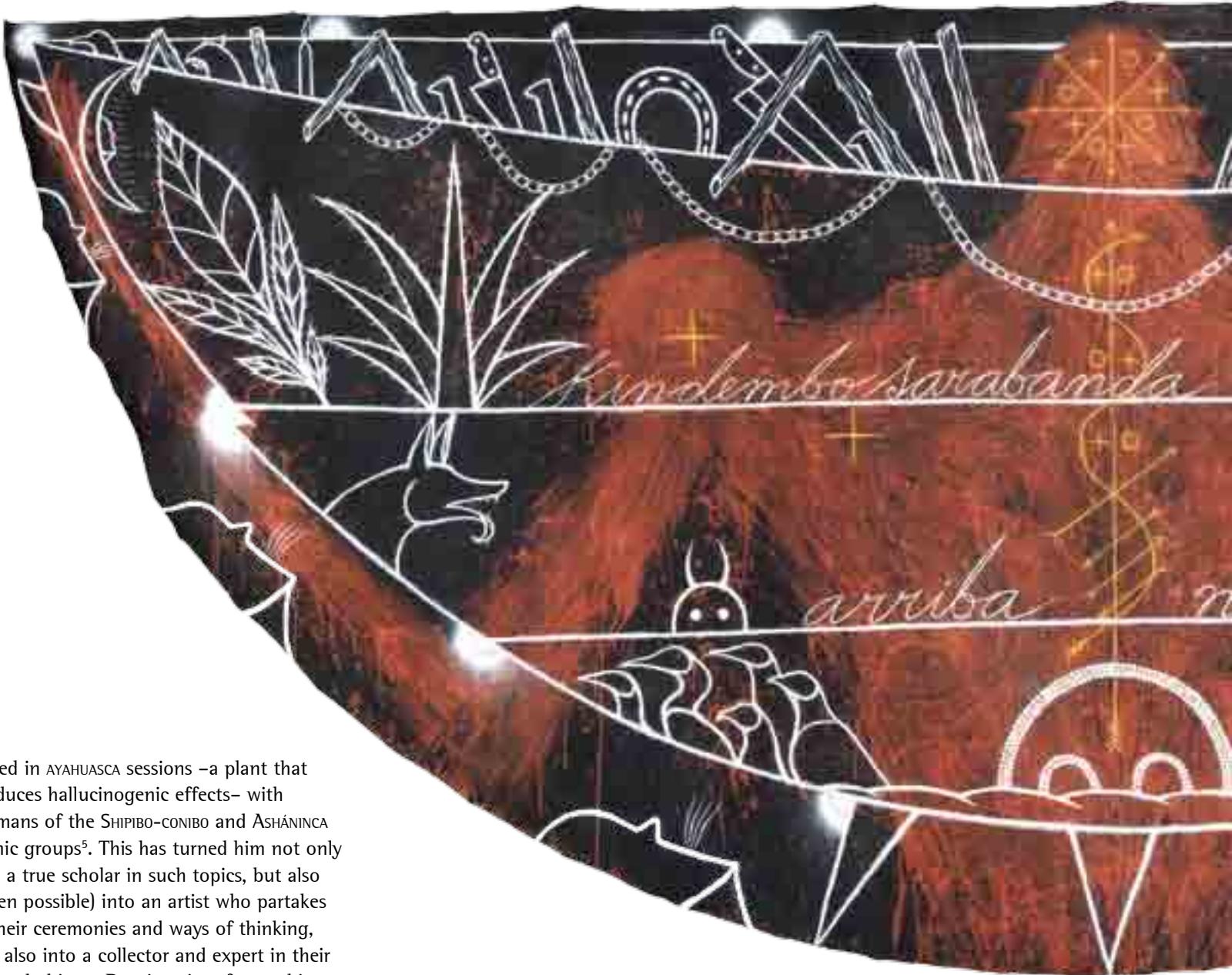
aboriginal or indigenous cultures of América, Africa and Afro-Cuba, the main incentive for creating of a new aesthetic and a new form of non-western modernity. Bedia also followed an existential program that he had planned from the beginning of his career:

"I RECOGNIZE MYSELF AS INCAPABLE OF GIVING A GENERAL DEFINITION OF ART BEYOND WHAT I INTEND PARTICULARLY WITH MY WORK, WHICH IS ESSENTIALLY GEARED AT HIGHLIGHTING THE CONTINUITY OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT. IT IS AN ATTEMPT AT COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNION BETWEEN THE MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL UNIVERSE OF "MODERN" AND "PRIMITIVE" MAN. THE RESULTING WORKS ARE ONLY OBJECTIVE TESTIMONIALS THAT ALLOW PEOPLE TO SHARE MY EXPERIENCE."

"THE PROCESS –A TRANSCULTURAL ONE, JUST TO GIVE IT A NAME– WHICH TAKES PLACE AT THE MOMENT IN THE MIDST OF MANY AUTOCHTHONOUS CULTURES IS THE ONE THAT I TRY TO DEVELOP IN MYSELF, BUT IN REVERSE. I AM A MAN WITH A WESTERN TRAINING THAT BY MEANS OF A VOLUNTARY AND PREMEDITATED PERSONAL SYSTEM, IS SEEKING TO APPROACH THOSE CULTURES AND ALSO EXPERIENCE THEIR EQUALLY TRANSCULTURAL INFLUENCES. WE ARE BOTH LIKE THIS, HALFWAY BETWEEN MODERNITY AND PRIMITIVISM, BETWEEN THE CIVILIZED AND THE WILD, BETWEEN THE WESTERN AND THE NON-WESTERN, ONLY IN OPPOSED DIRECTIONS AND SITUATIONS. MY WORK STEMS FROM THIS RECOGNITION AND FROM THIS BOUNDARY LINE THAT TENDS TO BREAK DOWN."³

PALO MONTE has not been the only topic that has interested José Bedia⁴, but rather it is part of a wide range of interests that have included the Native Americans, the ancient Mayas and Aztecs, and the indigenous and contemporary popular cultures of Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala and the Peruvian Amazonia where, for example, Bedia has

José Bedia Valdés



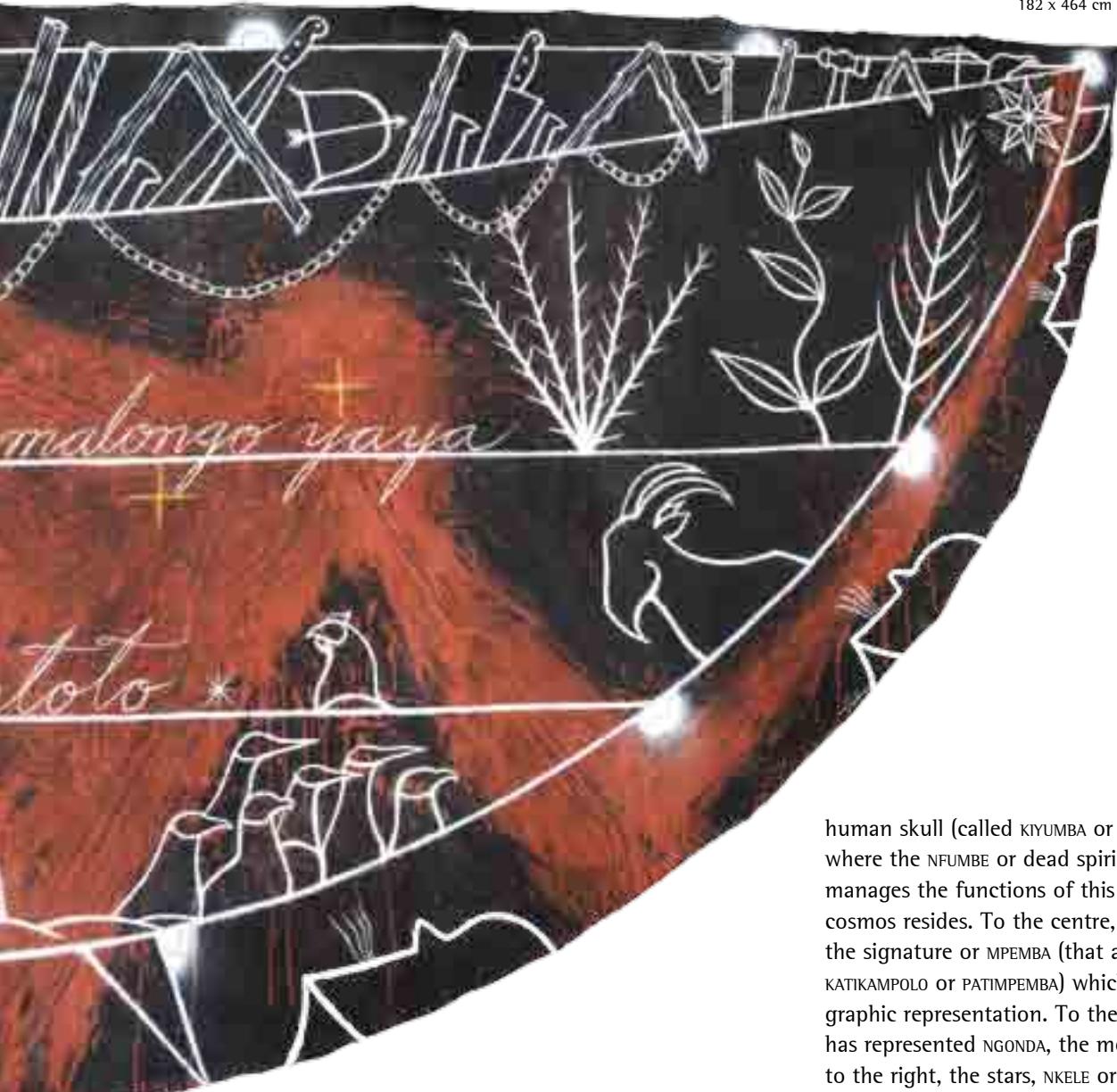
joined in AYAHUASCA sessions –a plant that produces hallucinogenic effects– with shamans of the SHIPIBO-CONIBO and ASHÁNINCA ethnic groups⁵. This has turned him not only into a true scholar in such topics, but also (when possible) into an artist who partakes in their ceremonies and ways of thinking, and also into a collector and expert in their cultural objects. But, in spite of everything, the religion of PALO MONTE has always been a central reference in his work which has surfaced in almost all its stages, many times mixed with ingredients from other traditions and also as a tool to make political comments or social criticism. His first trip to Africa in 1985 during the Angolan war (in which he participated as a member of an artistic brigade of the “internationalist Cuban mission”) put him in direct contact with the original culture of this religious practice and increased his identification with the African ingredients of our nationality. Unfortunately, from that experience in Angola, I can

remember only one work which in all probability does not exist today: “Toy for an Angolan Boy”.

José Bedia has constantly added other cultural references to the previous list as a result of his numerous trips around the Caribbean (Dominican Republic, Haiti), and recently around Africa (Egypt, Kenya, South Africa, Botswana, Zambia) that have allowed him to integrate in his work and his cultural life knowledge from that continent that never arrived in Cuba for historical

reasons. These links through art are a new way of enriching the Cuban and Caribbean culture, radically different from the colonial and slave connotations of our heritage. Our disconnection from Africa is disappearing little by little and we are finding new ways of recovery and renovation.

Kindembo Sarabanda Malongo
Yaya Arriba Ntoto, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
182 x 464 cm



Kindembo Sarabanda Malongo
Yaya Arriba Ntoto, 2009

This work by José Bedia is a splendid large-format representation of the main sacred object of the PALO MONTE religion, the NGANGA, which is also known in Cuba by several other names, KINDEMBO, NKISO, NKISO, MALONGO, PRENDA (garment), CALDERO (pot), and FUNDAMENTO (foundation). It appears here reflected in a kind of X-ray image, with its fundamental ingredients exposed: sticks, hooked sticks, herbs, soil, rooster, dog, male goat, birds, iron tools, chain, machetes, knives and a

human skull (called KIYUMBA OR KRIYUMBA), where the NFUMBE or dead spirit that manages the functions of this microcosmos resides. To the centre, we see the signature or MPEMBA (that a few call KATIKAMPOLO OR PATIMPEMBA) which is its graphic representation. To the left, Bedia has represented NGONDA, the moon, and to the right, the stars, NKELE or TETEMBOAS that grant spiritual force to this object. The recipient of a SARABANDA garment is a three-legged iron cauldron or kettle surrounded here by several PALEROS that MBOPAN (speak to it) or sing some of its mambos or prayers, which allows the appearance of the gigantic NFUMBE who resides there or of the mpungo or deified energy that presides over it. In this case, SARABANDA is an equivalent of the ORISHA OGGÚN of the Yorubas. Although there are many other NGANGAS (NKUYU, NSASI or SIETE RAYOS, CHOLA WENGUE, PANSUA or COBALLENSE, among others) doubtless SARABANDA is one of the most popular and abundant in the Afro-Cuban religion of PALO MONTE⁶.

¹ José Bedia. Oral history. Interview by Juan Martinez, Miami, Florida, USA, February 13, 1998, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

² Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy*. Vintage Books, Random House, New York, 1984, p.14

³ José Bedia. Folleto Promocional Ministerio de Cultura, Havana, Cuba, without editorial data.

⁴ On José Bedia there is an extensive bibliography in exhibition catalogues and other publications, but the most documented book on his life and works is currently José Bedia. *Obra 1978-2006*, Galería Ramis Barquet, Turner Editores, Madrid, Spain, 2007, with contributions by Orlando Hernández, Kevin Power, Cuauhtémoc Medina and Omar Pascual Castillo.

⁵ We have used the term shaman because it is the most comprehensible, but in the case of the shipibo-conibo tradition, they are called unaya, and in the case of the asháninka, shiripiari. Both work with the ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis Caapi*), also known as *Datura*, *Yajé*, etc, on which there is an extensive bibliography.

⁶ Lydia Cabrera. *El Monte, Igbo-Finda*, Ediciones Universal, Miami, Florida, United States, 1975, has a very illustrative chapter titled "Como se prepara un Zarabanda", p. 134. By the same author, *Vocabulario Congo (el bantú que se habla en Cuba)*, Colección del Chicherekú en el exilio, Miami, Florida, USA, 1984.

Marta María Pérez Bravo

(Havana, 1959)



Marta María Pérez Bravo is a pioneer of artistic photography in Cuba, a kind of photography done by artists rather

than professional photographers, photo-reporters or photojournalists (although, of course, these can also make works of art). The purpose of this particular form of artistic creation, sometimes called metaphoric photography¹, is not to document external reality, people's faces, city or country landscapes, or to record scenes of daily or family life, politics or rituals. The objective is rather to explore (or to make spectators discover in the photographic images) the ideas, concepts, emotions, desires, fears, hopes and beliefs that the artist intended to convey. When the camera is pointed towards the chaotic heterogeneity of the surrounding world in a conventional way, as an instrument recording the objective, it is difficult to achieve the same goals, intensity or emphasis. In artistic or metaphoric photography, on the contrary, the photographed object is subjected to some type of transformation. The true nature of the object is intentionally changed, with the purpose of having our gaze go beyond reality. In this case, the aesthetic effect is hardly ever left to chance, as often happens with the beauty or surprising impact generated by instant photographs (even studio photographs, where the poses, ambience, decoration and light are staged). The true object of artistic photography is conceptual and subjective from the beginning. Meanings are neither

left to chance, nor to arbitrary readings or interpretations, although this may happen depending on the spectator's knowledge or imagination. In Marta María's case, the visual transcription of a defined message is generally of a verbal origin (a phrase, a proverb, the name of a deity, a ritual event) that she represents in a reduced scenario, by means of a mini-performance. Photography has the obligation of verifying such pseudo-theatrical representations in its isolation and immobility.

Marta María Pérez's metaphoric photography uses language in a strongly connotative rather than a denotative manner. Her true interest is not to show us the poetic side of an object or a scene, but rather the phantom of such an object, or a preview of what such a photographed scene could end up being in our minds.

The arrival of this new genre of photography in Cuban art in the 1980s overturned our relationship with the long history of photographic images. It placed our traditional photographers (many of them already celebrities) in a somewhat unfavourable position to compete in the field of art, especially so-called contemporary art. This created a conflict –at times hidden– that has lasted until now. The new artistic or metaphoric photography brought about a technical and aesthetical crisis of photography, of its established values and hierarchical structures. Issues considered to be sacred laws by the professionals (frames, focus, illumination, angle) were no longer indispensable. The quality of the photograph

began to be evaluated by other parameters, from other perspectives. Marta María was one of those responsible for the first subversive approaches to the photographic fact as an artistic expression. Her photographs did not comply with many of the old requirements but, in exchange, they offered something new and unusual. Although we may feel inclined to consider it a higher level in the use of photographic techniques, it is not completely fair to interpret it as a fresh start vis-à-vis our previous magnificent photographic tradition.

Marta María was also a pioneer in the use of her own body within Cuban contemporary photography. Perhaps it was a chance discovery or self-discovery of her body during her pregnancy (1986), since many of her first works were related with the mysteries of motherhood, like the series *To CONCEIVE* (1986.) At any rate, it should be noted the body that we see in Marta's photographs it is not actually hers. It is the body of a fictional character which she creates modelled on the image of her own body. And the atmosphere surrounding it does not exist in any place. It is an abstract, imaginary body, and the scenes are dateless, with a timeless character. Her body has never been used in her works as an autobiographical reference, or perhaps incidentally so, for those who know that she is the basis for her only model. Sometimes she turns her back, other times only one of her arms or legs are shown, or the head is out of the frame or covered by a cloth. It could be said that this body of a white female subject seeks to erase or ignore her

personal identity, gender, sexual identity and race, in order to achieve other purposes. The body has always served her as neutral raw material, by means of which she can represent her ideas, like a painter would with oil or a sculptor with a piece of stone or wood, or a ceramist with clay. And although her ideas generally stem from *REGLA DE OCHA*, *PALO MONTE* or Spiritualism, her work has nothing to do with the documentation of a performance (as is the case with the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta). In Mendieta's case, the artist's body was part of an action, a ritual event, even when it was a private and fictitious or artistic ritual. For Marta María, the idea has always come first, then the building of the object-scene-atmosphere that may best represent the idea, and finally the photographic image. This is always the order. The idea triggers the entire process, although it would be uncomfortable to consider her as a strictly conceptual artist. In a conversation that we had in 1995 for the writing of an article on her work, Marta explained:

"I SOMETIMES FIND IT DIFFICULT TO FIND THE IMAGE WITH WHICH TO REPRESENT MY IDEA, BUT ONCE I FIND IT, IT IS THAT AND NO OTHER: THERE ARE NO ALTERNATIVES. IT IS NOT LIKE IN THE CASE OF JOSÉ BEDIA WHO CAN BREAK DOWN A MYTH INTO MANY DIFFERENT IMAGES. WHEN I FIND THE IMAGE, I PREPARE THE CONDITIONS TO REPRESENT IT AND TO SHOOT THE PHOTO. THERE IS NO CEREMONY IN ALL OF THIS. NO RITUAL OR ANYTHING OF THE SORT. I BELIEVE THAT IT IS JUST THE OPPOSITE. WHILE WE ARE TAKING THE PHOTOS I EVEN END UP BY DEVELOPING A BAD TEMPER, I DESPAIR; I WANT EVERYTHING TO CONCLUDE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE."²

Unlike other artists who work with their own bodies (such as René Peña, who has recognized her influence), Marta María seems to dedicate more time and care to the transformation and the formal arrangement of the scene. The set where her body is placed and the selection, assembly and exact position of the objects give her photographs a sculptural, immobile and synthetic character, almost minimalist.

The references that Marta María uses in her images almost always have a religious, or African-religious origin, taken fundamentally from *SANTERÍA*, *PALO MONTE* and Spiritualism. She has made some breakaways to other traditions of popular Cuban culture (Chinese charade, for example) or Catholicism, also present in Mexico where she currently resides (such as votive offerings, penitents or Christian martyrology). Almost all her work has explored these issues, although the abundance of meanings allows the public to make wider, more generic or more universal readings. I believe that the metaphoric scope of Marta María's works can end up being more intense, or artistically more productive, in those cases where the public does not know to what symbolic ritual or religious aspect she is referring in her photographs. And there is nothing in Marta María Pérez's works that conforms to obvious readings. Just the opposite. Perhaps the truth is that some of us recognize her starting points better than others.

Marta María Pérez Bravo



Caminos I
(Road I),
1999
Photograph
100 x 80 cm

Caminos I (Paths), 1999
Caminos II (Paths), 1999

In CAMINOS I, the two hooked sticks of ELEGGUÁ are tied in opposite directions to the ankles of the figure. We could think of the double power of this ORISHA, who is considered the owner of destiny, capable of making us advance, impelling us vigorously forward or obstructing our path, to hinder or paralyze our progress. I do not recall in all the Cuban visual arts a more profound or elegant representation of ELEGGUÁ than this one. Marta María has represented the double power that this ORISHA may exert with the simple tool that is its best attribute, the hooked stick. The ambivalent personality of this deity of Yoruba origin is like our own destiny, often guided by opposed and uncontrollable, favourable and unfavourable forces. To be aware of the existence of ELEGGUÁ does not mean that ELEGGUÁ does not



Caminos II
(Road II),
1999
Photograph
100 x 80 cm

exercise its functions inexorably,
a practitioner of SANTERÍA could say.



Eshu Elegguá, Regla de Ifá.

CAMINOS II also refers to ELEGGUÁ, with the figure practically bound with cement, fused to the image of this orisha. A pessimist would think that we are simply prisoners of ELEGGUÁ's capricious will, while others, on the contrary, may imagine that we are capable of controlling those designs, as Marta told the Cuban critic Juan Antonio Molina in an interview: "I am my own ELEGGUÁ." Although immediately she recognized: "But what destiny has in store for me, I don't know³." Two small, almost invisible dolls are inlaid in the mass of ELEGGUÁ, representing Marta's own twin daughters and perhaps expressing that destiny is something we have to share with others, especially with our sons or daughters.



Jura
(Oath),
1999
Photograph
100 x 80 cm

Jura, 1999 (Oath)

Ya no hay corazón (There is no longer a heart), 1999

These two works are dedicated to PALO MONTE or to the religion that has NSAMBI or SAMBIAMPUNGO as a fundamental divinity, both in Africa and in Cuba. In the case of JURA, we are witnessing an imaginary initiation ceremony, in which RAYAMIENTO (scratching) or small incisions are made on the body of the initiate. These cuts act as protection, as a safeguard and, at the same time, they are expressions of sacrifice and commitment to the sacred power which the person worships. The forms and distribution of such incisions vary depending on the branch of PALO MONTE where they are carried out. The image created by Marta reveals a sense of respect and voluntary subjection of the character to the rules by which one is sworn in. In fact, there is no religion, not even a fraternity or political



Palo Monte new initiate with cotton over the scratches, La Habana.

party, or even love engagement that doesn't imply some type of oath, accompanied by some act of sacrifice. I believe that the true beauty of this work is found in the field of ethics as much as in that of aesthetics. It not only summarizes a specific ritual procedure, in this case of PALO MONTE, but it also reflects the universal character of surrender, of the commitment that any human being expresses when establishing a relationship with anything

considered sacred. In this selfish, pragmatic time of fierce individualism, these messages are uncommon. The image is presented in such way as to give us the impression that we are not the true spectators, but rather that the recent initiate is being contemplated by the eyes of God, of NSAMBI.

In YA NO HAY CORAZÓN, Marta María Pérez takes as a reference the NKISI NKONDE or wooden figure covered with nails, knives and other piercing elements that is used in the cultural and religious tradition of BAKONGO, to repel the attack of bad spirits or malicious people, among many other functions. For some reason, the NKISI NKONDE was never assimilated into the Afro-Cuban religion of PALO MONTE. Marta María has incorporated it here to transform her own body into a fetish capable of self-defence against wickedness, slandering, envy or any other threat. The aggressive aspect of the image reflects its function and its force. The same idea is developed by Marta in her work PROTECCIÓN, 1990, but this time, using for protection the thorns of the Ceiba, a sacred tree for all our Afro-Cuban religions that is called by different names: NKUNIA SAMBI (by the PALEROS) ARABBA or IROKO (by the SANTEROS and BABALAWOS) and UKANO BEKONSI (by the ABAKUÁ). Be it thorns or nails Marta, or the imaginary character that she embodies in her works, has felt the need to be protected. And in a boastful gesture demonstrating that she already has protection, a shield, the figure shows her breasts transmuted into two pointed weapons of a very different nature than the thorns of the Ceiba: the powerful weapons of femininity.

Marta María Pérez Bravo



Protección
(Protection),
1990
Photograph
50,5 x 40,5 cm

Ya no hay corazón
(There is no heart),
1999
Photograph
100 x 80 cm



Firmeza
(Firmness),
1991
Photograph
50,5 x 40,5 cm

Firmeza (Firmness), 1991

FIRMEZA is one of few examples – together with some by Rodríguez Brey –where Spiritualism makes its appearance in Cuban visual arts. In this case, in its most simple and most enigmatic expression: a glass of water where the spirits of our ancestors come down to drink, known in the local language as “spiritual glass” or “spiritual assistance”. Instead of the table or shelf where this is generally placed, the glass rests on the artist’s own body which, assuming a natural yet extreme stability posture, becomes an improvised altar for the grateful descent of the spirits. Perhaps there is no better altar than our own bodies.



¹ Juan Antonio Molina. “La marca de su cicatriz: historia y metáfora en la fotografía cubana contemporánea”. 5th Latin American Colloquium on Photography, CONACULTA, Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City, 1996, pp. 95-100.

² Orlando Hernández. “Marta María y el juego de las estatuas”. Ramis Barquet Gallery, Monterrey, Mexico, 1996 (in Spanish and English).

³ Juan Antonio Molina. “Yo soy mi propio Elegguá”. Interview with Marta María Pérez, May 1995, Pagina en Blanco blog. <http://paginaenblanco-juan.blogspot.com/2008/09/yo-soy-mi-propio-eleggu-entrevisa-con.html>

Rubén Rodríguez

(Cárdenas, Matanzas, 1959)



Not everything exists on the surface, or is what it appears to be. Neither is

everything transparent and legible; more so, when dealing with works of art. This is especially true regarding the contents of Afro-Cuban religions, in which discretion, reticence and secrecy have always prevailed. Many people have been naive witnesses of hermetic, only-for-the-initiated, small events; but lacking the necessary information to identify those events, they have considered them as something ordinary, not of great significance. Of course, this is not only the case regarding the Afro-Cuban religions, but also freemasonry, for example.

Those of us who are accustomed to interpreting works of art consider it normal to unravel all that is hidden, difficult or even undecipherable, for the benefit of knowledge and for the enjoyment of less trained spectators. And to a certain extent, that includes explaining religious images and symbols in works of art. But this opinion is not shared by a large number of religious believers, neither, strange as it might seem, by many artists. Apparently, what is hidden, mysterious and enigmatic increases the seductive power of the artworks, and serves as a decoy to lure viewers and stimulate their imaginations. But, in the case of the religions of African origin in Cuba, secrecy has performed very different functions that go beyond protecting the sacred from the indiscreet gaze of non-believers. Secrecy has made it possible for these religions to survive in the scientific and rationalist atmosphere

of the modern world, as well as to avoid discrimination, persecution and repression which was part of the colonial, slave regime of old and atheism which has characterized official thought in socialism. Such caution and mistrust with their information prevails up to the present; therefore, we should be respectful when commenting on these matters.

It is true that many Cuban artists have openly expressed in their works elements that were part of important religious secrets; likewise, ethnography has recorded and described a great number of these details. But what decision should be taken when an artist such as Rubén Rodríguez has integrated SANTERÍA and Ifá elements in a large part of his work, in such a voluntarily discreet way that those links are hardly verifiable? Rubén Rodríguez does not speak much about his works. And much less of the relationships of his works to religious events, objects and symbols. He is not interested in making those relationships visible. It suffices for him to know they are there. And, in fact, they have always been there, since the beginning of his career. Many people may not have noticed them, and could therefore not have been aware of their real importance when evaluating and interpreting his work¹.

It could be said that more than the religious aspect, what is hidden, mysterious and secret is what seems to have prevailed in the painting, drawings and prints of Rubén Rodríguez. But that concealment and secrecy originates in religion. Or perhaps those concealments and secrets are an inseparable part of his personality, which is why the

mysteries of the Afro-Cuban religions are his excellent travel companions. Rubén has always opted to keep his preferences and religious membership private. It is something that belongs only to him. He does not feel obliged to share his religiosity with other believers, or at least not in the way most do, by participating in religious ceremonies and festivities, but rather in the solitude of his home. To a certain extent, the practice of the religion of the ORISHAS in Cuba facilitates such privacy, since the home of every believer is a temple. The believer has his/her consecrated objects within his/her reach. And except in some cases, he/she doesn't have to attend any temple or church to pray and to make petitions, sacrifices and offerings.

Rubén Rodríguez's art is seldom interpreted from the perspective of the Afro-Cuban religious traditions. For many, he may even seem an outsider in this exhibition. Yet I believe that, on the contrary, his work is one of the most interesting examples of the Afro-Cuban religious presence in art, which makes us wonder if many others are also hidden in unsuspected corners, out of our view. The philosophies, myths, colours, numerical symbolisms, sacred stories and varied knowledge that make up the strong tradition of the Afro-Cuban religions have penetrated the subjectivity of all Cubans so deeply that it is very rare for somebody to be unfamiliar with their influence, either in art or daily life. In a metaphoric manner, Rubén Rodríguez uses the inner, not the outer parts of those religious aspects. He does not paint a coconut, but the invisible water inside it. Not the shell and pulp of a fruit, but the seed, flavour or scent of that hypothetical fruit. What truly interests

him is not the varied appearance of religious practices, but their religiosity, their mysticism, their secrecy.

In his paintings, drawings and prints, he presents naked bodies, sometimes simple sketches of bodies, without much detail, split, fragmented bodies, whose heads are not generally not visible. Sometimes the head is substituted by a dove, a fish, or a rooster. Arms or legs are enormously lengthened to cover the whole space. Almost all his work is a succession of bodies in different positions, painted with different formal and chromatic solutions.

He uses a body to convey aspects of a simple wild herb, its characteristics or ritual uses, its power to solve certain problems, to strengthen the spirit, to keep away an enemy or the spirit of a dead person, because he knows that such a herb is used to make an OSAIN, an OMIERO or, in a cleansing ceremony, a DESPOJO, or SARAYEYE. But the herb is only mentioned in the title. The body acquires the characteristics, the personality of that herb.

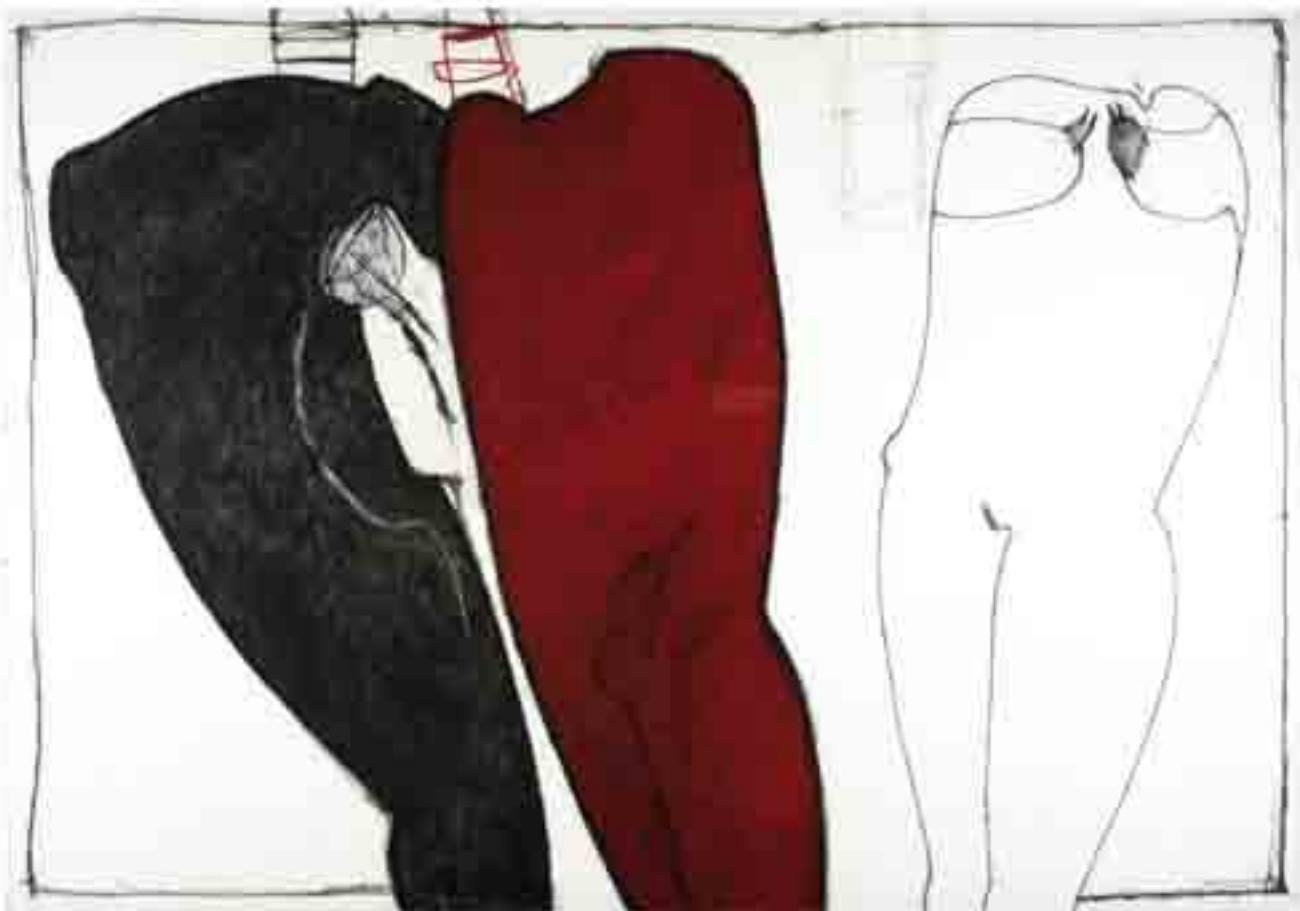
He uses sayings from the sacred treaties of SANTERÍA and IFÁ: "The spider never loosens her web," "A big fright brings happiness," "What goes well, ends well," "You must give before receiving," but he does not describe those situations by means of a narrative representation. The proverb was in his mind when he made the work; and that is enough. The proverb's content passes to the canvas, to the cardboard and incorporates itself in the painting or drawing. Or maybe the proverb came to his mind later and was identified after having finished the painting.

He uses the five manners in which a coconut falls after being cast (AGBÓN in Cuba, OBI in Nigeria) during a divination process called by some BIAGUÉ, to make five paintings in which he conveys in an abstract manner, the positive or negative features of the answers of that uncomplicated oracle: ALAFIA, ETAWA, EYEIFE, OKANA and OYEKÚN. He does this by means of formal and chromatic suggestions, increasing or decreasing the intensity of the colour and texture, making the painting lighter or more dramatic according to the situation.

Rubén Rodríguez may be the most hermetic of all the Cuban artists. It is not that he wants to be obscure and impenetrable, but rather that this is natural and unavoidable for him. To be an artist, to express himself through painting or drawing and to openly exhibit his works are his only ways of betraying such secretiveness. This is much more visible in his paintings than in his drawings. His paintings can have a paralyzing, intimidating effect, eliciting in the viewer a sensation of restlessness and fear, mainly due to the use of dark, cloudy colours, while his drawings allow more rest because they present less rarefied, lighter atmospheres, where winding, elegant lines reflect greater sensuality. Thus, they are better accepted.

Sensuality and eroticism have always been the essential ingredients of the works of Rubén Rodríguez. He mixes this in an unusual manner with religious contents, attributing an enigmatic character to the bodies involved in his scenes. Sensuality, religiosity and hermeticism could be the three characteristics that best define him.

Rubén Rodríguez



Cortar los paños
(Cutting the cloths), 2005
Oil, charcoal
on Guarro heavy paper
70 x 100 cm

Cortar los paños (Cutting the cloths), 2005

This work has as a substratum or initial motivation an important ritual event of Ifá called PARALDO or oparaldo, in which three rectangular pieces of white, red and black cloth are used on which certain ODUS or Ifá

signs are painted. The aim of this small ceremony is to keep the presence of death or of a dead spirit away from a person. An animal (chicken, rooster, dove or guinea fowl) is sacrificed by a BABALAWO behind the back of the person involved. These three colours are basic in the religion of Ifá, since they represent or possess the three types or primordial energy or ACHÉ present in the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdom, and allow the making and fulfilment of all things². In this work, the cloths mentioned in the title have been substituted, as is common in Rubén Rodríguez's work, by human bodies. His substitutions are done almost exclusively using the human figure, male and female. For white, he uses the figure of



Babalawo Vicente Granda
(Baba Eyiogbe) preparing space
for Paraldo ceremony,
Regla de Ifá, La Habana

a woman whose breasts seem to be dripping maternal milk, maybe as a reference to the purity associated with the mother, who is the origin of the whole human species. For red, he uses a sexually aroused male figure, with an erect phallus, to represent activity, passion and blood. And for black, again a female figure, but this time bent over on herself, hunched, gloomy, of funereal aspect, like death (IKÚ) itself or the dark forces of the invisible world, of the world beyond (of ORUN). In spite of its uncomplicated appearance, this work not only synthesizes, in an odd manner, the ceremony of the OPARALDO, but the contents of all that exists from the perspective of the Yoruba mystic way of thinking.



From the Mantos (Cloaks)
series, 2002
Oil, ink and Charcoal
on Guarro heavy paper
70 x 100 cm

From the Mantos (Cloaks) Series, 2002

This beautiful drawing from the MANTOS series refers to an Afro-Cuban religious event of Santería. Other types of cloths called PAÑOS DE LA PARADA (standing cloths) are used by the SANTEROS. These four cloths (white, blue, yellow and red) are placed, following a certain order, on the head of the future IWORO or SANTERO during the secret initiation process, to allow the FUNDAMENTOS of each ORISHA of the consecration to lie there. More than allusive, the drawing is totally elusive, it does not explain or reveal anything and maintains the same discretion that surrounds this ritual event. The drawing is about the consecration of a woman, probably a daughter or OMO of the following ORISHAS: ELEGGUÁ, OGGÚN, CHANGÓ, AGGAYÚ, BABALÚ AYÉ, ORISHA OKO, INLE, OBBA or

Oyá, because, in those cases, the red cloth is the last that is placed. Therefore, it is more visible, as in this drawing³. But this is only a supposition, a reading taken from religious knowledge. If one were to ask Rubén, he would probably smile and answer evasively: "Yes, something of that is there."

¹ I drew attention to these matters in the text of his first exhibition, which fortunately I also organized. Rubén Rodríguez Crypt, Galería Habana, February 1991.

² Juana Elbein dos Santos. Os nágô e a morte; Padé, Asésè e o culto Égun na Bahía (1986). Editora Voces, Petrópolis, Brasil, 2002, pp. 39-42.

³ Orishas, Tratado del cuarto de Santo. Brochure printed by hand, with no edition data.

This is the kind of bibliography usually used by the religious Afro-Cuban population.

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons

(La Vega, Matanzas, 1959)



My current vision of María Magdalena Campos-Pons' work is admittedly quite fragmentary, and unfortunately not as updated as I would like it to be. It is a piecemeal perception, sometimes with no dates or order, like when we thumb through a family photo album from which somebody has taken some pictures, in this case, the last ones. This is what happens when Cuban artists have been living abroad for twenty years or more, and have not had their works shown in our galleries and museums. Sometimes there is no choice but to make do with memories, archive materials, the internet or the occasional catalogue that is brought to the shores of our isolated island. And sometimes one remembers areas that have been left behind, that maybe the artist herself has forgotten, but that inevitably are part of her career and her history.

Let's take, for example, three silk screen prints by Magdalena Campos from 1988 that are part of the series *SABOR A CUBA* (Cuban Flavour): *EL MAMEY* (Mammee Apple), *LA PAPAYA* and *QUIMBOMBÓ QUE RESBALA PA LA YUCA SECA* (Slippery Okra for the Dry Cassava) which, despite their innocent, ornamental aspect, are full of sexual allusions. Sexuality, especially female sexuality, was one of the topics that Magdalena Campos was most interested in during those years. And it continues to be one of her motivations. Occasionally she made formally elaborated works by means of planimetric structures made of wood, plaster and acrylic, with allusions to the Leda and the Swan myth, for example, or she mixed ritual elements from the ancient Aztec culture. These works

were shown at one of the many international exhibitions of Cuban contemporary art organized during those years: *CUBA OK*, 1990, which functioned as a launching pad for many artists of that generation. Despite not being directly related with the Afro-Cuban tradition, Magdalena's initial works prepared her for deeper and more daring discourses, and for dealing with a topic, like female sexuality, which was also taboo: that of racial problems.

In fact, the works of Magdalena Campos were never moderate or conservative. Only a year later, during the Fourth Havana Biennial, 1991, Magdalena presented a complex installation called *TRA...* with a historic, reflexive and critical approach that set a landmark in the treatment of the Afro-Cuban theme and had a great impact on our milieu. Ariel Ribeaux Diago, one of the organizers of two important exhibitions: *QUELOIDES* (*Keloids*) and *Ni MÚSICOS NI DEPORTISTAS* (*Neither Musicians nor Athletes*), the first of which addressed race as a theme, says this about Magdalena Campos in his essay *Ni MÚSICOS NI DEPORTISTAS*:

“...THE DISCOURSE OF THE ARTIST MARÍA MAGDALENA CAMPOS IS THE MOST VISCERAL AND CLEARLY DEFINED, IN SO FAR AS GLOBAL POETICS, OF THESE TIMES. A CONSIDERABLE AREA OF THIS ARTIST'S WORK APPROACHES THE RACIAL PROBLEM – A RARA AVIS IN THOSE TIMES – AND, IN ADDITION, SHE DOES IT FROM A GENDER APPROACH. ONE OF HER MOST OUTSTANDING WORKS WAS, I BELIEVE, THE *TRA...* INSTALLATION, SHOWN IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS DURING THE FOURTH HAVANA BIENNIAL (1991). ITS REMINISCENT TITLE ALLUDES TO TERMS LIKE SLAVE

TRADE, TRAP, TRANSCULTURATION, AND TRAFFIC, ETC., AND IT CONTAINED A TEXT THAT REFERRED TO ALL THE SUFFERINGS OF THE BLACK RACE SINCE THE ARRIVAL OF BLACKS TO THE NEW WORLD. THIS INSTALLATION ESTABLISHED, BY MEANS OF IMAGES OF CROWDED BLACKS (BIG WOODEN PANELS AS SLAVE SHIPS WITH BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS WHICH EMPHASIZED THE DRAMATIC ATMOSPHERE), THE CONCEPTUAL COORDINATES OF MAGDALENA CAMPOS¹."

It must be said, in reference to some of those words (slave trade, traffic) that María Magdalena Campos-Pons has been the victim of at least two displacements, two exodes and two diasporas. The first involved her forefathers. They were forcibly brought from Nigeria during the slave trade to work in a sugar plantation at a place called La Vega, in the province of Matanzas. In this case, it is only an engram, a half-blurred fact, strengthened by successive evocations by her family that Magdalena has never wanted to forget. A large part of her oeuvre has been devoted to reactivating the bonds with that past, with those memories, to lend them artistic usefulness loaded with ethical, social, racial, sexual and political commitment. But is there a real possibility for a person of black skin in Cuba, or in any other place where African blacks were enslaved, to break away from that affiliation, or to avoid being indirectly involved in that traumatic event?

In fact, very seldom have I heard a black person in Cuba mention with pride that her/his great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather was an African slave. Maybe I have heard it in the religious atmospheres of SANTERÍA, Ifá and PALO MONTE, where these

ancestors are worshipped and acknowledged, mainly due to the prestige that direct African origin seems to grant to a believer or to sacred objects received as an inheritance. In all contexts, not only religious ones, this should be the norm and not the exception. The slavery of African blacks in Cuba and in all America should not be regarded by their descendants as a shameful, humiliating chapter that would be better forgotten or hidden, since the arrival of African blacks in our lands was economically, socially and culturally important. The slavery of the past illustrates the moral inferiority of slave traffickers and owners, and of those who were pro-slavery, mostly whites of European origin. Being a white Cuban myself, could I feel the same pride if my great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather had been pro-slavery, a slave trafficker or a RANCHEADOR, persecutor of runaway slaves? Who should feel more ashamed or humiliated by his/her origins? On the other hand, Africans not only had in our lands a history as slaves and maroons; they also played an essential role in the formation of our society and our modern culture, arts, literature, intellectual and political life, although little of that knowledge has been made public.

To a large extent, the blame for that concealment of knowledge could be attributed to historians, those who have written (at the request of the hegemonic sectors, of the representatives of power) the history that unfortunately continues to include many of the Eurocentric, racist, aristocratic and bourgeois concepts of the 19th century.² In our school history books, for

example, the route followed by Christopher Columbus and his sailors during their three voyages to Cuba and the Caribbean, has always been described in detail. We know that Columbus sailed from a town called PALOS DE MOGUER, we know the name of his three ships, NIÑA, PINTA and SANTA MARÍA, and even the name of the sailor, Rodrigo de Triana, who sighted land for the first time after a long journey from the European shores. We even know that Columbus said something like: "This is the most beautiful land that human eyes have ever seen," when he landed on Cuban soil. All these anecdotes recorded in our history books are about the CONQUISTADORES, the invaders, and those who would soon become dedicated producers of sugar with the slave manpower brought from Africa, once the indigenous population of our island had been exterminated. And who, a while later when liberating those slaves, would become our "founding fathers" and the "builders of our nationality," a concept that minimizes the importance of the slave uprisings that took place and figures like the free black José Antonio Aponte whose antislavery and anti-colonial conspiracy of 1812 occurred many years prior to the war of independence in 1868. Shouldn't the black Aponte at least be considered one of the true "fathers of the homeland?" Only very recently has the so-called "Slave Route" become known in relatively narrow academic circles. Now there is a small museum in the city of Matanzas. But few Cubans of African origin know from which place in Africa their forefathers came, neither do they know their original names, or to which ethnic group they belong; thus it is impossible to

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons

reconstruct their family histories. The history of outstanding figures of the population of African descent continues to be little known and recognized, in Cuba and all through America. If it were known, wouldn't the descendants of those Africans be better able to feel pride?

Magdalena Campos has dug, for many years, in those silences, showing through her art, the history of the history-less, beginning with her own family, listening, taking notes, "speaking softly" with her grandmother and her mother, as it is said in the name of one of her exhibitions: "Spoken Softly with Mama³." Perhaps she is convinced that the history of each black family, no matter how poor their origins might seem, is the solid foundation on which to build the true history of Cuba and of humankind.

Magdalena Campos' second diaspora has to do with her departure to the United States, where she has resided since 1991, and with the estrangement from her native language, her family and social and cultural context. Although this is very different from her initial diaspora, it has evoked almost identical feelings in the artist. Her life in a different milieu seems to have elicited in her not only rewards, happiness and joys, but discomforts, pains and conflicts similar to those suffered by her distant African relatives when they arrived on these strange lands on the other side of Atlantic, or the Black Atlantic. *MUTATIS MUTANDIS*, is it not always about the same diaspora?

Dreaming of an Island, 2008

This impressive photo installation of Magdalena Campos-Pons offers us an extraordinary opportunity to understand the African diaspora, often presented in books as a remote event. In this image, we see three possible shores where nostalgia, yearning and remembrance are headed. In which of those shores should we imagine the figure represented in the work to be, in this case the artist herself? A black Cuban woman dreaming of Africa from Cuba? Dreaming of the Africa of her ancestors from the shores of United States? Or dreaming of Cuba (or Afro-Cuba) from any place of the world? Some of the titles of the works and exhibitions of Magdalena give us the answer: *WHEN I AM NOT HERE / ESTOY ALLÁ, (I AM THERE)* or *EVERYTHING IS SEPARATED BY WATER*. As a bundle of very long aquatic roots, the hair of the artist extends through the seas as a bridge, attempting to connect all those shores for good.





Dreaming of an Island, 2008
Polaroid, Polacolor #7
70,5 x 62 cm (each piece)
217 x 190 cm (overall size)
Edition 1/2



¹ Ariel Ribeaux Diago Ni
músicos ni deportistas (*Notas*
para el Libro Oscuro), 1997.
[http://www.afrocubaweb.com/
arielribeaux.htm](http://www.afrocubaweb.com/arielribeaux.htm)

² Walterio Carbonell, *Cómo*
surgió la cultura nacional,
Ediciones Bachiller, Biblioteca
Nacional José Martí, 2005.

³ María Magdalena Campos-
Pons. *Spoken Softly with*
Mama, National Gallery of
Canada, Ottawa, Canada,
1998.

Juan Carlos Alom Jiménez

(Havana, 1964)



Juan Carlos Alom is a strange mix between a gypsy and a maroon, and

is at the same time a cultivated artist and a street-smart man, a restless, fidgety spirit, difficult to grasp, define or characterize. His essentially drifting personality has allowed him to feel at ease in both the vortex of big cities and the solitude of mountains. Alom is constantly escaping routines, traditions and styles. He prefers to run the risk of anonymity in exchange for enjoying total freedom, which he favours over the comfortable imprisonment of fame, applause, money which are, after all, only good to buy materials for his next adventure.

Many of his adventures are surprising: he goes for weeks to the bush to photograph close up the sticks, leaves, vines, the dimness and clarities of the wild environment, unbeaten tracks, not as a botanist or environmentalist, but to enjoy the vital secret energy that he knows exists in each plant. He is astonished when he discovers in the sparse dwellings of the area, the rustic firewood or charcoal kitchens that our farmers still use in the 21st century and spends weeks enjoying the simplicity and sincerity of their company and cooking. He trains rigorously for months like a boxer about to participate in a secret fight for bets, and then he forgets there was to be a fight. Or he films and photographs the journey undertaken by our national hero José Martí in 1895, following his diary page by page from Cap Haitien to Dos Ríos to revive this distant itinerary with new characters and incidents.

His willingness to look everywhere, to find the unseen, provides him with an enormous stock of images, ideas and large projects than he can tackle immediately. While he carries out some of these, he realizes that he has been accumulating ideas and images for something new and unplanned and begins from there.

He undertakes his projects with exaltation and zeal, but abandons them with the same speed if they begin to cool down and become too slow, traditional or conventional. I sometimes wonder how Juan Carlos Alom has managed to make such a coherent body of work when he has always been under the inspiration of surges, chaos and speed. He moves with the same naturalness among the brotherhoods of Harley Davidson bikers as among jazz musicians or SIERRA MAESTRA's country folk. It is as if he has his engine permanently geared up, about to run where his instincts tell him to go. His photographs and films have the same agitated pace, but in the end he manages to arrive unflustered at his unique goal.

Strange as it may seem, his true passion is not art, photography or cinema, but life itself. It seems as if photography is only a pretext. His objective is not so much the work per se as the process which makes it happen, the people and places he gets to know and the anecdotes he learns. Each photograph is only a small fragment of a much wider experience. More than anything, he is interested in the lives of ordinary people, the poor, the marginalized, among whom the black and mulatto populations of Cuba have always

Arbol replantado
(Relocated Tree), 2004
Digital Laminated on PVC.
86,5 x 110 cm



had an important place and to whom he has dedicated many of his works.

Juan Carlos Alom has a special relationship with photographic techniques and materials. It is a love-hate relationship. He is always dissatisfied with the quality of the technology that is available, but his dissatisfaction is counter clockwise. He likes to film with 16 mm negatives and if the materials are somewhat worn-out or near their expiry date, much better. Such aging adds a realistic touch to his works, with a strong dose of emotion, nostalgia and drama that he insists could never be achieved using the tricks of new software. It seems that he wishes to grasp contemporaneity from the perspective of the past, wanting his photographs and films to have been made 40 or 50 years earlier. He does not trust the exaggerated definition and purity provided by the digital world. And when his negatives provide him with a too clear, impeccable image, he attacks them. The beauty that Juan Carlos Alom looks for is at a level other than the perfection of the image.

In the beginning, and for a long time, Alom built his production and decorated his characters – sometimes extravagantly – by adding elements that allowed him to represent his ideas (as in TARJETAS POSTALES (Postcards), ARBOL REPLANTADO (Replanted Tree) or SIN PALABRAS (Without Words)) but lately he shoots only what he sees (as in PAPUCHO and TATA GÜINES), what springs up, or what he looks for knowing that he will also discover other things. What better image could he have found in TATA GÜINES than his own hands with long fingernails, the hands that were able to elicit from the drumhead of a TUMBADORA or conga drum the best possible Cuban music? Juan Carlos Alom's gaze is increasingly seduced by the mystery of reality. In that sense, one of the masterpieces of his filmography, HABANA SOLO, enters into a reality with very little intervention of metaphoric resources. The force of natural images has begun to win the game. The essence is already in those atmospheres and characters that he decides to film or photograph, without additions. He films and photographs the invisibility of music by

recording brief improvisations that he has requested from different Cuban musicians that he later combines with street scenes, images of our rickety and beautiful city, that express the sadness, discouragement and also the invincible and powerful happiness of the Cubans.

Juan Carlos Alom Jiménez



Tarjetas Postales (Postcards)

In TARJETAS POSTALES, Juan Carlos Alom has made a fake ethnography of slavery. Two friends from his neighbourhood have lent themselves to the experience and posed with an improvised yoke around their necks, like the yoke that slave traders placed on their "goods" to prevent them from escaping during their transfer from the slave ship to the square where they would be sold. The artist creates the illusion that this is an old photographic document, but in leaving the small earring that shines in the ear of one of the models – a hardly perceptible detail – he commits an intentional anachronism that reveals his true intention: to make us discover the present, the contemporaneity of the image, the situation and those depicted. Perhaps slavery has returned to his own neighbourhood in today's Cuba? Is racism a new form of slavery, as heavy and

bothersome as those ancient yokes? The image is a forceful critical comment on the current situation of black people in Cuba, who continue to bear different forms of oppression by reason of their skin colour and that not even the distant abolition of slavery, or the improvements achieved by the revolution and socialism have been able to eradicate completely.

Tarjetas Postales
(Postcards series), 1994
Digital Laminated on PVC
71 x 150 cm



Slaves with yokes conducted to the coast, old illustration detail.

Sin Palabras
(Without Words), 2008
Digital Laminated on PVC
105 x 82,5 cm



Sin Palabras (Without Words)

In SIN PALABRAS, Luisito, a popular character from Havana, serves Juan Carlos Alom as a model for the creation of this dramatic image. It is an unusual portrait, different from those taken by tourists. More than a contemporary fashion of facial decoration, the innumerable rings create an image (maybe somewhat exaggerated and imaginative) of an African recently arrived in Cuba as a slave in the 16th century and to the exotism of their customs, considered barbaric. The stoic expression on that face, full of small rings, seems to represent the long history of suffering and pain that black people have endured in Cuba and other places. The solemn, almost funeral face, as if shrouded, seems to carry a hint of resistance, almost at its limits, on the verge of turning into a scream of protest. The photo's negative has been intentionally cut,

emphasising the character's internal suffering, creating a thick scar, a keloid that reminds us of QUELOIDES (Keloids), that famous and problematic exhibition on prejudice and racial discrimination organized by a group of artists towards the end of the 1990s. It is a naked face, seemingly without a mask, yet it hides more than it shows.

Juan Carlos Alom Jiménez

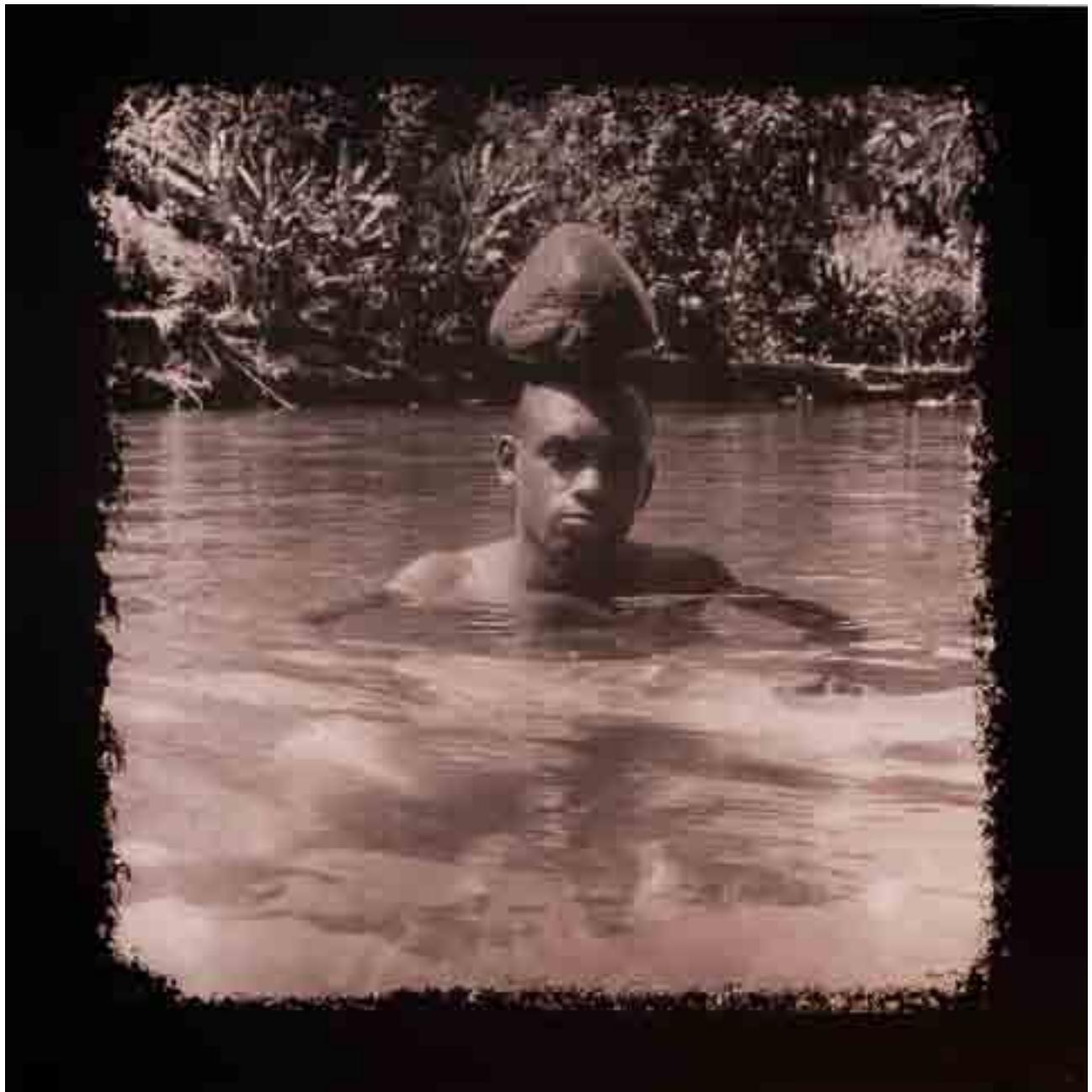


Havana Solo, 2000
Film 16 mm
Black and White
Duration: 15 minutes
Edition DVD 1/100



Tata Güines, 2008
Digital Laminated on PVC
105 x 110 cm

Papucho, 2008
Digital Laminated on PVC
100 x 105,5 cm



Papucho

A black man emerges from the bottom of the river with a large stone on his head. This is a peculiar decision. Maybe it was made to surprise those that waited at the bank or to please the photographer. Something that PAPUCHO himself would not have connected consciously with the religions from Africa. However, to bring a stone from the bottom of a river is an act of great importance in the ceremony of consecration of a SANTERO. The

future IWORO will keep such a stone forever inside a covered earthenware jar (the “jar of the secret”) and it does not represent any specific ORISHA – like the other stones or OTÁS that make up the foundation of each ORISHA. We do not know the final destination of this stone. Perhaps it became part of the foundation of a house. Or perhaps it was returned to the river minutes later. In any case, the stone was turned by Papucho

–and then by Alom’s photograph– into a stone with a special power, the possessor of a deep secret. Our gazes are the jar to preserve that secret.

Elio Rodríguez

(Havana, 1966)



Rodríguez¹ shocking or unusual, especially those who have taken the premises of negritude or black consciousness too seriously. Or those who apply an introspective approach related to the traumatic psychological experiences that the famous psychoanalyst from Martinique, Frantz Fanon, explored in his writings. In fact there is no painful exploration of his existential condition as a black man in the works of Elio Rodríguez. There is no trauma. No black lament. Neither can we find any thirst for vengeance. No revanchism. Quite the opposite. It seems that being black – in Cuba, in Spain, in any place – was a reason for joy, amusement, celebration, in spite of the daily lashings of racial prejudice and discrimination which he has inevitably faced. The boastful exhibitionism of his black condition has always had in Elio Rodríguez (or in his alter ego, the MACHO) a sense of self-assertion, optimism and racial pride, a festive or carnival tone that is intentionally farcical, like a self-caricature. Yet those expressions are never exactly what they seem to be, but carry large doses of sarcasm and irony. In general, there is no irony without the existence of a previous upset, a feeling of discontent or annoyance, and without a concrete target at which to point the cannons. The work of Elio Rodríguez became from an early stage, a vigorous and original paradigm within the small Cuban artistic vanguard that began to investigate and denounce racial problems during the 1990s.

At first,
one might
find the
work of Elio

But his works do not have an intellectual or theoretical origin from reading the main activists of negritude or black identity (Aime Cesaire, Rene Depestre, Frantz Fanon, Malcom X and Reverend Martin Luther King). His main source has been his personal experience as a black man in our society, in countries visited and in Spain where he resides at present. Elio Rodríguez has always had the strategic support of his direct knowledge of popular Cuban culture in which he was born and bred. There he found instruments that were sharpened and ready to tackle conflicting situations as well as to satisfy his artistic purposes. These instruments are humour, double meaning and mockery that the artist finds in the lyrics of popular songs, in jokes and conversations, where sexual, racial and political ingredients are mixed with the same guile that he uses in his works. Only the handling of such instruments by the artist turns our laughter –irresponsible, prejudiced– into a reason for reflection and self-questioning.

Elio Rodríguez did not start his career as an anti-racist militant. And his work cannot be reduced to a critical comment on racial problems. Art curators and critics often manipulate the work of the artists in such a way as to build from the outside, amplifying some aspects and playing down the importance of others. I remember his first works well, since I was fortunate to be the tutor of his thesis at the Higher Institute of Art (ISA) in 1989, and they revealed a search for his own language and a topic with which he could fully identify. Maybe that is why the title of his thesis and his first solo show

was a humorous question: MAMMY, WHAT DOES THE BLACK WANT? which was the refrain of a popular song at the time.

In the beginning, Elio created capricious monsters from fragments of different animals (bats, rhinos, giraffes) that he shaped by means of the soft sculpture technique, and later he did something similar with tropical fruit. In both cases, he emphasised sex, representing sexuality in its more direct and uninhibited sense (with a great profusion of male and female sexual organs).

Although Elio Rodríguez has always made his status as black man evident, his works approach a wide variety of situations and social, cultural and political problems that go beyond racial comments. These include male chauvinism (MACHISMO), which the artist sees in the patriarchal character that still governs our immediate and extended families, sexual or gender relations and the encounters between cultures, where there always seems to be a weaker or "feminine" culture and another stronger or "masculine" one. His work also makes allusions to male chauvinism in domestic political discourse. This last variable was presented splendidly in one of his early works, CON LA GUARDIA EN ALTO (With our Guard Up), made for his exhibition EL MACHO in 1991, in which the figure that sustained the shield of the CDRs (Committees for the Defence of the Revolution)², instead of wielding the machete as it appears on the original shield, brandished over its head a large male organ, to emphasize a false concept of virility or manliness in a revolution in which women

had been important participants. Despite our impassioned disagreement with the managers of the state-owned gallery (Provincial Art Centre of Havana), the provocative heraldry of the CDR suggested by Elio was censored and withdrawn from the exhibition, which at least demonstrated its effectiveness.

Seen from a wider perspective, Elio Rodríguez's interest has been in dismantling and questioning clichés and stereotypes, whether social, racial, sexual, historical, cultural or political. "EVERYTHING SHOULD BE QUESTIONED; I BELIEVE DEVELOPMENT STEMS FROM QUESTIONING THE "TRUTHS." ORDINARY CUBANS LIVE SUCH COMPLICATED LIVES THAT THEY DO NOT HAVE THE TIME TO QUESTION THEMSELVES, OR THE REALITY THAT SURROUNDS THEM. THEY DO NOT HAVE REFERENCES, THEY ONLY KNOW OF EL DORADO THAT THE CONQUISTADORES HAVE TOLD THEM ABOUT. THEY HAVE NOT BEEN TRAINED FOR THIS" (interview with Elio)³. These questionings have always been made by means of his outlandish inclination to transform everything, even the most dramatic situations into funny or humorous topics, knowing that humour has been a form of resistance for Cubans in the face of countless difficulties confronted throughout history. These ingredients of our national idiosyncrasy have been the subject of his artistic research into specific socio-economic



CDR logo.

situations, as was the case of the "joint ventures", (a novelty of Cuban socialism of the 1990s which included foreign capital for the first time) as well as the emergence of the paladares, small family-owned restaurants suddenly authorized by the State, that confused many people, since private property had been disallowed in Cuba since the Revolutionary Offensive of 1968, and even the smallest businesses had been confiscated or nationalized.

The invention of the non-existent MACHO ENTERPRISE, under which Elio Rodríguez printed his magnificent series LAS PERLAS DE TU BOCA (The Pearls of your Mouth) in 1995 is a reflection of those peculiar circumstances known in Cuba as the Special Period. Elio had fun mocking the Cuban "tropical or exotic character" vis-à-vis the opening to foreign tourism that the State used to counteract the economic deficit generated by the fall of the socialist camp, with an artificial emphasis on the attractive aspects of Cuba's image which paved the way, among other things, for a new type of prostitution (the JINETERAS and JINETEROS), dedicated to the economic exploitation of our national identity with a view to pleasing the tourist's fantasies at all costs.

Elio Rodríguez

Gone with the Macho, 1995

Gone with the MACHO is a parody of the famous American film by Victor Fleming,



Gone with the wind, poster. joint ventures with foreign capital, which were absent in our local art system then (and now). More than Elio and Lisbeth (or El Macho and Lisbeth), the characters appear to be archetypes or stereotypes that have had a long history within the national imagery, from the comic opera to the black and the mulatta of our times. More than the natural representatives of our society, who could be whites or Asians, the black man has been fabricated (consciously or unconsciously) by the discriminatory Cuban mentality as having sexual power and the mulatta as having sensuality and frivolity, thus turning them into highly valued merchandize for foreign tourism. In this work, the characters appear surrounded by tropical fruit to give the scene an exotic and succulent character. Years later, in his series REMAKES, 2005, Elio produced a new version of this image, but this time the

GONE WITH THE WIND (1939). This time, the romantic lead was not played by actor Clark Gable but rather by Elio Rodríguez who was not holding Vivien Leigh in his arms but rather Lisbeth Martínez, his ex-wife. The artist uses his fake company MACHO ENTERPRISE to print the poster (or the new film) parodying new



Gone with the Macho
(From the Pearls of your
Mouth series), 1996
Screen print on paper
70 x 48,5 cm

mulatta was replaced by a blond woman, probably a tourist, and the fruit was replaced by local products sought-after by foreigners: cigars, old cars and Afro-Cuban religions. Thus, using a simple substitution trick starting with an old American film poster, Elio makes incisive critical comments on different layers of the Cuban reality of those years, in which the racial issue was in the foreground, but was not the only important one.



El Jinetero, 2007
(of the Cubanísimas series)

In his canvas **EL JINETERO**, 2007, the advertising medium of reference was not a poster, but an illustration from an old cigar box, in which a black faun and a white woman appear as the main characters of a sexual and cultural exchange where the faun (the MACHO, now in his role of successful JINETERO) plays his enormous

"MARACAS" and seems to have conquered the white woman by offering her his large "cigar". Surrounding the scene are the typical Cuban products that this time include the presence of a policeman, who works as supervisor (and sometimes facilitator or middleman) of this new form of intercultural prostitution.

El Jinetero
(The rider from
Cubanísimas series),
2007
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 150 cm

Elio Rodríguez



Tropical, 1996 (of the Remakes series)

In the work TROPICAL, the casting changes totally. The MACHO's masculinity is no longer the object of desire of a hypothetical tourist, but a homosexual, a black gay who, wrapped patriotically in the Cuban flag and with a red beret, promotes himself as the sexual fantasy of the floral-shirted tourist. The crown or banana halo behind this character is probably a reference to the famous singer and French dancer of Afro-American origin,

Joséphine Baker (1906-1975), known in Cuba as LA PLATANITOS (the banana woman), who sometimes wore an extravagant skirt made only of bananas to make her negritude more exotic in the eyes of the French public of those days. The black gay is not a common figure in popular Cuban imagery, and may be considered a contradiction, since manliness has always been the most important feature of the stereotype constructed around the black man.

Tropical
(From Remakes
series), 1996
Screen print
on paper
70 x 50 cm

La Jungla (The Jungle), 2008

Since I have written about this extraordinary work recently⁴; I will transcribe my own words:

"THAT MONUMENTAL WHITE AND VOLUMINOUS JUNGLE, OF THE BEGINNINGS OF THE 1990s (DESTROYED AND MIRACULOUSLY REMADE BY ELOIO VERY RECENTLY⁵) WAS – AT LEAST FOR ME – NOT ONLY A STRANGE HOMAGE, BUT A PRANK (ALTHOUGH VERY RESPECTFUL) PLAYED ON THE MAESTRO WIFREDO LAM. OR AT LEAST THAT IS HOW I HAVE CHOSEN TO INTERPRET IT. DOES IT NOT CONTAIN A HEAP OF SHARP REFLECTIONS ON THAT "CONSTRUCT" CALLED HISTORY OF THE CUBAN MODERN ART WHOSE HIGHEST EXPONENT IS CURIOUSLY ENOUGH IN NEW YORK'S MoMA? THE "WHITENESS" THAT ELOIO'S YOUTHFUL JUNGLE BRINGS FORTH, ISN'T IT ALSO AN INCISIVE COMMENT ON THE RELATIVELY WESTERNIZED OR EUROCENTRIC POSTURE OF THAT GREAT PARADIGM OF THE "AFRO-CUBAN" AND THIRD WORLD ART THAT LAM WAS? THE WHITE (OR THE DISCOLOURING) OF ELOIO'S JUNGLE, IS THIS NOT ALSO A WINK OR A SLIGHT NUDGE TO THE SCANT PRESENCE OF REAL NEGRIITUDE, OF A TRUE RACIAL IDENTITY OR OF AUTHENTIC AFRO-



La Jungla
(The Jungle), 2008
Soft sculpture on canvas
238 x 248 cm

CUBAN RELIGIOSITY, BEFORE THE EVIDENCE THAT THE MOTIVATIONS OF LAM STEMS RATHER FROM BOOKISH APPROACHES, SECOND-HAND CONCEPTIONS OR THE DREGS OF THAT PARISIAN NEGRIITUDE (AND PICASSO-STYLE) FASHION AND NOT SO MUCH FROM TRUE LIFE EXPERIENCES? MAYBE THIS WHOLE MATTER OF DIRECT EXPERIENCES IS NOT SO IMPORTANT TO MAKE A WORK BELIEVABLE AND ARTISTICALLY EFFECTIVE. OR TO TURN IT INTO A WORK OF ART. BUT I DIGRESS AND

ACTUALLY WHAT I WANTED TO SAY DOESN'T HAVE TO DO SO MUCH WITH LAM AS WITH ELIO HIMSELF, AND THE FACT IS THAT NO ARTIST WILL REPRODUCE INCH BY INCH A MONUMENTAL WORK SUCH AS LA JUNGLA AND IN PASSING REMOVE ITS COLOURS, ONLY FOR THE PLEASURE OF MAKING A JOKE OR TO EXPERIMENT WITH SOFT SCULPTURE, DON'T YOU THINK? THE PLEASURE HAS STEMMED WITHOUT A DOUBT FROM HIS REFLECTIVE INTERESTS.

¹ www.machoenterprise.com

² The CDR (Committees for the Defence of the Revolution), was one of the first mass organizations established by the Revolution with the objective of having a system of vigilance made up by the neighbours of each block to prevent possible sabotage and counter-revolutionary activities. Its functions expanded later.

³ Elio Rodríguez. *Las culturas inventan su propio cliché. Interview on the exhibit Arte, Sátira...! Subversión, Cinco visiones iberoamericanas, Casa de América, Madrid, Spain, 2007.*

⁴ Orlando Hernández. *Ceiba Negra. Text for the catalogue of Elio Rodríguez's exhibition. Centre de Cultura Contemporània D'Elx L'Escoixador, Elche, Alicante, Spain, November 2009-January 2010*

⁵ Elio Rodríguez was commissioned to make *The Jungle* as a part of the present collection, since the first version was destroyed.

Carlos Garaicoa Manso

(Havana, 1967)



The art career of Carlos Garaicoa¹ has been truly meteoric. That doesn't mean that he appeared out of nowhere or that sheer luck (or a sudden market opportunity)

exempted him from the gradual upward mobility that characterizes the careers of many artists and launched him into celebrity. Garaicoa has always moved forward step-by-step to guarantee a sure advance without setbacks. And this has been possible, not only due to a large dose of talent, originality and creativity, but also to discipline and an enviable ability to organize, like an efficiently-run business. In the field of art, these characteristics are seen more frequently in a film production, or in a theatre or dance company, and certainly in the field of architecture or urban projects and constructions, where collective planned work is essential; but it is unusual to find them in a visual artist whose works are exhibited in galleries and museums. In the case of Carlos Garaicoa, the execution of his numerous projects - often shown simultaneously in various parts of the world - would be impossible without the backup of a small and powerful team of professionals of diverse disciplines grouped under the name "Carlos Garaicoa Studio."² In Cuba, this technique is recent, perhaps inaugurated by Carlos Garaicoa.

It seems that, like in the biological process called natural selection, the Cuban artists who began their work during the harsh economic (and also social, political, cultural and moral) crisis, called the Special Period, were subjected to a swift adaptative process that made them stronger and more dynamic than those who began their career during the previous long, paternalistic or subsidized period. Like creatures that begin to walk by themselves and search for food as soon as they emerge from their shell or their mother's womb, some of these new artists entered the art system hardly depending on governmental institutions. Garaicoa is a typical example of this autonomous, self-promoted, self-employed generation.

Carlos Garaicoa is also one of the few Cuban artists whose work has a global character, not only in terms of international circulation and exhibitions, but also at the level of interests, themes and ethical and political attitudes in the face of situations and problems whose relevance goes beyond the local environment; the Angolan War, authoritarianism, censorship, repressive institutions, and capital and globalization are a few examples.

Yet in spite of the complexity and variety of his artistic expressions, the work of Carlos Garaicoa has the virtue of preserving a relatively homogeneous nucleus. Frequently he uses the universal languages

of architecture and urbanism as his main sources of stimulation. Thus we can identify his alphabet and his grammar and feel like polyglots, even when he uses different calligraphies, according to the content of his ever-changing discourse, which is provocative, rebellious, subversive, as well as utopian and often anarchist. It does not matter that his work deals with forgotten neighbourhoods, ramshackle buildings, urban spaces threatening to disappear, closed cinemas, buildings for imprisonment and torture, walls riddled with bullets, he always refers to the persons who live or use these places, to their problems and aspirations. Neither is it important that in his creations he resorts to scale models, drawings, photos, threads, candles, paper lanterns and folded papers. His work is always focussed on the problems of society, the individual, not who but where, not the concrete man or woman or society, but the environment where they live, that reflects their moods, psychologies, ideologies and counter-ideologies, dissatisfactions, nightmares and illusions. Other artists have chosen portrait or self-portrait, or nature, for example, to express the same problems, but cities have shown to be, beyond their real functionality, more malleable conduits of expressive possibilities. One can try to trace the presence of human representations, individuals or groups in his works and end up confirming their almost total absence. They aren't there, but actually, they are

always there; we are always there. Facing his works we are not only viewers but, momentarily, their inhabitants.

Of the romantic debris of old Havana of colonial and republican times, from which he once extracted fragments like a nostalgic archaeologist resolute to restore them with care, he went on to restore, by means of drawings, many of those ramshackle buildings making imaginative, imaginary reconstructions, and later on he focused on the depressing typology of the multi-family, prefabricated cities, which are the result of the Social Microbrigades. Many buildings remained unfinished for many years or have not been maintained due to lack of resources, and have become ruins. Later Garaicoa built sophisticated cities of lighted paper lamps. Or placed on a table a fragile city made of small glass objects. Or reproduced an old torched city using candles. Or conceived buildings out of books piled on shelves. Or made small replicas, in molten silver, of nefarious buildings used for repression and torture in various countries.

He has been able to say almost everything using the language of the city, architecture, urbanism and urban furniture. Even billboards (used exclusively for conveying the ideological messages of the only party of Cuba, the Communist Party) made it possible for Garaicoa to poke fun with poetry at the huge size of that monotonous propaganda,

making use of the skeletons or empty structures which have been abandoned throughout the city, to place his enigmatic messages (No, no, no, I CANNOT GO ON), or to expand them in space like elegant buildings, and by doing so "TRANSFORM THE POLITICAL WORD INTO FACTS, FINALLY," like the title of that series. These and all his works show that it is possible to make a thoughtful, critical art, socially and politically committed, without giving up aesthetic and poetic sophistication and without having to resort to propagandist or barricade messages.

Carlos Garaicoa Manso



Abstracciones: Azul
(Abstractions: blue), 1997 - 2000
Color photograph, 3/3 Edition
124 x 100 cm



Abstracciones, hueco y estructura
(Abstractions, hole and structure), 1997 - 2000
Color photograph, 1/3 Edition
124 x 100 cm

Serie Abstracciones (Abstractions Series)

Despite their abstract appearance, the bullet holes on the walls that Carlos Garaicoa photographed in Angola (1996-97) are a concrete testimony of the violence of an African war that involved several countries, and in which around 2000 Cuban troops died. The abstract ceases to be so when we receive the information (unfortunately not included in the titles) that the photograph is about bullet shots on the walls of houses, hospitals and other buildings of the town of Cuito Cuanavale, the scenario of the final battle of that war. Initially, those photographs were part of a provocative project organized by the Angolan artist Fernando Alvim (MEMORIAS INTIMAS-MARCAS, 1997)³ in which, besides Alvim and Garaicoa, the South African artist Gavin Younge participated. The exhibition aimed at exorcizing

that terrible experience and removing the amnesia of some of its participants, making known the psychological wounds of ordinary people, the trauma provoked in the people, the city, the animals and plants by this and any war. Other works by Garaicoa in that project (drawings, videos, installations) addressed the permanent damages of the Angolan War in the minds of the ex-soldiers, or referred to the responsibility of the political leadership.

Seen from another perspective, all Carlos Garaicoa's works about the war of Angola pose an interesting problem, a latent conflict between ethics and aesthetics. Are we entitled to enjoy the beauty of the horrors of war? His large photos of bullet impacts on the walls of Cuito Cuanavale run the risk that the

viewer might detach him/herself from the fact that gave them origin and admire them as simple abstractions, due to their colours and forms. His beautiful photos create an ethical dilemma of aesthetically admiring or enjoying what we should, in truth, reject: violence, weapons, wars. They allow us to meditate on the fact that wounds, like these that we are now admiring in the artistic image of walls with holes, were made in the flesh of men and women from Cuba, Angola and South Africa. But is it not the case in the disasters of daily life reflected by Carlos in many other works, dealing with the deterioration of the cities or with the unfinished state or work stoppage of projects, from the perspective of their inhabitants? How do we admire, without being afraid to do so,

Abstractions, huecos oxidados
(Abstractions, rusted holes), 1997 - 2000
Color photograph, 1/3 Edition
124 x 100 cm



Abstractions: Gris
(Abstractions: Grey), 1997 - 2000
Color photograph, 2/3 Edition
124 x 100 cm

his exquisite Crown Jewels, 2009, knowing that in their dungeons, offices or cells people were tortured or imprisoned, who may have believed in the need for freedom or change for human improvement? This is not a passionless, insensitive game, but a therapeutic, even surgical operation. In order to cure, it is often necessary to cause pain or discomfort in the viewer, the patient.



Blazos y Puerta
(Shots and Door), 1997
Color photograph, 1/3 Edition
100 x 124 cm

Carlos Garaicoa Manso

Nuevas Arquitecturas para
Cuito Cuanavale (New Architectures
for Cuito Cuanavale), 1999

In NUEVAS ARQUITECTURAS PARA CUITO CUANAVALE (photograph and drawing) Carlos Garaicoa seems to hint at an ironic, caustic smile. Next to a semi-destroyed shack, he creates a tall and graceful monument to victory rather than a new house for the inhabitants of Cuito. A symbolic luxury instead of a practical solution, which is what politicians so often do to mask or hide, with some kind of grandiloquent gesture, their forgetfulness, negligence and failure to fulfil obligations.





Nuevas Arquitecturas para Cuito Cuanavale.
(New Architectures for Cuito Cuanavale), 1999
Color photograph and drawing in pincel
on cardboard
Installation (two pieces)
120 x 100 cm (photograph)
120 x 100 cm (drawing)

Carlos Garaicoa Manso

Aquí Estuvieron los Cubanos I
(The Cubans Were Here) (I), 1996
Diptych, Color photograph
on Ilford Flex Paper
Edition: A/P 3
50 x 60 cm



Graffiti Hospital, 1996.
Hospital Baleado
(Bullet-riddled Hospital)
(detail), 1996.
Aquí Estuvieron los Cubanos
(The Cubans Were Here)
(I and II), 1996.

The graffiti photographed by Garaicoa on the walls of hospitals or homes in Angola that were bombed, and where in some cases it is possible to discover a sample of popular painting, achieve an effect somehow different from the magnified shots used by him in other works. The presence of a body or an attacked human face with holes in those paintings makes it possible for us to identify ourselves, in a more direct manner, with the true victims of that war. In the same way as Palaeolithic primitive painters trusted that the wounds inflicted on the image of a painted animal could act directly on the real animal, here - in an inverse manner - the attacked human representations aim to evoke in our minds the image of the actual wounded and dead.

Other graffiti represents texts written by soldiers, the inscription of a name, a date, a sentence ("The Cubans were here," for instance), which bring back the presence of human beings who may have died



Hospital Baleado
(Bullet-riddled Hospital), 1996
Color photograph
on Ilford Flex Paper
Edition: A/P 3
50 x 60 cm



Aquí Estuvieron los Cubanos II
(The Cubans Were Here) (II), 1996
Diptych, Color photograph
on Ilford Flex Paper
Edition: A/P 3
50 x 60 cm

some days later or lost the hand that wrote those naive and hasty messages. Despite being made years after the real events, the work of Garaicoa about the War of Angola is an indispensable artistic contribution to the memory of those who were directly or indirectly involved in that war, and a very strange monument to the heritage that the Cubans and Africans share. For Cuban viewers, these works by Garaicoa are the reflection of an atypical situation in the history of what has been called – sometimes in an idyllic manner – the search for our roots or the return to Africa. A trip that in many cases was final, with no return.

Graffiti Hospital
(Graffiti Hospital), 1996
Color photograph
on Ilford Flex Paper
Edition: A/P 3
50 x 60 cm



¹ See his web site
www.carlosgaraicoa.com

² The Carlos Garaicoa Studio
is made up by Lillebit Fadraga
(director), Victor A. Obin
(model maker), Jetter González
(architect), Irelio Alonso
(graphic designer) and Mytil
Font (general assistant and
archives), Annelis Lien and
Elena Zapata (assistants).

³ There is a publication on
this project: *Autopsia &*
Desarquivos, with texts by
Claude Lorent (Belgium),
Orlando Hernández (Cuba),
Yacouba Konaté (Côte d'Ivory),
Adriano Mixinge (Angola) and
Clive Kellner (South Africa).

Proyecto Memorias Intimas-
Marcas, Espace Sussuta Boé,
Belgium, 1999, 1 000 copies in
English, French, Spanish and
Portuguese.

Oswaldo Castillo Vázquez

(Contramaestre, Santiago de Cuba, 1967)



of Cuba to the capital looking for better living conditions. During those years, those of us who lived in Havana thought that our situation was bad (blackouts, shortage of supplies, transport problems, dilapidated streets), but in the cities and towns of the interior and in the rural areas, things were much worse. The situation of those who lived in the rural areas in the eastern provinces, like the Castillo family, seems to have been untenable. The economic crisis that whipped the country after the withdrawal of the Soviet grants and the collapse of the socialist camp brought to Havana a great migratory wave from all corners of the island, especially from the eastern area of the country.

Although the ORIENTALES –as they are called generically– were not the most abundant in those internal migrations, they became notorious for their way of speaking, their Indian colouring (a little different from that of the mulattos) and especially their industry, their tenacity to assume any work and adapt to any type of dwelling. This generated a feeling of resentment among many in the capital, as if Havana was not “the capital of all the Cubans” as one slogan affirmed – but the property of Havana’s denizens.

Accustomed to working the land with his father since he was a child, to small animal husbandry and to bringing water from distant places to their house, Oswaldo Castillo was nevertheless able to obtain a Degree in Primary Education in 1988. From a young age he taught himself to paint and became a visual arts instructor for the children of his community. He was a tireless reader. Castillo participated in the Naïve Art Festivals of the Mella municipality in Santiago de Cuba and in municipal salons of Contramaestre, where he won prizes. Occasionally his neighbours asked him for small works such as a portrait, a landscape or a vase with flowers to decorate their houses, providing a modest source of income. His departure to the capital, although spurred by economic necessity, was also motivated by the development of his artistic career, since in Havana there are more galleries and cultural institutions than in the rest of the country and better opportunities to exhibit and sell his work.

Since his arrival in Havana, Oswaldo Castillo became a LUCHADOR (fighter), one who does not give up when faced with difficulties. In contrast to other popular or self-taught artists who wait to be discovered and supported by some critic or gallery, this humble artist, of unhurried movements and somewhat melancholic expression, went out with some of his paintings under his arm and began his journey to ask and discover for himself who could help him to improve the quality of his works and place them in any market, regardless of how small and sporadic. Without great illusions but with trust in himself, little by little he made his

works known; he made some sales and later managed to obtain a permanent contract with the FONDO CUBANO DE BIENES CULTURALES to market his works as an independent artist. Once established, Castillo brought one by one all his relatives from Contramaestre and they built a small property on the periphery of Mariano's residential area, known as Finca Santa Catalina. Initially, the land was almost uninhabitable, full of boulders and thorny bushes, but they took to subsistence farming and reproduced the same forms of rural life they had enjoyed in their place of origin. They continued being rural in the city, and ORIENTALES in Havana.

Castillo was invited to participate in an important exhibition of prints, but since he had never made prints, in a few days he learned the rudiments of the technique from Ibrahim Miranda (one of our best printers and a professor) and he not only showed a group of beautiful xylographies and linoleum prints, but became such an enthusiast of printing that some weeks later he built himself a rustic press with waste machinery parts with which he printed many more works. At another time, when there were no buyers for his paintings, I suggested that he make figures carved in wood and then paint them, and in a few days he transformed himself into a wood carver, creating mothers carrying children, farmers with straw hats, multicoloured fish and a few unconventional walking sticks. In these new artistic expressions, he required only perseverance, tenacity, and used the same language, ambiences and characters that appeared in his paintings.

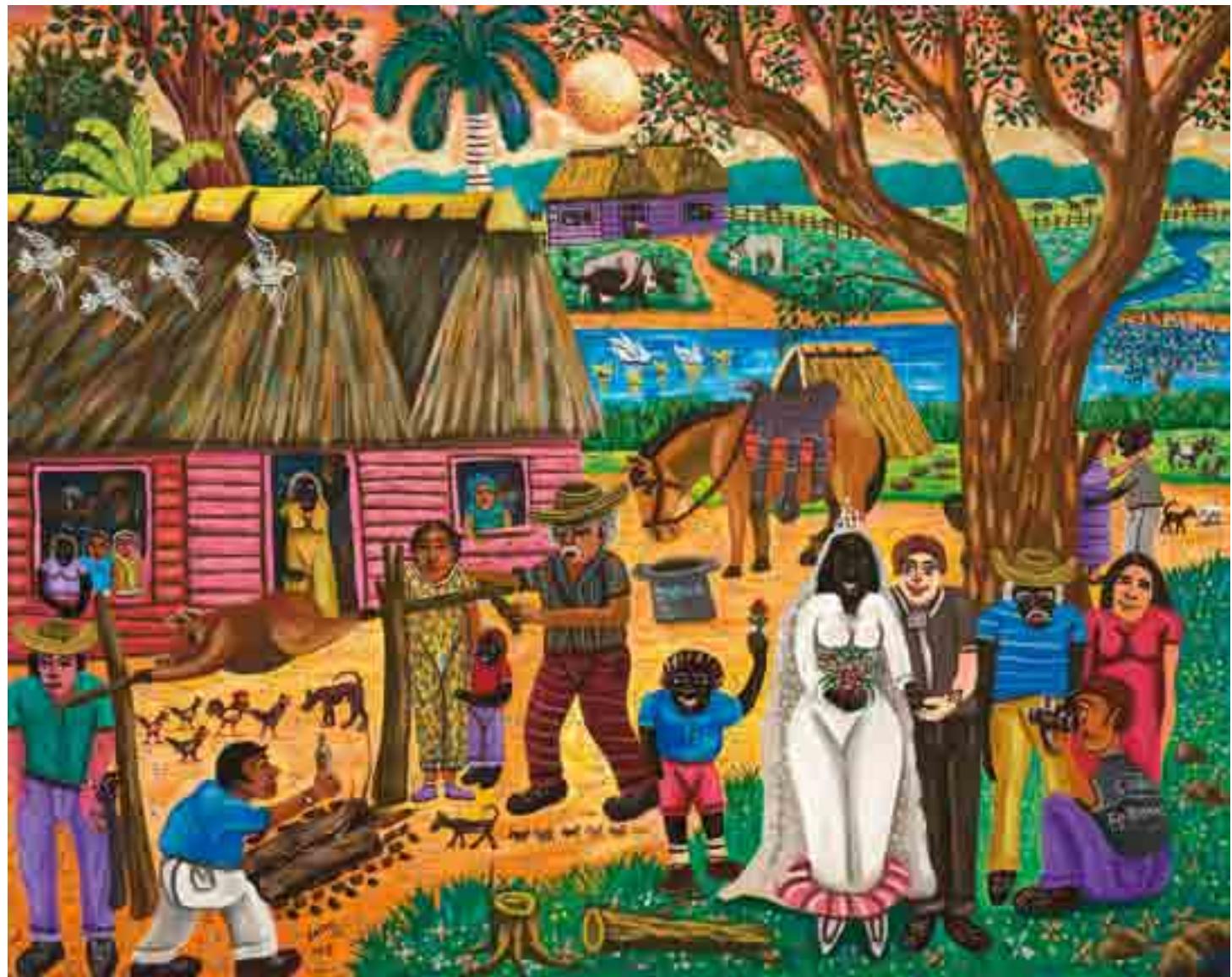
It is curious that despite having resided in Havana for more than ten years, all of Oswaldo Castillo's work refers to the rural atmosphere of his origin, to its inhabitants, customs, work, landscapes, animals and humble dwellings. His paintings continue being gentle, idyllic, presenting a calm image of contemporary rural life of Cuba, and only occasionally reflecting some dramatic event from his own life (for example an accident while riding a horse at night that almost killed him and left him deaf in one ear).

Portraying the city, its buildings, squares or inhabitants has not been important to him. His paintings have also avoided reflecting the suffering that his new life in the capital has caused him and his family, especially events related to the government's measures to control migration and avoid the establishment of improvised and therefore illegal housing. All those institutional measures prompted in a large portion of the capital's population a new form of prejudice and discrimination against the ORIENTALES (whom they started to call "Palestinians"), many of whom were returned to their places of origin or besieged in the streets by the police for not having the documents required to live in Havana. This recent form of discrimination (not only racial, –but also ethnic, cultural and linguistic) was added to those well-known against the black and mulatto population. Oswaldo Castillo's painting has always avoided those unpleasant topics and he has placed his bets on those who are more accepting and at the same time able provide

him with an income. This may be a way of adapting to his new and unstable conditions or a resistance strategy vis-à-vis those discriminatory mechanisms, in this case not only deployed by the white privileged sector but, unfortunately, also by the black and mulatto sectors of the capital.

Instead of hate and resentment, Castillo prefers to return to Havana many things that the city and its art have started to lose and forget: the simplicity and sincerity of the language, the kindness, sweetness and beauty of the natural ambiences, the colour of the skies, the transparency of the rivers, the playful grace of the dogs, the flight of the birds, although he has also expressed in his work many of the current difficulties and vicissitudes faced by farmers, such as water shortages and humble housing. His oeuvre also reflects the racial composition of rural families from the eastern area of the country, where the population of African descent has generally been numerous.

Oswaldo Castillo Vázquez



Boda Campesina (Rural Wedding), 2008

The painting BODA CAMPESINA refers to a mixed marriage between a black woman and a white man. The spectator discovers that this mix is also present in many of the weddings guests and even the animals surrounding the event, which forces us to consider it as something normal. Small dogs, lizards, cows and oxen with coats of different colours are united in sexual, loving activities. Treated with grace in a pleasant, picturesque setting, Castillo transmits his optimism with regard to the noncontroversial character of the biological crossbreeding that has been so abundant in the history of the Cuban people.

Boda Campesina
(Rural Wedding), 2008
Oil on canvas
79 x 99 cm



La Monta (The Cover), 2008

Inter-racial relationships or mixed marriages are presented again by Oswaldo Castillo, this time in a more emphatic and humorous way, in his work *LA MONTA*, where a dark-coated bull is covering a white cow. Although the story is similar to the one introduced in *BODA CAMPESINA* (since the substitution of two representatives of the bovine livestock for the human couple doesn't alter the essence of the matter), the fact that the male is the one with the dark coat presents us with a somewhat different connotation. Since this is a much less frequent combination, its acceptance by the racist ideology that still underlies the mentality of some Cubans is questionable. It would be different if

Castillo had presented a couple in which the male is white and the female is black. As we know, the relationship white-man and black-woman was, since colonial times, the established and more tolerated norm, since it was always the white man (the master, the slave-owner, or ultimately a member of the ruling sector) who exercised control and this included the control, abuse and rape of the black woman. In reversing the polarity of this relationship through the use of a dark bull covering a white cow, Oswaldo Castillo's apparently naive painting presents us with a relatively concealed angle of his concerns. Perhaps it is only the corroboration of a fact and not a reflexive comment, but either

La Monta
(Mounted), 2008
Oil on canvas
79,5 x 99 cm



Wood carvings
by Castillo.

way the situation is outlined frankly in the painting. One discovers in many of his works, especially in some of his beautiful wood carvings (where a black mother carries in her arms a white girl and a white mother carries a black girl), the same interest in making the racial question visible, not just the result of our own readings.

Alexis Esquivel

(La Palma, Pinar del Rio, 1968)



Alexis Esquivel¹ is a mulatto artist and intellectual² who has never wished to “whiten” himself but, on the contrary, to become darker, blacker. This attitude is seen not only in his physical appearance, the characteristics of his skin, hair and hairdo, but resides in the deepest strata of his consciousness. Esquivel presents this in the sharp perceptions of the black population’s social reality in his paintings; in his nonconformist readings of history, especially Cuban history, where the role played by the black and mulatto population has always been insufficiently reflected; in his refusal to accept the persistence of racial prejudice and discrimination and in his open rejection of the official rhetoric and demagogic that consents to or attempts to mask the extent of the problem. All this has allowed him to define and express with total clarity his social, racial and cultural identity. In contrast to many others, Alexis Esquivel has never wanted to be defined as a light-coloured mulatto, and much less “pass for white” and thus receive some of the benefits offered by white privilege, but he has assumed that the colour of his skin is as black as that of any black person, which – if we go only by his physical appearance – is not totally so. At one time he classified himself as belonging to the black-mestizo group, which was also a statement highlighting his blackness. All

of this is an exception to the rule. Not only in Cuba, but anywhere. Crossing the colour line in an opposite direction from the usual (which is from black to white, or from darker to lighter, either by means of the process known as whitening, assimilation or any other kind of mimicry) is not a trivial gesture, especially when the person in question is an intellectual, or a reflexive visual artist like Alexis Esquivel who not only knows the palette’s colours very well, but the social meanings of the colours and hues defining the races.

I have begun by referring directly to this delicate matter because a large portion of his work points to the racial problems that are generated by the colour of the skin. Although his artistic reflections have also been geared at a wide range of social and political situations, Alexis Esquivel is one of the few Cuban artists who has remained devoted to this specific form of social inequality and has recorded in his work the many ways – at times concealed, imperceptible, subliminal – in which racial prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination appear in our society. This priority in his thought and his artistic career has persisted. As he declared in the following extract from an interview:

"I AM CONVINCED THAT THE ONLY ANTIDOTE AGAINST RACIAL PREJUDICES, THE INJUSTICES AND INEQUALITIES IN WHICH THEY ARE BASED, IS A PERMANENT REFLECTION THAT A SOCIETY SHOULD HAVE ON THIS OR ANY OTHER TOPIC AFFLICTING IT, BY KEEPING AN INCESSANT POLEMIC ON THE MOST SERIOUS PROBLEMS OF ITS REALITY, AND ART CAN AND SHOULD HELP IN THIS."³

It is also important to reveal his opinion on the character that this type of commitment should take (especially for black or mulatto artists) to separate it from many other similar stands. This excerpt is taken from one of his letters:

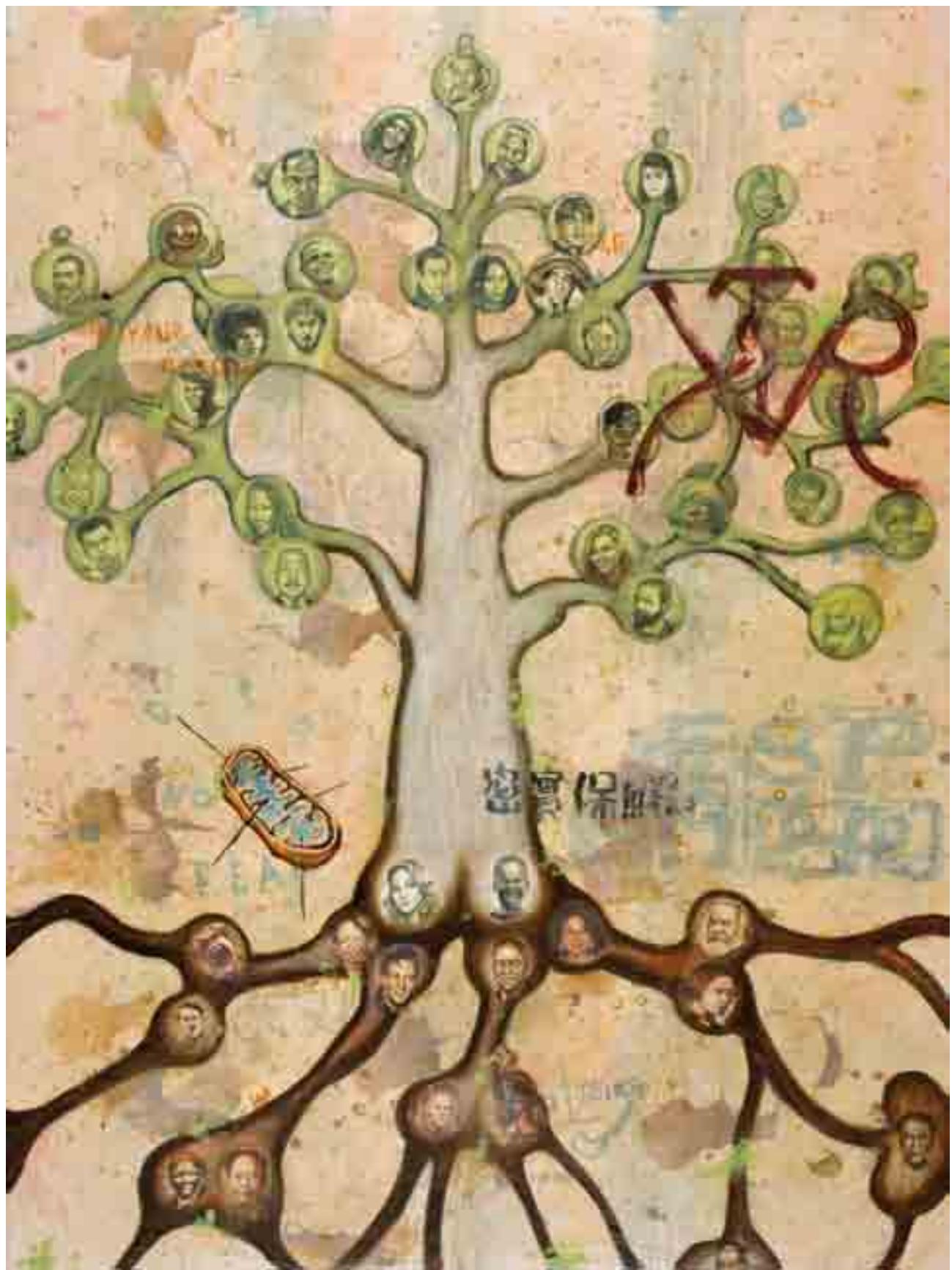
"I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT BLACK ARTISTS ARE OBLIGED TO APPROACH THE TOPIC, OR THAT THE TOPIC IS THEIR PRIVATE DOMAIN. THE EXPERIENCES ARE DISSIMILAR, FOR THAT REASON IN MY OPINION THIS SHOULD ARISE AS A NATURAL, SPONTANEOUS CONCERN. ALTHOUGH IN MANY ARTISTS THIS CONCERN MAY ARRIVE LATER ON, IT IS BETTER IF THIS IS NOT DONE AS AN OPPORTUNIST POSE, BUT RATHER LINKED EMOTIONALLY TO THEIR EXPERIENCE."⁴

Alexis Esquivel curated two of the first three exhibitions held in Cuba on racial topics: *Ni MÚSICOS NI DEPORTISTAS* (Neither Musicians nor Sportsmen) in 1997 and *Queloides II* (*Keloids II*) in 1999, both organized jointly

with the late art critic Ariel Ribeaux Diago, and preceded by a first version of *Keloids* in 1997, organized by Cuban art critic Omar Pascual Castillo, in which Alexis participated as an artist.⁵ Within the local artistic circuit, the defined stand in relation to racial problems taken by that small group that Esquivel integrated turned them (for some) into respected representatives of the radical wing of Afro-Cuban art and intellectuals, while they were considered (by others) as a group of resentful blacks seeing racial ghosts in Cuba where (seemingly) they no longer existed. As professor Esteban Morales expressed, this kind of reaction when facing a statement of racial identity by blacks and mulattos has always been "a paralyzing instrument, applied by those who do not want or do not find it convenient to discuss the topic" (...) that is to say, a sign of "white hegemony."⁶ The artists linked to these brave exhibitions were even mockingly called maroon artists or *APALENCADOS* (escaped slaves living in a palisaded shelter in the bush). Beyond the pejorative intent of such qualifications, were they not true after all? Those artists were in fact maroons who had been able to free themselves from those old obstacles and to break the silence that the society and institutions still maintained on the existence of racial conflicts within Cuban socialism.

Alexis Esquivel

Arbol Genealógico
(Family Tree), 2008
Acrylic on canvas
195 x 145,5 cm



Arbol Genealógico (Family Tree), 2008

The blacks and mulattos of Cuba, and of all the Americas, cannot reconstruct a family tree including all their ancestors. Beyond a few previous generations, there is a void that prevents them from finding the trunk and the roots. Those who attempt to put together their genealogy need to be content with a few recent branches. The old trunk and roots were left on the other side of the so-called Black Atlantic, in Ibadan, in Oyo, in Abeokuta, or further still, in any city or village of the ancient Kingdom of Congo, where the older saw the younger and strongest leave forever aboard slave ships. On this side of the Atlantic, the few black families whose elderly could remember the existence of an African great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather were perhaps able to mention the name with which they were re-baptized by the slave owner: Francisco, let us say, to which a last name was added, that of their nation of origin, Francisco Congo, or that of his owner, López or Martínez. The habit of building family trees is more common among high-class families that need to demonstrate their aristocratic origins, and is not usual among poorer families, and much less so in families descending from slaves. But the truth is that the origins of black Cuban families are as important as the family trees full of powdered European counts and marquises. Both family trees have their own nobility, their illustrious ancestors, who could be in the former case an expert blacksmith, a fortune-teller or a wood carver. The true history of black families in Cuba

has a deficit that may never be recouped, not even by searching wildly in our parochial files or in the intricate National Archives, or in the ARCHIVO GENERAL DE INDIAS in Seville although many researchers continue to work on this laboriously.⁷

In the face of the impossibility of establishing some of those traditional genealogical trees, Alexis Esquivel conceived a totally atypical kind of tree: a genealogical tree of racial conflicts, a heterogeneous family in which he included celebrated figures from the Cuban black community, world leaders in the fight against racism, as well as musicians, politicians, athletes, cosmonauts and even notorious characters who committed the most atrocious racist crimes, like Adolph Hitler. The list is long and perplexing. More than a tree it is a dense and entangled forest: Antonio Maceo, Evaristo Estenoz, Malcolm X, Bob Marley, Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, Huey Newton, Martin Luther King Jr., Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, Karl Marx, Toussaint Louverture, Elvis Presley and Barack Obama...

This is an excellent way to express the universality and complexity of racial problems. It is a shocking and provocative way, for some perhaps offensive, but unfortunately quite realistic. Whether we like it or not, we will never be able to do without all our "relatives", whether loved or unwelcome, if we want to understand with

objectivity who we are, where we come from and where we are going to in this issue of racism.

I transcribe the artist's comment on this interesting work:

(...) I IMAGINED A HISTORICAL MAP OF RACIAL CONFLICTS, WHERE EACH PERSONALITY OR FIGURE SYMBOLIZES MORE OR LESS A "FAMILY" OF DISCOURSES, STRATEGIES AND POLITICAL STANDS THAT LATER ON MAY BE DENIED OR AFFIRMED BY THEIR DESCENDANTS, IN A CHAOTIC AND DISORDERED EVOLUTIONARY DIAGRAM THAT SPROUTS HERE AND RETREATS OVER THERE AND RETRACTS ONCE AND AGAIN OVER THERE, WHICH GROWS UNSUSPECTED BRANCHES. IT IS THE PRODUCT OF AN IRRESPONSIBLE AND CAPRICIOUS GENETIC ENGINEERING.⁸

Alexis Esquivel



La Carrera del Siamés
(The Siamese's Race),
2005-2006
Acrylic on canvas
113,5 x 154 cm

La Carrera del Siamés (The Siamese's Race), 2005–2006

Despite the apparent simplicity of the image, this is an extremely suggestive painting full of small subtleties. Esquivel has used two small handcrafted figures that are sold as souvenirs in the foreign tourist stores in Cuba to represent Siamese twins. These dolls are generally stereotypical representations of a black man and a mulatta in their carnivalesque, tropical, "Caribbean" role. Very rarely – as in this case – they represent a white man or woman. Maybe the prototypes were originally conceived in the 1950s, or even earlier, specifically for the American tourist market and have remained the same. Mostly, they are amusing, inoffensive objects easy to sell in the souvenir market. These figures are the quickest emissaries, in Cuba and abroad, of a false and adulterated image of exotic black and mulatto Cuban men and women, always dressed as RUMBEROS (rhumba players and dancers), with maracas in their hands, dedicated to entertaining and pleasing tourists. A version of this idea appears in one of Esquivel's previous drawings, in which the Siamese twins are participating in a steeplechase. In



this painting, the obstacles have disappeared and only the stands and the big lamps illuminating the competition remain. Is Esquivel suggesting that both characters, the black and the white, are destined to remain inevitably together in this race in which only jointly will they be able to arrive at the finishing line or, on the contrary, not arrive at all? Or do these Siamese twins express doubt about the advantages of our celebrated racial mix, since, although united, they exhibit separate racial identities, half black half white? Instead of mestizo or mulatto, is it not preferable to characterize our society, our nation's project, according to its diversity and to conceive it as multiracial (or multicoloured)? Lastly, with regard to the title of this work, the double meaning of the English translation of the word CARRERA (race), the same word used for RAZA (race), is no mere coincidence. A good pun sometimes has the virtue of provoking deeper reflections than a complicated theoretical discourse.

¹ See his web site

www.alexisesquivel.com

² I have used, in this and other texts, the term "mulatta"

because it is the popular way of characterizing the racial identity of the mix between a black man or woman and a white man or woman. On the impropriety of considering the term "mulatto" pejorative, see the etymological explanation (derived from the Mandinga language) that appears in Fernando Ortiz, *Glosario de Afronegros*, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, Havana, 1991, pp.335-336.

³ Jorge Félix Rodríguez, Interview. Alexis Esquivel o el niño que aún dibuja en el suelo, Otrolunes. com, Revista Hispanoamericana de Cultura, año 1, no.3, December 2007.

⁴ Letter from Alexis Esquivel to the author, 1 July 2009.

⁵ On these three pioneering exhibits on the racial problem in Cuba, their context and the participating artists, see the essay by Alexis Esquivel Queloide, la cicatriz dormida (Keloid, the dormant scar), in the catalogue to the exhibition *Afrocuba: Works on paper 1968-2003*, with curatorship and texts by the American Art Historian Judith Bettelheim, Fine Arts Gallery / International Center for the Arts, College of Creative Arts, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, U.S. 2005, pp.17-21.

⁶ Esteban Morales. Cuba: *Algunos desafíos del color, La Jiribilla*, edición digital, Havana, year V, September 9-15, 2006. Professor Morales has published essays on racial conflicts in present-day Cuba in various academic journals.

⁷ Aisnara Perera Díaz and María de los A. Meriño Fuentes, *Esclavitud, Familia y Parroquia en Cuba: otra mirada desde la microhistoria*, Editorial Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, 2008.

⁸ Letter from Alexis Esquivel to the author, 2 June 2008.

Armando Mariño

(Santiago de Cuba, 1968)



Although in the last few years Armando Mariño has turned to other topics and interests, his most characteristic work – that which made him known and admired

– focused almost exclusively on the stressful relationship between western and non-western cultures, between the “civilized” and the “wild” or the “centre” and the “periphery”. The concepts of opposites that have emerged over time, and are now elegantly called “global” and “local”, have always referred to groups of dissimilar elements, belonging to one side or another. Currently, this duality is an abstraction, perhaps deliberately immobilizing, less useful than in the beginning, when the terms “colonialists” and “colonized”, “developed” and “underdeveloped” pointed towards more basic political and economic questions.

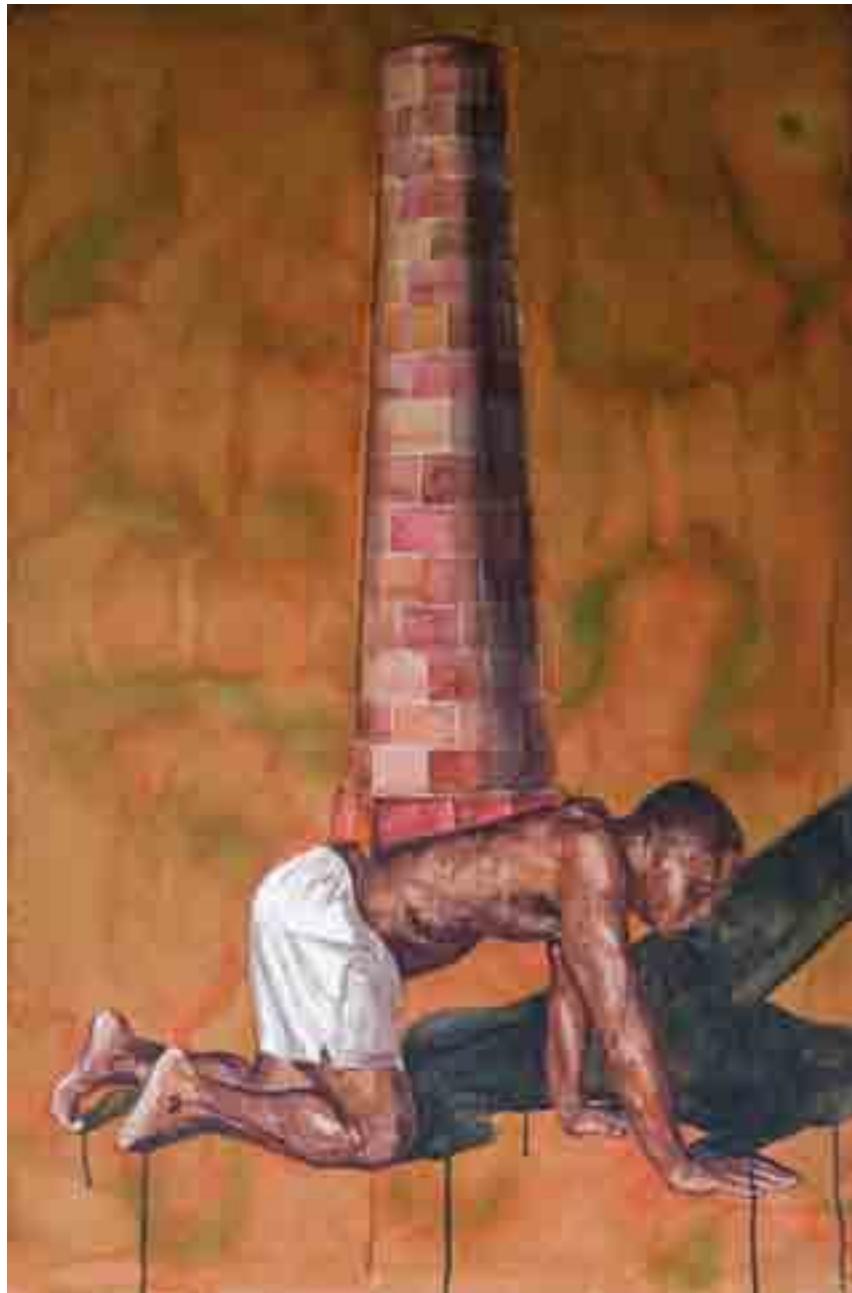
Armando Mariño’s painting has never paid much attention to such abstractions since the hub of his polarity has always been specific and concrete: the unequal positions of whites, representative of the west, the centre, the civilized, the developed and the global, and blacks, representative of all the rest. His paintings not only represent those relationships between white and black in a bodily form but he has also racializes them to make the issues more evident and categorical, without fear of being accused of Manichaeism. From a racial point of view, that alleged binary relationship is more complex than an equation made up of two elements. The white has always been on one side, but the Arabs, Latin American Indians, Native Americans, Asians

and people with many skin tonalities have all been on the other side. It is also true that the blacks have turned out to be the representatives of the most punished extreme in such a polarity. And if they appear with so much force in his work it is not only because the artist himself is a black person. The question is not outlined from a merely autobiographical position. Like other artists of his generation, both white and black, Armando Mariño was concerned with the social and political aspects of that sector of our population.

Looking at his paintings we realize, however, that everything concerning racial conflict was summarized abruptly by Mariño in scenes that only have those two protagonists (or antagonists), although often the white is symbolized by creations and the black is the active character. Taking another recurrent euphemism from academic jargon, it may be said that his painting is a sort of defence of “otherness”, but in his personal conception the “other” is always represented by the black. For Mariño, the black is the prototype of the “other”. A black man – perhaps the artist himself – with white clipped pants, generally barefoot, is the one to appear in the foreground of most of his paintings, carrying out different actions in contrast to some aspect of western culture, the white man’s culture. The examples are multiple and often aggressive: a black person defecating on a portrait of Velázquez inside a painting by Miró; arm wrestling on a table against a well-dressed white manager; lying on the floor after devouring a bunch of apples (the Big Apple?); carrying sacks (of sugar?) in front of which he piles real sacks; scoring a basketball in the famous Duchamp’s urinal; sitting down in front of a white canvas

watching Delacroix paint LIBERTY LEADING THE PEOPLE, and so on.

Many of Armando Mariño's concerns seem to revolve around the concept of art, the prestige or the hierarchy of artistic production, around the painter's trade, since his works constantly appropriate fragments of famous works or classic, romantic, academic, modern, avant-garde and trans-avant-garde portraits. His works quote Zurbarán, Velázquez, Van Gogh, Matisse, Miró, Mondrián, Magritte, Calder and Duchamp. Often these works are represented by symbols such as the painter's brush and palette, the working tools of the artist which are like his sword and shield. It could be thought then that he has taken art as the central topic of his entire provocative, demystifying, desecrating program; the history of so-called "universal" art (made up mostly of Europeans and North Americans). Or perhaps he has set aside the great maestros and made the other artists -- especially those of peripheral countries -- take them as exemplary models to be emulated if they wish to become part of this pantheon. This concern at times acquires a distressing tone when one is faced with the difficulty that such useless emulation generates. Yet Mariño's reflections always go much further. The relationships between peripheral art and the art of the "central" countries, or between the peripheral artist and the history of western art, can be considered a leitmotif, but his central topic has always been the evidence of inequality, especially the exclusion and racial discrimination that weighs on the black person in all walks of life, represented here by the black artist.



Hombre Chimenea
(Man Chimney), 2003

Many of Armando Mariño's watercolours have a direct and explicit language. This work in particular does not require much comment. Black people have always carried on their backs the full weight of material production, both in the old sugar mills of colonial times when they were slaves and in many areas of modern industrial production as workers. Although this situation has been

changing favourably little by little, manual rather than intellectual work is still the most frequent employment option for a large part of the black population of Cuba. The other two options have traditionally been music and sport – a situation sarcastically mentioned by Cuban critic Ariel Ribeaux in his magnificent essay *Ni MÚSICOS NI DEPORTISTAS*.¹

Hombre Chimenea
(Man Chimney), 2003
Watercolor on paper
150 x 100 cm

**Con el Permiso de mi Antropólogo
(With my Anthropologist's
Permission), 2003**

This work, like many other works by Mariño, is intentionally shocking. The matter is presented crudely, without the smallest concession to the aesthetic sensibility of the spectator who is made to view a perverse, satanic event, including a masked creature with long horns and an open abdomen with exposed guts. The odd thing is that this small image, an addition to one side of the main painting, makes what should be truly sinister and repulsive seem less awful: the image of an African slave under the torture of a tight noose and a halter or iron mask that were applied as punishment by the master, as well as the legal provision that appears in the painting: "...TO PROCURE THAT THE BLACK MARRY BLACK, AND THAT THE SLAVES DO NOT BECOME FREE FOR HAVING MARRIED", transcribed from Book VI of the LEYES DE INDIAS (Laws of the Indies). The work is a disturbing comment on the old prohibition against mixed marriages between blacks and whites, and suggests a false conception that

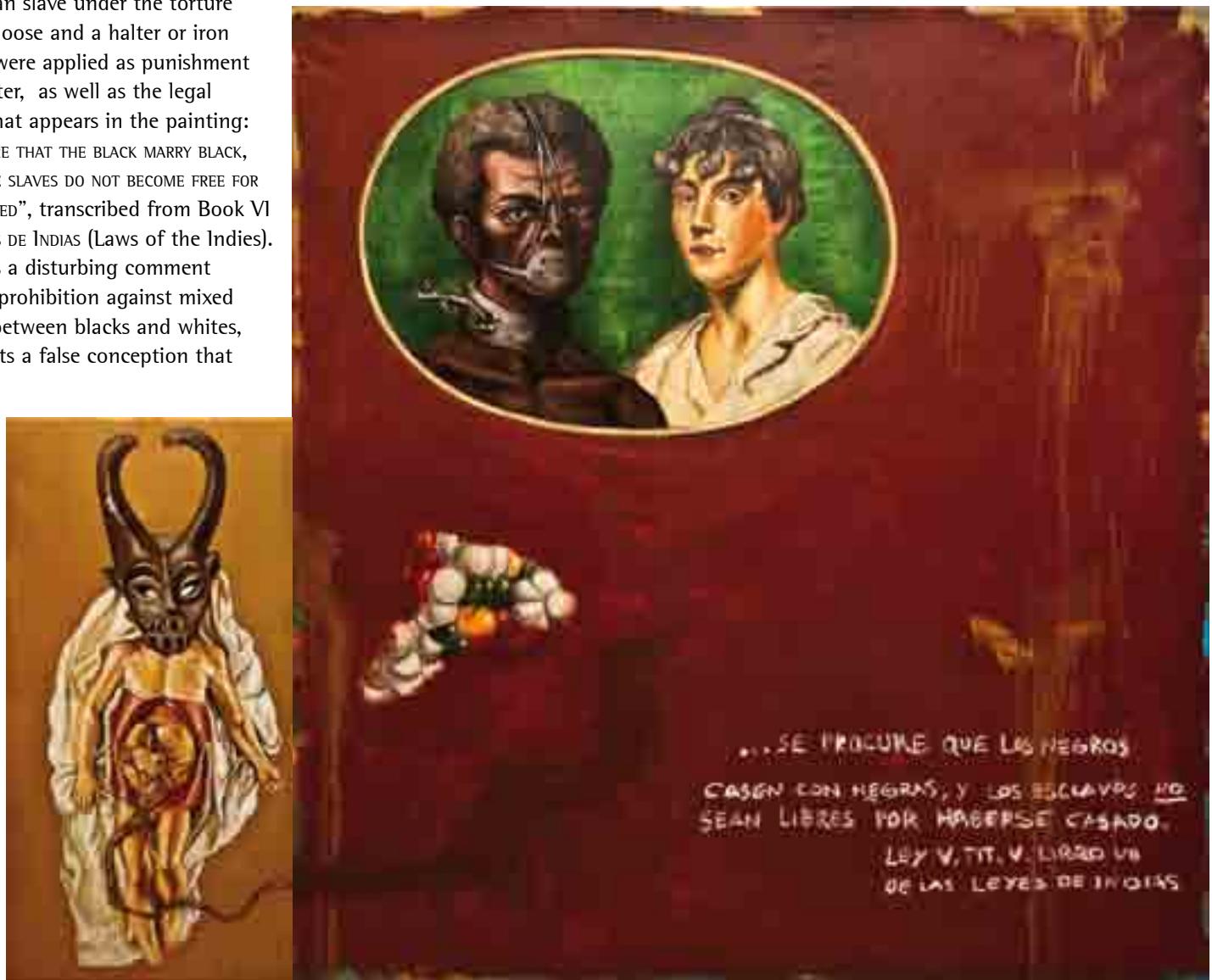


the genetic component of a black person could contaminate the white race and produce monstrous or diabolical creatures. Of course such arguments are no longer part of the current discourse on this matter, but Mariño tries to remove any vestige of this racist fraud

that may have remained in the contemporary collective imagination, both in Cuba and the rest of the world.

African slaves punished with iron mask_ Fernando Ortiz, Los Negros Esclavos (1916), edition 1975, La Habana.

**Con el Permiso de mi
Antropólogo
(With my Anthropologist's
Permission), 2003**
Oil on canvas (Diptych)
170 x 170 cm



El Sueño de la Razón
(The Dream of Reason),
2002
Oil on canvas
180 x 220 cm

El Sueño de la Razón
(The Dream of Reason),
2002

This work by Armando Mariño was inspired by the famous etching by Francisco de Goya, *The Dream of Reason Begets Monsters* 1799, from his series *Caprices*. In this case, the dream that torments the black

painter (whose appearance is, nevertheless, quite gentle) is the product of western reasoning that has been disseminated on a global scale by means of colonial destruction and ignorance or by discrediting the rationality of the many cultures of the world. These products of western reason are represented here by the magnificent building of El Escorial (Monastery of San Lorenzo del Escorial), built in 1563 for the king of Spain, Felipe II, whose valuable timber was extracted from Cuban forests. There are also portraits of George Washington, Carlos V, Matisse, Duchamp, and some fragments of famous works, such as Munch's *The Scream* and a martyred saint by Zurbarán. Again we see one of Armando Mariño's fundamental concerns: whether to accept or reject those forms of culture, rationality and aesthetic sensibility of the west which



are often incompatible with those of other cultures or, as in this case, conflict with those of the black artist sitting beside the painting and holding his palette. As the artist explained to me in a letter: "THE MONSTERS OF THE PERIPHERAL ARTIST ARE NO OTHER THAN THOSE BUILT AND STRUCTURED BY THE WESTERN CULTURAL WORLD, A CONSTANT NIGHTMARE OF REFERENCE FOR THE CULTIVATED 'OTHER'".²

The fact that this is reflected in all of Armando Mariño's work is curious since on the one hand, his painting has a high formal quality, particularly in the realism of his representation of figures and atmospheres, and the academic skill with which he handles colours, light, shade and perspective, but at the same time as assuming that legacy, he demonstrates that this legacy may be transformed or even denied by

challenging its contents, making us see that having received such learning is not so important after all. It is simply another tool and a way to express that identical means can and should be used to produce different messages.

¹ Ariel Ribeaux Diago. *Ni músicos ni deportistas (Notes for the Black Book)*, 1997, <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/arielribeaux.htm>

² Letter from Armando Mariño to the author, 6 October 2009.

Ibrahim Miranda

(Pinar del Río, 1969)



The words have to be enticed out of Ibrahim Miranda's mouth, one by one. His sentences are brief, sporadic, with long pauses, and are often condensed into a simple head movement, affirmative or negative. Sometimes there is a smile of approval or a laugh. I have never seen him worked up, or heard his voice raised. Yet one always feels the presence of a great inner, containement, like a pressure cooker. Our longest conversations in the past twenty years have been possible thanks to the presence of at least one talkative speaker! Yet despite being so quiet, Ibrahim is able to give lectures, teach workshops and give master classes in many universities and cultural institutions around the world. Despite being an introvert, he is an artist with a great expressive, communicative compulsion, who wants to share his work and what he knows about artistic creation, especially woodcutting, his specialty, and to participate in community projects or those involving the active participation of the viewers. His artistic production has been constant, almost obsessive, which is an excellent formula to balance the meditative and melancholic aspects of his personality.

Ibrahim comes from a family of poor mulattos from the most western province of our island, Pinar del Río, which has been called the Cinderella of Cuba because it is socially, economically and culturally underdeveloped. Although in the last years this situation has started to change favourably (since 2001 Pinar del Río has a Museum of Art (MAPRI), for instance), several hurricanes have hit this area so hard as to make the recovery process slow and relentless. Ibrahim Miranda left for Havana in 1984 to study at the National School of Visual Arts and then the Higher Institute of Art, from which he graduated in 1993. Moving to Havana and studying at these schools would have created an exciting change for Ibrahim. Many artists who live and work in Havana have made the same journey from the remotest corners of our island in order to benefit from the free art programmes which began in the first years of the Revolution. This constant influx of young men and women from all the provinces, from the urban and rural areas, from every social, cultural, racial and religious sector, has had a decisive influence on the development of our varied and complex artistic life, since all brought from their places of origin their own history and interpreted and assimilated in their own way the teachings they received. Some brought with them ingenuousness and the typical humour of the countryside, others the symbolism of the Afro-Cuban religious traditions practiced by their families, and still

others the imprint of the depressed, dismal atmospheres of their childhoods. Ibrahim arrived in Havana when he was barely fifteen, bringing emotional and psychological baggage together with a great intellectual curiosity and interest in historical and philosophical problems and the mysteries of art and poetry.

Long before his graduation from ISA, the splendid prints and ink drawings of Ibrahim Miranda were well-known and began to be shown in national and foreign galleries. Soon after, his woodcuts won important international awards such as first prize in the 10th San Juan Latin American and Caribbean Printmaking Biennial, Puerto Rico, 1993. Ibrahim started off as an artist with a defined poetry, expressed in two fundamental ways; xylography and the use of maps, with which he created countless transfigurations of the island of Cuba, generally with a dark, dismal aspect as well as great lyricism. His prints display imaginative and mythical imagery with oneiric touches reminiscent of heritages as diverse as the European medieval period and the Renaissance (Lucas Cranach, Albrecht Dürer), Russian Lubok¹, popular Mexican stamps (José Guadalupe

Posada) and the LITERATURA DE CORDEL (string literature) of the Brazilian Northeast. His work with maps, on the contrary, stems directly from poetry, and had its origin in Cuban José Lezama Lima's poem titled NOCHE INSULAR, JARDINES INVISIBLES (Insular Nights, Invisible Gardens). This poem, heard over and over in Lezama's voice, thanks to a record made by CASA DE LAS AMÉRICAS, inspired Ibrahim to work on a long series, many versions of which have continued to the present². The changing maps of our island, in constant metamorphosis, were a refined but provocative metaphor for our incompleteness, the indefinite and imperfect character of our society, our nation and the need for change. The xylographic creation of that imaginary cartography of Cuba, made in watercolour and inks on real maps extracted from the National Atlas of Cuba, was for many years the main creative nucleus around which the work of Ibrahim Miranda revolved. He has also explored other expressions such as painting on canvas, ink and wash drawings, knitted papers, patchwork and other combined techniques, generally based on prints, but xylography and the maps have allowed him to deploy with extraordinary originality his secret restlessness and his philosophical, existential, racial and political reflections, albeit in a veiled, cloudy and inexplicit language.

Ibrahim Miranda was important in the rebirth of printmaking in Cuba of the early 1990s which, according to the critic David Mateo, had the character of a vindication³ after years of neglect of this creative expression that previously had a long tradition in our visual arts. Ibrahim was also, along with printmakers Belkis Ayón, Sandra Ramos and Abel Barroso, one of the organizers and curators of the exhibition LA HUELLA MÚLTIPLE (The Multiple Imprint), devoted to reflecting and boosting artistic prints in all their variants by means of exhibitions, workshops and the publication of voluminous portfolios with many original prints, a project that despite having received the support of some state institutions, was practically subsidized by the artists themselves.

Ibrahim Miranda

Proyecto Cubrecamas
(Bedcovers Project), 1997- 1998
149 x 173 cm



Proyecto Cubrecamas (Bedcovers Project), 1997- 1998

Ibrahim began this project with the assistance of his sister, Idania Miranda, a tailor, during a visit in 1997 to the house where he was born in Pinar del Río. The idea was to recover the patchwork techniques used by dressmakers in the neighbourhood to make bedcovers from discarded clothing. Ibrahim added to the bedcovers "sewn drawings", thus changing their character. When they were finished, he lent the bedcovers to friends in Havana to be used before they were shown publicly. The idea revolved around how these bedcovers related with the night and sleep and with the personal experiences of each user.

What was interesting about this project has more to do with the level of the unconscious than with premeditation. Without the artist's knowledge, his work started to spread an important but neglected issue. His bedcovers project went beyond artistic originality, or a gesture to recover a handicraft tradition (generally female), or to give these objects of previous practical use artistic value. The main interest – at least regarding Afro-Cuban culture – lies in the hidden story of these humble textile artefacts, whose origin is not only popular, of poor people, but is also bound to a tradition of African origin

Proyecto Cubrecamas
(Bedcovers Project), 1997- 1998
138 x 184 cm





Proyecto Cubrecamas
(Bedcovers Project), 1997- 1998
134 x 149 cm

Proyecto Cubrecamas
(Bedcovers Project), 1997- 1998
161 x 200 cm



Bedcover, Marianao,
La Habana.

that has remained invisible or silenced in

Cuba. As professor Robert Farris Thompson has pointed out, this tradition stems from the "rhythmic" fabrics of the Mande culture of Mali that spread through many areas of western Africa until it arrived in America and the Caribbean through the slave trade⁴. Its presence has been well documented in the south of the United States⁵, and is equally present in Brazil, Suriname, Haiti and Cuba, although in our case its bonds with Africa have never been pointed out. This technique has not only been part of the making of bedcovers and other small household objects (pot holders, doormats, etc.), but has also been used in Afro-Cuban religious contexts, especially in shawls, skirts and shirts that the SANTEROS and PALEROS use when working with the powers of OYÁ or the dead (EGGUNS and NFUMBES), since the alternate combination of different colours (generally 9, in vertical or horizontal stripes or squares) has the power

to protect the practitioner from malicious spirits.



Afro-Cuban religious woman with skirt of nine colours, La Habana.

This symbolic tradition of African and Afro-Cuban origin has been reactivated instinctively by Ibrahim and reinforced through the inclusion of the fantastic imagery of his "sewn drawings" that often include mysterious religious messages.

Ibrahim Miranda



Lágrimas Negras
(Black Tears), 2000
Xilography and charcoal
on fine cardboard
107 x 124 cm

Lágrimas Negras (Black Tears), 2000

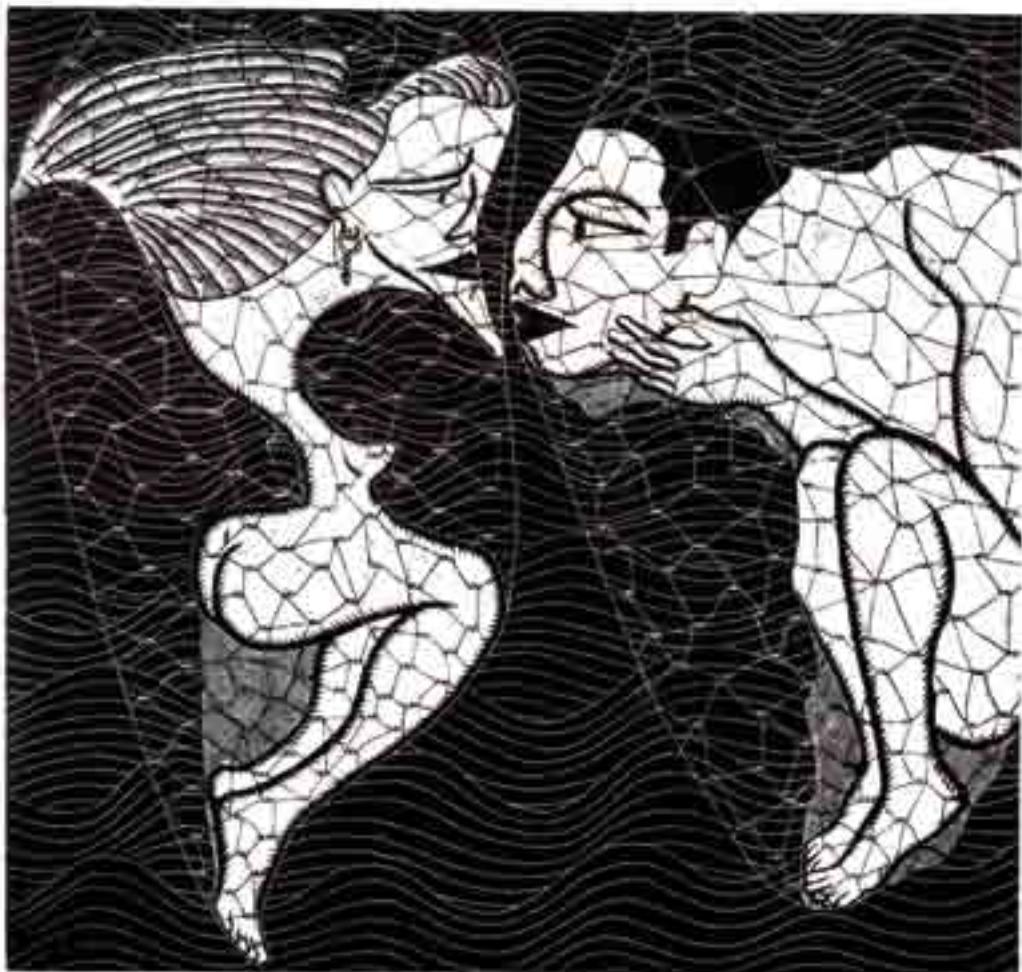
This xylograph with charcoal is somewhat removed from the iconography that Ibrahim used in his initial engravings. Far from expressing the whims of his imagination, here he intentionally transmits a message of social, racial and political meaning.

Ibrahim based this work on the title of a song by Cuban musician Miguel Matamoros (Santiago de Cuba, 1894-1971), interpreted by the famous Trio MATAMOROS which used as a background the image of an old map of Cuba where the Florida peninsula is also visible. The long political rift between the

governments of Cuba and the United States, which has blocked our country economically and culturally for the past fifty years, has not only generated untold hardship and suffering in our population, but has also encouraged it to embark on an exodus to the United States (especially Miami, only 90 miles away) as a possible solution to our problems. In addition to the dramatic separation of families, this voyage is often carried out on rudimentary crafts, which has caused countless deaths in the Straits of Florida. The black population of Cuba – although

less represented in these migrations – has always been worse punished by the economic effects of this political conflict. Aside from the many domestic problems they have faced as the most vulnerable sector of our society, they are also in a disadvantaged position in relation to the remittances sent by émigrés from abroad, since the black sector residing abroad has fewer employment possibilities and receives less remuneration⁶. The black tears of this work refer to the sufferings of the Cuban people in general, and specifically the tears of black men and women.

Los Novios
(The Bridal Couple), 2004
Woodcut on paper
98 x 101 cm



Los Novios (The Bridal Couple), 2004

Of slighter appearance, even caricaturesque, this xylograph is a summarized expression of the strong connection that has always existed between Africa and America. As the title says, they are lovers, a couple. However, curiously enough, although Africa has always been conceived as the mother of humankind, here it is represented as the father. Perhaps since the artist is an Afro-descendant man, he unconsciously identified himself with the African continent. The couple looks at each other and is about to kiss. But both continents are caught in enormous nets

that keep them apart. And we already know what these nets are: they were knitted a long time ago by colonialism and are still held in place by the near invisible hands of global capitalism. Ibrahim Miranda has outlined this in a simple and comprehensible way, using the resources of old and popular printmaking.

¹ For this interesting and little known expression of Russian popular printmaking, see the beautifully illustrated book *The Lubok, Russian Folk Pictures, 17th to 19th Century*, Aurora Art Publishers, Leningrad, 1984.

² Orlando Hernández, *Cartografía Nocturna de Ibrahim Miranda*, Catalogue of the exhibition at Meza Fine Art gallery, Coral Gables, Florida, United States, 1993 (text in Spanish and English).

³ David Mateo, *Vindicación del Grabado. Catalogue Galería Acacia, Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales*, Havana, 1995. *Nosotros, los más infieles. Narraciones críticas sobre el arte cubano (1993-2005)*, CENDEAC, Murcia, 2007, pp 799-802

⁴ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit, Vintage Books, a division of Random House, New York, 1984*, pp 207-222.

⁵ *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, (various authors), Tinwood Books, Atlanta, in association with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA, 2002.

⁶ Esteban Morales, *Un modelo para el análisis de la problemática racial cubana contemporánea*, in Catauro, *Revista Cubana de Antropología*, year 4, no.6, July-December 2002, p. 74. ("...they receive fewer remittances (83.5% of the migrants are white). They migrated late in time, without external support and took the less remunerated jobs.") Esteban Morales Domínguez, economist, political scientist and professor of the University of Havana has written many essays on racial problems in Cuba.

Alexandre Arrechea

(Trinidad, 1970)



The art career of Alexandre Arrechea¹ began twice: first around 1991 and again on 4 July 2003. (The accuracy with which the artist has recorded the second date has always aroused my curiosity). The thing is that Arrechea was not always an independent artist. For 12 years, he belonged to the famous art group called *Los CARPINTEROS*, of which Marco Castillo and Dagoberto Rodríguez were also members. Should I begin writing about the anonymous Arrechea who was part of *Los CARPINTEROS* or about the new Arrechea who began his career in 2003? Should there be a radical divide between his first phase as a group artist and this new phase as a solo artist? Can we wipe the slate clean and consider it a totally new beginning? In fact, a great effort must be made to avoid looking back. The years he worked as one of that trio of artists are not only recorded in his résumé, but are still present in the formal and conceptual virtuosity of his new works and in the synthetic and enigmatic formulation of his ideas. An important part of Arrechea will always remain in the works of *Los CARPINTEROS* of that period.

While part of the generation that burst onto the Cuban art scene in the 1990s, Alexandre Arrechea, together with Marco and Dagoberto, took a stand somehow different from that of their peers. They made fun of the constant surveillance of the content of artworks by the State playing its censorship role, as well as by art critics and viewers, the latter interested in discovering and praising (discreetly, in a low voice) any work with critical allusions to the national reality, that showed social commitment by artists. Lacking an alternative journalism, independent of the official press, which would openly point out and discuss the errors that affected our society, art since the mid-1980s became one of the few rostrums for expressing uneasiness and nonconformity, although the discourses were metaphoric and addressed to a relatively small audience. However, some members of that new generation of Cuban artists began to get tired of the excessive politicization of art. In the case of *Los CARPINTEROS*, their attitude was cynical in two ways: they concealed their responsibility as individual artists by means of the alibi of the group and they directed attention to the excellent handicraft of their works, such as carpentry or cabinet-making. Thus, they tried to stop others from looking for the social or political problems that eventually might (or might not) be reflected in their works, under the assumption that handicraft is apolitical. For many years, they were devoted to conceiving and building objects exquisitely made but with an irrational and absurd aspect, in which apparent conflicts had to

Black Sun,
Times Square, New York,
2010.



do with the extravagant incompatibility between conventional ideas about objects (for example, a table) and the objects which they built (a table with a water surface, therefore, unusable). For some people this was an elegant way of openly ignoring the social and political predicaments of their environment.²

The new solo works by Arrechea also have that mocking and ambiguous touch that prevents us from accurately defining his reflections, opinions and criteria. The large abstractions or mega-concepts he manages at present in his works, such as power, for example, do not clearly state what kind of power they are alluding to. We are not certain whether he is referring to the power of the big transnational capital, to that of authoritarian socialism, to the power still wielded by the white hegemony all over the world or to that which a lower bureaucrat exercises at a state office. Perhaps one can simply enjoy the excellence of the work in a hedonist manner, with no concern for the meaning beyond its physical qualities.

An impressive work by Arrechea, Black Sun, 2009, shows a big black wrecking ball swinging menacingly toward the wall. Since most gallery walls are white, could this be an aggressive gesture against the concept of whiteness, especially the racial one? Arrechea describes the action of this demolishing ball as devoid of confrontation. He perceives it as “knocking on a door”, like asking permission to enter. “THE PIECE, AS I SEE IT, IS THE FAILURE OF THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF THE WRECKING BALL. AFTER HAVING WATCHED THE VIDEO FOR A WHILE, YOU FEEL THE SENSATION THAT YOU ARE “INSISTENTLY KNOCKING ON THE DOOR” AND THAT IS THE PART THAT INTERESTS ME. IT IS A PIECE THAT IS REQUESTING A SPACE RATHER THAN WRECKING ANOTHER.”³

This expression of easing of tension, of a kind, non-violent action, seems rather apolitical and uncommitted. Does the market play a role in these decisions? Or does it have to do with facilitating the global circulation of art, where local references or too many problematic or polemic elements can become an obstacle to understanding, or generate censorship in spaces dominated by politically correct ideology? It must not be forgotten that Alexandre Arrechea as Los CARPINTEROS, Carlos Garaicoa, Tania Bruguera and Yoan Capote are global artists, accustomed to carrying out site-specific works around the world. This condition generates different criteria from those of many local artists. Their conceptualism and minimalism are effective tools within that context. But, strangely enough, BLACK SUN was projected recently on a wall of NASDAQ (the largest

automated stock exchange of the United States) in Times Square, New York, and a critic drew attention to how the work made him recall the “catastrophic collapse of the U.S. economy”.⁴ Is it then a kind of explosive work with an innocent aspect, capable of exploding like a bomb or not, depending on the context? Would we be entitled to read racial interpretations into BLACK SUN?

Alexandre Arrechea

White Corner, 2006

With this work I suffered a strange and enlightening deception. I got excited about an interpretation of it that turned out to be far from the artist's real purposes. I fantasized that the fight of one black person with a bat and another black person with a machete (both performed by the artist himself), was a representation of intra-racial conflicts or, at least, mistrust within the black population of Cuba or any other place.

I included the white wall as a silent, indolent witness or as a supposedly neutral spectator in the face of this problem, which would then introduce a new conflict, this time of inter-racial nature. How many times, when there is a fight between two black people, have we heard a white person say disdainfully: "let them kill each other"? And this indolent exclamation can be repeated when hearing the news that the black population of an African country attacked and killed hundreds of other black Africans for tribal or religious issues. Yet Arrechea wrote to me that the work referred mainly to an inner conflict between his old stand as a member of Los CARPINTEROS and his current work as an independent artist: "WHITE CORNER IS, THEN, ONE OF THOSE PIECES THAT EXAMINES THAT WHOLE PROCESS

White corner, 2006
Two video projections
on brick walls.



OF CHANGE AND RE-CONVERSION. THEREFORE, THE INSTALLATION IS A CRY OF INDEPENDENCE REGARDING MY PREVIOUS WORK AND OF PERSONAL CONFLICT (...) THE VIDEO SHOWN ON THAT WALL ARRANGED IN AN ANGLE IS A PERFECT AMBUSH, IN WHICH THERE ARE FEW POSSIBILITIES FOR ONE ALEXANDRE OR THE OTHER ALEXANDRE TO SURVIVE. ONLY ONE WILL BE THE WINNER."⁵

Why, then, did I choose this work for the Afro-Cuban collection knowing that its subject was not, in fact, intra-racial nor inter-racial conflict? Why did I not think that it could be about violence between two people (of any colour) or simply about distrust, a widespread syndrome in our society where, in the face of the ghost of surveillance, nobody dares to speak with total honesty for fear of being accused



White Corner, 2006
DVD 8 min. (loop)
Two video channels
Edition 2/3



of being a potential dissident or counter-revolutionary? In fact, the first individual work of Alexandre Arrechea was called *EL JARDÍN DE LA DESCONFIANZA* (The Garden of Distrust), and was made in Los Angeles between 2003 and 2006. Its central element was a tree in whose branches the artist had installed video cameras that recorded and sent images of the viewers to the internet. Even knowing this precedent, my imagination was diverted by the presence of two black people waiting for an imminent attack. Was this really a misinterpretation, a prejudiced misreading? As the artist later warned me, all his works are designed to have many readings and, being a black artist, it is unavoidable for the racial problem to be present. But it was not the core of his concerns. Should it be so? Is he forced to

address that subject in response to viewers and critics' expectations because he is a black artist? Would that be my second fiasco, the second betrayal of my white subconscious? Or was I finally beginning to understand the real functioning, the subtle strategy of the works of Alexandre Arrechea?

¹ See his website: <http://www.alexandrearrechea.com/>

² See in: http://www.loscarpinteros.net/english_press/english_press_interview of the Los Carpinteros, by Trini Dalto in *Bomb Magazine*, Winter 2001/2002; interview by Rosa Lowinger in *Sculpture Magazine*, December 1999 - Vol.18 No. 10, and interview by Margaret Miller and Noel Smith, Institute for Research on Art, Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa, USA, 2003.

³ Letter of A. Arrechea to the author, 4 June 2009.

⁴ Carlo McCormick. *American Abyss*, NY, 2010. <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/mccormick/alexandre-arrechea3-5-10.asp>

⁵ Letter of A. Arrechea to the author, 4 June 2009.

JUAN ROBERTO DIAGO DURRUTHY

(Havana, Cuba, 1971)



artists and intellectuals whose credentials are well documented. I would like to draw attention to the way of placing racial identity before national identity in sentences such as this since its use is still a taboo in many of our discourses and writings, probably because of the fear of incurring discriminatory or racist expressions. Amongst Cubans, racial identity is habitually included in the more comprehensive and generic definition of "Cuban man" or "Cuban woman". When one does not mention black or mulatto identity, and subsumes it in the larger identity of being Cuban, one denies the importance of the whole social, cultural and historical burden of these groups of people.

This old Cuban black family has as its most prominent figure – at least in the context of visual arts – Roberto Diago's grandfather, painter and sketcher Juan Roberto Diago Querol (Havana 1920 – Madrid, 1955) who was one of the most renowned modern Cuban artists in the 1940-50s², son of Virgilio Diago (Tampa, Key West, 1897 – Havana, 1941), first violin of the symphony orchestra of Havana and one of the most remarkable violinists in Cuba³. In 1949 Diago Querol married Josefina Urfé, daughter of

Juan Roberto Diago¹ Durruthy stems from a long-established family of black Cuban

the celebrated musician José Urfé (Madriga, Havana 1897 - Havana, 1957), clarinettist, professor, orchestra and band conductor and composer of DANZÓN EL BOMBÍN DE BARRETO⁴, among others. Other musicians and music researchers are also part of this family, such as Odilio Urfé (Madriga 1921 - Havana, 1988)⁵, Josefina's brother who visited their house frequently, Ignacio Villa (BOLA DE NIEVE) and José Lezama Lima. Since childhood Roberto Diago Durruthy was surrounded by anecdotes of artistic, literary and musical creators, as well as numerous books and artworks that would end up marking his future.

Nevertheless, as he admitted in a brilliant interview by journalist and art critic David Mateo⁶, he preferred swimming and baseball, but thanks to his grandmother Josefina Urfé who signed him up for courses for children offered by the National Museum of Fine Arts, little by little he became interested in art: "...IMAGINE HOW IT WAS TO LIVE IN A MARGINAL NEIGHBOURHOOD AS THAT OF POGOLOTTI, LINKED TO A POPULATION OF LOW CULTURAL LEVEL, PLAYING IN THE STREETS WITH BOYS SOME OF WHOM ARE STILL CLOSE FRIENDS, AND TO HAVE SOMEONE GRAB YOUR HAND AND TAKE YOU TO A DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSED CONTEXT AS THAT OF THE MUSEUM."⁷

I believe that this mix of cultivated and popular, elitism and marginality has been extremely important in Diago's artistic career

A mal tiempo buena cara
(Put on a brave face), 2005.
Light box on bwood,
digital photo, acrylic
and electric wires
84 x 75 x 12 cm



and in the formation of its own personality. This has endowed his topics, his language and the critical content of his discourses with a high degree of credibility, originality and aesthetic quality. His works display a double commitment to those two socio-cultural contexts from which he stems and which contributed different but equally enriching ingredients.

He began his career as a painter, but became more inclined to textures, assembling different materials, volumes, drawing on his training in sculpture, with the result that in addition to drawing, painting and photography, he has used many sculptural techniques and materials such as cement, wood, iron and jute fabric. Like other artists of his generation interested in approaching race relations in a critical way, these concerns did not appear initially, but grew out of the process of maturing, assimilating the problems, gaining incentives from the context and reading current texts of that time. His works were shown in the well-known exhibition *QUELOIDES*, at the CASA DE ÁFRICA in 1997, which was an important acknowledgement of his artistic commitment to the problems facing blacks in Cuba. Since then, his work has been one of the most energetic in commenting on this topic using all the resources within his reach. And his criticisms have been direct and daring.

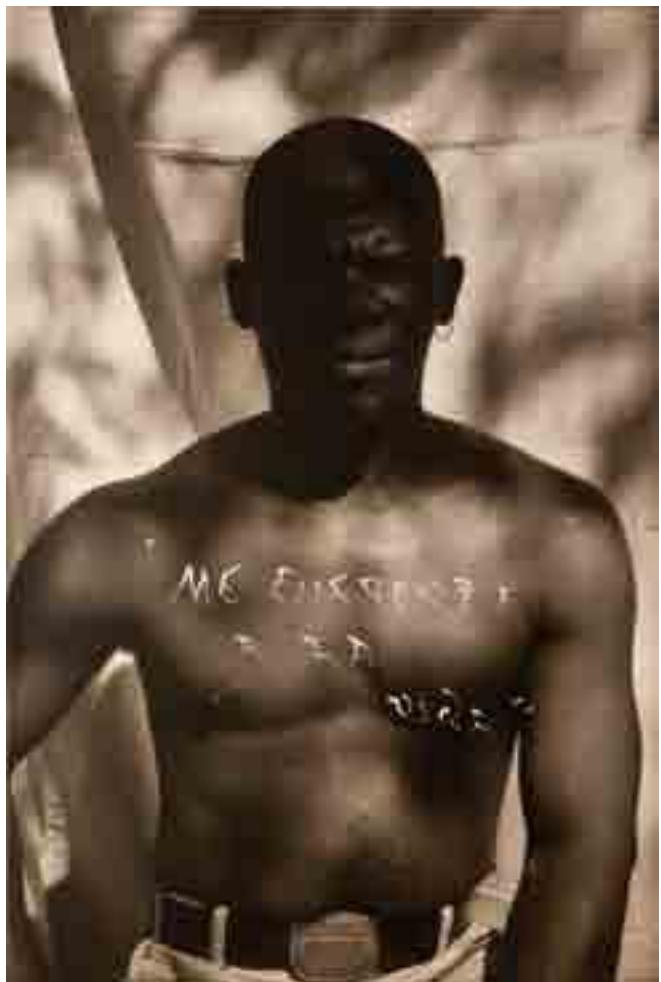
De la serie 'Donde el Dolor no Duele'
(Of the series 'Where the Pain Does not Hurt'), 2003
A Mal Tiempo Buena Cara
(Braving the Bad Weather), 2005

The photographic work of Diago is direct and sincere, without fixating on aesthetics. A secret alliance or complicity arises between the subject and the photographer, something

that many photographers do not achieve. This effect results from either their large light boxes assembled from rough wood boards like the rickety houses that one

JUAN ROBERTO DIAGO DURRUTHY

De la serie
"Donde el dolor no duele",
(From the series,
"Where the pain
doesn't hurt"), 2003
Digital photo print on PVC
150 x 100 cm



finds in many slums or, when they are simple photos, from a message written by the person photographed in his own handwriting. Diago's photography has the peculiarity of capturing black people just as they are, in their daily lives, without giving them time to pose. The faces reflect the subjects' true state of mind, revealing the upset beneath a smile, or the pride and satisfaction of being represented with objectivity and not edulcorated or translated. Sometimes, in addition to the photograph, the artist keeps a filmed recording of what the subject told him about his/her life and difficulties, as in the photograph from the series DONDE EL DOLOR NO DUELE.

España, Devuélveme mis Dioses (Spain, Give my Gods Back), 2000

When shown for the first time, this work seemed controversial within the local milieu for its visual formulation as well as its messages. The work combines two categorical statements, one religious and the other racial. Both are written on the cloth with the brutality of street graffiti, as quickly as possible, like political denunciations written on walls, mindless of aesthetics and unrelated to the elaborate graffiti of the hip-hop culture. The first writing seems a strange, disproportionate and rather absurd demand, since Spain is in fact no longer our colonial metropolis, nor was it ever capable of taking the African gods from Cuba, but instead brought its own gods and censored and repressed all others. Perhaps we should interpret it as a retrospective grievance, in which the artist takes the side of his ancestors, those Africans who were abruptly robbed of their native religions when brought to Cuba as slaves. Or maybe it is a scornful comment on religious "syncretism", since identifications and homologies between African orishas and Catholic saints have made us lose sight of the fact that the main content of the rituals was always and continues to be essentially African. The requested restitution could be the restitution of that African native status which preceded the participation of the Catholic saints who had not yet stolen the limelight from the orishas. The second writing hardly requires a comment. It is as plain as daylight: "It is not difficult to be a man, being black is difficult."

The materials used as support, especially the seemingly abstract central detail, are the most suggestive, perhaps because the information is less readable although written in large characters. The jute sack is a casing that has always been associated with sugar in Cuba. In colonial times, sugar was produced by the labour of African slaves and their offspring, so that its use instead of a white canvas (from the European artistic tradition), is clearly a cultural and racial objection. This message encourages disobedience and cultural insubordination. Yet these are not Cuban sacks, but rather African ones from Ghana, which have been used to ship coffee. The African sacks have, according to the artist, an additional "symbolic load"¹⁸ due to their origin. This substitution of country and



product generates new links – especially for the Cuban public – that may relate coffee with blacks, not only because of the colour but because of a stereotype established by the song *MAMÁ INÉS* by the famous black musician Bola de Nieve, in which one verse states: “Oh *MAMÁ INÉS*, all the blacks drink coffee.” This stereotype was challenged by Roberto Diago in his work titled *TODOS LOS NEGROS NO TOMAMOS CAFÉ* (Not all Blacks Drink Coffee), 2002.

Regarding the expressive and rough textile ties at the central part of the painting, perhaps these indicate the linking or interweaving between whites and blacks, or between the cultures of European and African origin, represented by the white canvas and jute sack strips. This work unwittingly expresses the inevitability of such a link, and the necessity that any solution would have to involve the union of

blacks, mulattos and whites. The interwoven textiles also remind us of an Afro-Cuban religious practice known by the PALEROS as NKANGA or “ties”, used symbolically to tie down either a couple with disagreements or to mystically secure and protect the space where a ceremony is to be held. Religious references can never be ruled out of the work of a Cuban, much less so in the case of Diago, although religion has never had an important or obvious presence in his works. Could such “ties” be a form of securing the unity of all the sectors of our society, of attempting the long-awaited racial harmony never achieved that would provide us with a nation “with all and for the wellbeing of all” that José Martí spoke about?²⁹ The artist comments that we cannot cast aside the fact that such ties represent the bones of all the Africans who died at sea during

España, devuélveme a mis dioses
(Spain, give my gods back), 2003
Oil on jute fabric and knotted strips
of canvas and jute fabric
200 x 300 cm

the long Middle Passage across the Atlantic in slave ships. Whatever the associations called forth by this detail of Diago’s work, it is only tangentially connected with the aesthetic contents, such as rough impasto surfaces with multiple materials, used by

the assemblage artists of the already faraway 1950s; Tápies, Burri and Antoni Clavé. Unlike these artists, Roberto Diago’s work uses material loaded with meanings and suggestions of historical character, social, racial and political denunciation and, of course, hope.



Two cloth's doll with a NKANGA OR “AMARRE” to tie down a couple.

JUAN ROBERTO DIAGO DURRUTHY



Carmen III, 2008
Acrylic on canvas, collage
with burlap cloth, charcoal
and seams
200 x 150 cm

Tu lugar (Your place), 2006
Mixed media on canvas
65 x 99,5 cm



Tu Lugar (Your Place), 2006
El Hijo del Monte
(The Son of the Bush), 2008

Hombre en azul
(Man in blue), 2008
Acrylic on canvas, collage with
burlap cloth, charcoal and seams
130 x 100 cm



In some of his recent works, Roberto Diago has presented a more amiable, less conflicting image of blacks, who simply claim a place under the sun, either in the city or near nature, as in the works *TU LUGAR* (Your Place), 2006 and *EL HIJO DEL MONTE* (The Son of the Bush), 2008. With reference to the exhibition *UN LUGAR EN EL MUNDO* (A Place in the World) held in UNEAC's Villa Manuela Gallery in 2009, Diago replied to a comment by critic David Mateo about the absence in these works of their habitual aggression and criticism of racial problems: "PEOPLE ALWAYS TEND TO FRAME THE RACIAL ISSUE, THE BLACK ISSUE, APPROACHED FROM MARGINALITY, AND THIS EXHIBITION DESPITE THAT, SPEAKS OF A PLACE IN THE WORLD, THAT TRANQUIL PLACE THAT



El hijo del monte
(*The Son of the Bush*), 2008
Acrylic on canvas, charcoal
and seams
200 x 150 cm

OUR ANCESTORS, OUR PARENTS, OUR GRANDPARENTS, AND MOTHERS ALWAYS HAD.”¹⁰ Perhaps Diago is unconsciously idealizing the real situation of most black Cuban families, yet he gives us signs to suspect the underlying existence of critical messages in those faces without mouths, or in those fragmentary supports made of patches that refer to backgrounds of poverty and disadvantages that black people still confront, which forces them to have to assemble their world from bits and pieces, like those bedcovers that we see in humble homes. In this context, the absence of mouths of his characters can be understood as an allusion to the difficulty that blacks still have in openly articulating their discourse, expressing their discomfort

and telling their story in their own words, without having someone speaking for them, silencing or censoring them. And although those schematic faces, some with one rectangular eye and another circular eye, remind us of masks, perhaps because our memory is overburdened with old references, but in Diago’s case these are always schematized human faces and not Afro-exotic masks. They are the faces of black people who look at the reality that surrounds them in a different way from how they are perceived, often contemptuously, with paternalism or tolerance.

¹ See his website www.robertodiago.com

² Catalogue of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Colección de Arte Cubano, Havana, Scriba NetStudio, Zigram Art Project, Edizioni Industrialzone, 2008, pp.148-149. See also *Memoria. Artes Visuales Cubanas del Siglo XX*, José Veigas, Cristina Vives, Adolfo V.Nodal, among other authors, California International Art Foundation, Los Angeles, California, USA, 2001, p.134. See also *Orlando Hernández, “Oscuridad de Roberto Diago”*, Catalogo Tercera Bienal de La Habana, Centro Wifredo Lam, Havana, 1989, pp. 222-226.

³ Radamés Giro. *Diccionario Enclopédico de la música en Cuba*, Editorial Letras Cubanás, Havana, 2007, volume 2, p.19.

⁴ Radamés Giro. *Idem* volume 4, p.225.

⁵ Radamés Giro. *Idem* volume 4, p.225-227.

⁶ David Mateo. “No todos los negros tomamos café” Conversación con Roberto Diago, *La Gaceta de Cuba*, UNEAC, Havana, May-June 2003. Also published in: David Mateo, *Palabras en Acecho*, Ediciones Almargen, Editorial Cauce, UNEAC, Pinar del Río, 2005, pp.166-178.

⁷ *Idem* footnote vi.

⁸ *Idem*

⁹ José Martí, *Obras Completas* volume IV, 267-279, Editorial Nacional de Cuba, Havana, 1963-1973. The phrase is taken from a speech made by the National Hero, José Martí, at the Cuban Lyceum of Tampa, on 26 November 1891 known by this title: “With all and for the wellbeing of all.”

¹⁰ David Mateo. “Roberto Diago: un lugar en el mundo”. Interview. *Revista Arte por Excelencias*, 22 December 2009.

Douglas Pérez Castro

(Santo Domingo, Villa Clara, 1972)



What stands out most in Douglas Pérez's Castro's works is his great sense of humour; a humour that comments with extraordinary acuity

on complex matters in our local history, society and culture. Pérez's works hardly ever use humour for its own sake. In spite of being a cheerful, funny person, he never lets himself be drawn into the simple pleasure of amusing others gratuitously. Behind his humour, his impulse to caricature, there is always an underlying critical or at least reflexive, curious, inquiring purpose. His critical commitment seems to be governed by a phrase pronounced by our great poet-philosopher José Martí: "HUMOUR AND SATIRE SHOULD BE FOR SOCIETY LIKE A WHIP WITH BELLS ON THE TIP." Although his works may point to painful or dramatic realities such as racial discrimination against blacks, or the difficulties and contradictions that prevail in our current society, they never reflect bitterness, anger, regret or sadness, but rather amusement and humor. One often has the impression that they are not critical comments at all, but simply "painted jokes", as the artist himself has said about his work.

Of all the Cuban artists of his generation, Douglas Pérez probably has the most extensive and varied repertoire. Although he has been inclined to dwell on the history of Cuba, in which the black slave is an essential figure, his fascination for science fiction has recently led him into the future, into imaginary history, without abandoning the representation of the local iconography that characterizes his work. In the first case, he is not trying to reflect precise historical events, but rather to preserve the tone or style of past times. Many of his paintings and watercolours seem to recreate Cuban colonial scenes in the context of local colour, as if they were appropriations from painters and printers of the 19th century, mostly foreigners such as Hipólito Garneray, Federico Mialhe, Eduardo Laplante or Víctor Patricio de Landaluze. His repertoire is similar to that of those artists: groups of house slaves in interiors or in plazas and markets; characters dressed in the attire of members of the African cabildos on the feast of the Epiphany; ancient horse carriages (called quitrines and calesas) with coachmen dressed in rich livery and knee-high boots, and a wide variety of objects that seem to be simple reconstructions of Cuban colonial times. But

Afro-Cuban festival of Epiphany s.XIX.



when we look closer, we discover alarming anachronisms: a picture of Ché Guevara, an electric rice cooker, an airplane, a man filling used lighters, a parabolic antenna, a TV set, a Russian nested doll (or MATRIOSHKA), an offset print of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre or the Sacred Heart of Jesus that are common in our homes today. These artefacts are meant to launch us back from our daily contexts to meditate on the complex and contradictory nature of our national identity, which includes many negative elements from our past (not always overcome) or successive pasts. We realize that the slaves represented in his works are present-day black men and women, or perhaps Cuban men and women of any colour.

Another remarkable characteristic of Douglas Pérez's work is his vivid colour. His works are always attractive and pleasant, devoid of sombre or depressing atmospheres. Such enjoyment of lively, exuberant colours has been a characteristic shared by many Cuban and Caribbean artists and is apparently influenced by our climate, the intense brightness of the tropics, the exuberant nature of our vegetation and skies, which reflects upon our bustling, extroverted idiosyncrasy. But in Douglas's case, this may also be the result of the picturesque images that he uses as a reference to record our typical ambiences and characters and our local colour. For those painters and printers that reflected colonial reality

from the perspective of the powerful, the landlords and sugar mill owners, the life of the popular sectors, especially the slaves, seemed an exotic scenario, a feast, eternal carnival, rather than the hell that it actually was. This carnivalesque, folkloric exoticism was transmitted to our BUFO theatre (Cuban vernacular theater) through the stereotypical representations of el NEGRITO (blackface or little black man) and LA MULATA (the mulatta) who contaminated our understanding (or misunderstanding) of the human factors in our own society. Hence the festive character and the colouring of Douglas Pérez's painting has the intention of mocking or parodying that which we should not disregard. The colouring of his paintings and watercolours are an attractive envelope to make the true merchandise that has been smuggled in more enticing: his critical, scathing reflections on our history, the current state of our society and, in particular, the black Cuban population.

The meticulous and detailed narrative style of Douglas Pérez sets him apart from most of his Cuban contemporaries who are generally more prone to laconic, synthetic discourses, influenced by the conceptual trend of the 1980s in Cuba. His aesthetics are even far removed from those of painter Pedro Álvarez who is possibly his closest antecedent and with whom he has many other points in common. Douglas's paintings are always multi-coloured, full

of characters who are carrying out a wide variety of tasks and surrounded by an endless number of heterogeneous elements belonging to different periods. Since his narrations tend to be ongoing, Douglas distributes them in extensive series, another of his characteristics. His desire to narrate is inexhaustible, and he takes advantage of each chapter of that long chronicle with retro appearances to focus on problems in our present, drawing on the complicated history of our social and cultural identity. Douglas Pérez is an informed chronicler of contemporary Cuba, who comments by parodying the languages of the past.



El Macao (The Crab), 1997
Oil on canvas
79,5 x 59 cm



Nutricia (Nutrition), 1997
Oil on canvas
79,5 x 59 cm

El Macao (The Crab), 1997
Nutricia (Nutrition), 1997

These works are an interesting exception in Douglas Pérez's artistic production, using sober language and unconventional materials (toilet paper on coloured ink drawings). They are also atypical for their synthetic character and subdued colouring that lends them a certain drama, far removed from his habitual humorous tone. In the case of *El MACAO*, he could be alluding to a common phrase in Cuba which draws a parallel between the only way to drive the macao (a small Cuban

hermit crab) out of its shell and a person who is entrenched or trapped (voluntarily or not) out of his position: we must set him/her on fire. Referring to the African slave caught inside that old conical sugar mould, the only way to put an end to his condition as a slave is by means of violent struggle, the fire of war, or a direct confrontation with the manifestations of racism. In the case of *Nutricia*, Douglas Pérez also makes reference to the old slave population, but here he uses

the cone as a funnel to refer to the coarse nature of their sustenance that was seen by the masters as a way of filling the tank with fuel so that the slave could continue working. In both artworks we may extend the meaning to some of the problems in present-day Cuba, depending on our interpretive abilities. The works of Douglas Pérez are only food for thought.

Comentario
(Commentary), 2008
Oil on canvas
85,5 x 76,5 cm

Comentario
(Commentary), 2008

This work is part of an extensive series called Stowaway. According to the artist, the series deals with the cultural resistance of black Cubans to white hegemony through music, dance, theatre, religion and politics. In COMENTARIO, this form of resistance is synthesized in a great multicoloured ear alluding to the circulation of information through oral culture, including stories told by parents to children, street jokes, flirtatious remarks, cries of street vendors and even gossip. In colonial times, with few exceptions, blacks were forced to communicate their culture by word of mouth, which not only preserved and transmitted traditional religious knowledge but was also used to conspire against the Spanish colonial powers and to organize slave rebellions secretly. Douglas Pérez's comment on the use of oral communication refers not only to the current black population, but to the Cuban population in general, since the opinions, concerns and dissatisfactions of the great majority of citizens are not reflected in the mass media, on television or in newspapers, but circulate orally inside families, among friends, or in street conversations where comments and speculations are made about what is not expressed in the official media.



Viajeros
(Travelers), 2008
Oil on canvas
85,5 x 76,5 cm



Douglas Pérez Castro

Güiro (Gourd), 2007
Oil on canvas
70 x 50 cm



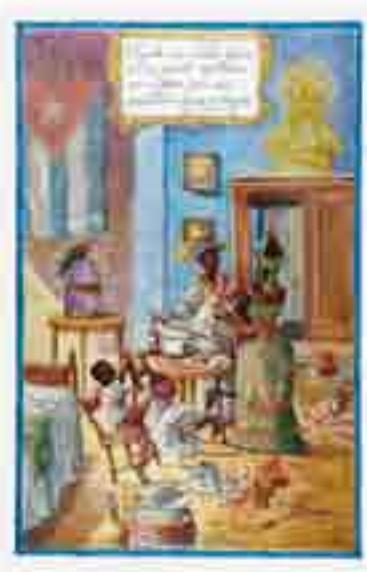
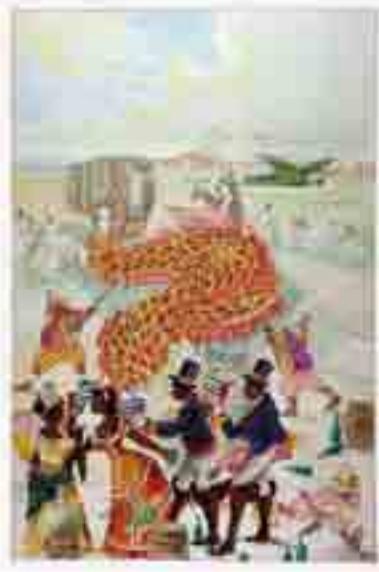
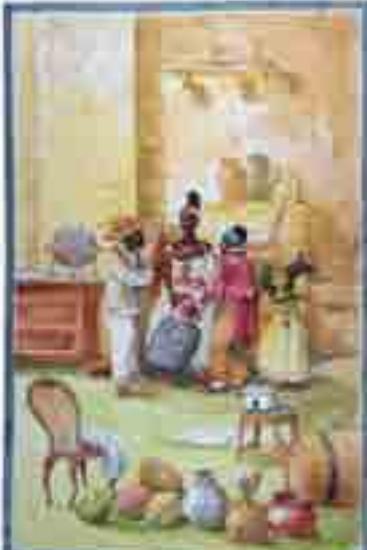
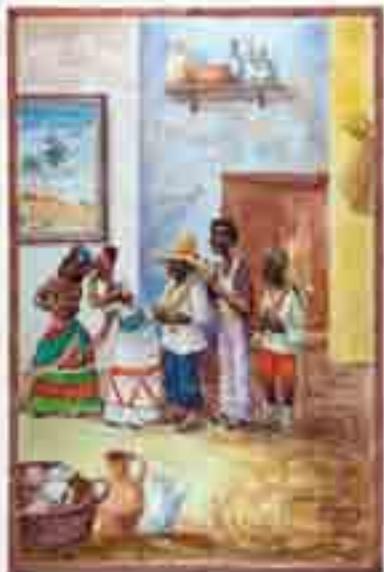
Güiro (Gourd), 2007

In one of his exuberant colonial scenes, the work GÜIRO is an ironic comment on the absurd prohibition in Cuba on the reception of satellite TV channels whose service is only allowed to diplomats and foreign entrepreneurs, but not to the ordinary population. These limitations include using the internet and, until very recently, mobile phones. The characters in the painting, although representing the black population of colonial times, are in fact portraying present-day Cubans since – although under different historical circumstances – contemporary Cubans share with our predecessors of the 19th century the same technological backwardness, this time not because of the absence of means of communication but because of censorship and prohibition. The great gourd is a funny, imaginary representation of the camouflages or resources used by Cuban popular inventiveness to obtain access to satellite signals in illegal ways. The alleged illegalities may be considered the current expression of those old forms of cultural resistance to which Douglas refers.



Ciclón (Hurricane), 2007
Oil on canvas
70 x 50 cm

Douglas Pérez Castro



Armory, 2005
Watercolor on fine cardboard
56,5 x 38 cm

Si al rico le entra una espina
(If the rich man is pricked), 2006
Watercolor on fine cardboard
56,5 x 38 cm

Yuca (Yucca), 2005
Watercolor on fine cardboard
56,5 x 38 cm

Miguel Cervantes Saavedra, 2006
Watercolor on fine cardboard
56,5 x 38 cm

Obsequios
(Gifts), 2005
Watercolor on fine cardboard
56,5 x 38 cm

Ya se fue la vida mía
(My life has gone away), 2006
Watercolor on fine cardboard
56,5 x 38 cm

Dragón (Dragon), 2005.
Watercolor on fine cardboard
56,5 x 38 cm

El gallo con tantas plumas
(The cock with many feathers), 2006
Watercolor on fine cardboard
56,5 x 38 cm

Por donde quiera han cercado
(They have fenced everywhere), 2006
Watercolor on fine cardboard
50 x 32 cm

José Ángel Vincench Barrera

(Holguín, 1973)



José Ángel Vincench Barrera¹ is a conceptual artist who, contrary to orthodox representatives of such a trend, has always preferred to

intentionally “contaminate” his artistic material with sociological, religious and political contents and purposes which, to make matters worse, are marked by the “stigma” of being local. In his works there are no abstract or generic concepts, much less formalist plays stemming from brief verbal enunciations which do not allow us to arrive at any conclusion, other than obvious or simplistic ones. His particular Conceptualism is guided by issues that are relevant to Cuban social life and his work is enquiring, without global pretence. Vincench does not seem interested in playing a big court. He knows that although the serve or initial impulse is made from the narrow breadth of our island, his ball is sufficiently elastic and lively as to bounce toward any field.

Looking back, the artistic trends and international schools that have arrived on our coasts, generally several years late, have ended up gradually losing their purity of origin, to become Cubanized. Like fragments of broken bottles that have been too long at sea, they end up losing their sharp edges, or their dogmatism, so that in Cuba we

hardly have true fundamentalists. When we use labels such as Conceptualist, it is only to indicate a place of origin. But these labels are easily removed. In such a way, we may label Vincench an intellectual, rational and analytic artist, obviously interested in taking a critical stand within art.

In contrast with what was always considered a feature of Cuban and Caribbean art, its tendency to spontaneity, emotions, the Baroque and the colourful, as of the 1980s the situation changed radically and these tendencies were replaced by speculation. Cuban art became more involved in the cognitive than the aesthetic processes of art. This change was not only the result of the impact of Conceptualism and other tendencies such as arte povera or Minimalism, but was also due to a social urge, a request from society for artists (in implicit, indirect ways) to devote at least part of their talent to reflect, contest and criticize, rather than please the eyes of the spectators. Aesthetics could no longer be the main occupation of our artists, in the presence of a growing deterioration of the economic, social, ethical and political conditions which reached high levels at the beginning of the 1990s. Vincench was part of the generation that began their artistic quest under those premises and, unlike those who have gradually succumbed to the invisible pressure

of the global market, or who have settled abroad under more benevolent conditions far from our daily problems, he has maintained his initial impulse and included in his works local problems that may be considered high risk. It does not matter if his discourses are disguised behind the rituals of the Afro-Cuban religions of PALO MONTE and Ifá, or that he uses pixel decomposition in his portraits so that only very few are able to identify the characters (as in the series *Lo Que te Puedo Decir con el Expresionismo Abstracto, Sobre la Libertad* (What I Can Tell You through Abstract Expressionism, on Freedom), 2007, or that he uses abstract resources such as the graphic transcription of the texture of a street where repressive political confrontations have occurred and that the media abstains from disclosing (as in *Cuadro Abstracto que Habla* (Abstract Painting that Speaks), 2009. His discourse, although tending to the hermetic, has never stopped being a constant provocation and an individual commitment to our acute problems. A recent work by Vincench is a video, reminiscent of the graphic simplicity of a PALO MONTE signature, representing only a circle with a cross (like the crosses made in the boxes of a ballot paper) expressing, by successive emphases in each one of its segments, the electoral options that Cubans should have instead of the single option preached by official state propaganda.

His foray into Afro-Cuban topics may be traced back almost to the beginning of his career. His religious affiliation (as a believer of REGLA DE Ifá and PALO MONTE) has never been separate from his artistic and political vision, with the result that his art functions on three overlapping levels. The use of elements characteristic of the religious Afro-Cuban rituals in Vincench's work is seen in practical procedures like cleansings, refreshings, protections, safeguards, warnings and even attacks against enemies. José Ángel Vincench uses the knowledge amassed in those religious traditions to build a discourse pointing to society and politics. He transfers that knowledge originally designed for family and individual use to a wider field of application. He is convinced that the whole society and its political structure needs these therapeutic, healing and purifying procedures, not only at an individual level. Curiously enough, this shuffling of functions is a resource that has not only been used in art: the religious institution itself, especially the highest priests of the cult of Ifá, through its Organizing Committee of the Letter of the Year (an annual prediction), has begun to do the same with their prophecies, and the population has begun to make political readings of their religious metaphors, especially the proverbs that accompany each one of the Ifá odus. In the Letter of the Year of 2006, for example, the ruling

sign was OYEKÚN OBARA, one of whose proverbs say: "Two people cannot sit down at the same time in one seat." The people interpreted the message this way: despite the fact that President Fidel Castro, because of serious health problems, provisionally delegated his position in his brother Raúl Castro, both continued for a time governing simultaneously, which was negative. This situation remained until 24 February 2008 when Raúl Castro started to govern the country in an autonomous way. Is this not a political interpretation triggered by a religious metaphor? Vincench's art can be understood from a similar perspective. One may make sociological and political readings through the religious elements that he uses in his artistic discourse. Of course, we know that neither art nor religion can go beyond these hermeneutic processes; they can interpret but cannot change our reality.

José Ángel Vincench Barrera

Rogación de Cabeza (Feeding the Head), 2005–2006

This work had a previous edition in 1995–96, which was shown in London (Barbican Centre, 1999) and currently belongs to the National Museum of Fine Arts of Havana. The installation is part of a series titled SOCIALIZACIÓN DEL RITUAL (Socialization of the Ritual). It deals with the use of white cloth caps and kerchiefs by the practitioners of SANTERÍA and IFA during a brief ritual known as KOBORÍ, the function of which is to feed the personal deity (called Ori) that resides inside the individual's head. In this offering



Ritual
kerchief written
by Belkis Ayón.

to Ori made to regain balance, tranquillity or relief from stress and internal conflicts, various elements are used, habitually white items (cotton, cocoa butter, EFÚN (white clay), grated coconut meat) or fresh items, such as fruits, although in some cases the sacrifice of white doves, a red snapper or fresh fish becomes necessary. The caps cover these ingredients so that they stay protected and penetrate to the residence of Ori. Vincench distributed these caps (used by the men) and kerchiefs (used by the women) amongst different people residing in Havana, writers, artists (such as Belkis Ayón and Julio Girona), housewives, religious people



Babalawo
and religious practitioner
with ritual caps.

(such as BABALAWO Enrique Santa Cruz), and each one wrote on them their desires, aspirations and concerns. The same was done simultaneously with Cubans residing in Miami, which is the city outside of Cuba with the largest Cuban population, especially following the triumph of the Revolution of 1959. Since then, there has been a tendency to misunderstanding between these groups generated by political issues. According to the artist, “THE RESULT WAS TO BRING THESE STANDS FACE TO FACE, OFFERING THE POSSIBILITY OF READING SOME OF THE THOUGHTS OF THE CUBANS INSIDE AND ABROAD, TO UNITE MORE THAN TO SEPARATE, TO REMEMBER MORE THAN TO FORGET THAT THEY ARE PART OF CUBA'S IDENTITY”². The artist's intention is to repeat this experience every ten years “to investigate the generational thought of Cubans”. Using an artistic-religious resource, this work not only links interesting sociological research carried out from the point of view of art but also proposes reconciliation and unification between Cubans located on the two shores of the Florida Straits.



Rogación de Cabeza
(Feeding the Head), 2005-2006
Installation: 25 ritual hats
of white cloth, pen and pencil
handwritings, wood box
and glass
32 x 32 x 8 cm (each one)

¹ See his website <http://www.vincenchart.com>

² Personal communication with
the artist, August 2008.

Yoan Capote

(Pinar del Río, Cuba, 1977)



Yoan Capote may be the first Cuban artist to be directly interested in artistically exploring the small physical, sensorial, emotional, psychological and even glandular or endocrine reactions that the human being experiences. For a long time the wonderful and multiple functions of our bodies were neglected as a topic or source of inspiration for the creation of artistic works. Our visual arts were devoted to superficial or mimetic explorations. Op art, for example, played with the mechanisms of our vision (as European Impressionism had done by using dots of colours which our vision joined into an image). Other artists played with our sense of touch, letting people feel and move parts of their works. Yoan Capote has not only made use of scents and flavours in some of his works, but went beyond the superficial and used the human senses to make deep links with social and political reality.

The optic or kinetic art by Cuban artists of earlier generations such as Sandú Darié (Rumania, 1908 - Havana, 1991) with the use of lights and sounds to activate other sensorial levels, or the sculptures by Osneldo García (Las Villas, 1931) which recreated provocative sexual movements, could be seen as some of the scant antecedents of Yoan Capote. Yet in none of these cases can we speak of a complete use of the

suggestive powers that the secret functions of the human organism can provoke. In spite of their value and audacity, these previous explorations did not advance much further. Perhaps only the famous DETECTOR DE IDEOLOGÍAS (Ideology Detector), 1989 by the controversial Cuban artist Lázaro Saavedra (Havana, 1964) can be considered a really close antecedent.

Fifty years of Marxist and socialist education made us all worry about the anthill and not the ant, the big picture (macro) and not the little things (micro), the national economy and not issues such as the male erection, scoliosis or bruxism (disorder characterized by the grinding of the teeth). The social being stole the limelight for a long time. Mass-man, the ideological, political, historical and philosophical being, displaced and made the individual human being nearly invisible.

Yoan Capote had to start almost from zero to recapture the issue from its basic, primary stages. His conceptual platform can be summed up schematically as follows: what happens in society happens first in each one of our organisms, in the individual human beings and vice versa, what happens in our bodies, in our organisms, has representations at a social and political scale. The human body (that bag of bones, muscles, blood, guts, nerves, glands) has therefore been the main raw material of his art, its starting point. Yoan's works do not wallow in physiologic, sensorial and neurological or

endocrinial speculations. The results of his investigation into these responses, reactions and changes that take place at the organic level serve to reveal those manifestations or consequences that take place in social and political behaviour. His objective is to make us reflect on those equivalences, with a focus on the latter end of the relationship.

Despite his youth and the fact that Yoan Capote began his artistic production at the end of the 20th century (a very “special period”), the novelty of his work and having reached a great level of local and international acceptance in the last few years, have turned him into one of the most visible figures of our artistic milieu.

In the beginning, before his graduation from the Higher Institute of Art, Yoan made works together with his brother, artist Iván Capote, with whom he discussed many of his concerns and aesthetic visions and with whom he exhibited and performed on several occasions. Yoan also participated as a member of the Galería DUPP (DUPP Gallery), a travelling school that was organized and directed by Cuban artist René Francisco Rodríguez (Holguín, 1960). DUPP Gallery (the acronym of the title of their project DESDE UNA PRAGMÁTICA PEDAGÓGICA (From A Pedagogic Pragmatics), carried out a sequence of interesting experiments with students of the Higher Institute of Art. The DUPP artists organized performances and interventions in public spaces after profound

debates and collective studies with their professor. This was a critical moment in which many of the representatives of the Cuban artistic avant-garde had migrated to other countries and a kind of apathy or malfunctioning of the institutions devoted to visual arts became widespread, creating a vacuum that such collective experiences attempted to fill. But as frequently happens, the moment arrived when Yoan Capote decided to abandon collective work and continue on his own. Undoubtedly, this group training, in which analysis, discussion, criticism, self-criticism and profound sociological research about the environment in which the works were to be placed played a decisive role in the methodology that he later followed.

Yoan Capote's sculptures and conceptual and minimalist installations have great doses of humour and craftiness. Although they generally stem from human behaviour or responses or are related to parts of the body (brain, noses, legs, ears, phalluses, breasts), they approach an endless number of our social and political problems in a highly expressive way. This has almost always been the final destination of his journey.

Let us examine the characteristics of some of the works by Yoan Capote. He comments on female prostitution in Cuba (the abundance of which was notorious and shocking during the first years of the economic crisis), by creating a park bench to be located

in a public space where prostitution was habitually exercised. The arms of the bench are the bodies of kneeling women, so that those who sit down are leaning their body weight on the backs of those women, PARQUE PROHIBIDO (Forbidden Park), 1999. To comment on the difficulties and limitations of travelling for Cubans, Yoan filled a suitcase with bricks, creating a wall inside to express that limitation, while making the suitcase too heavy to carry as a symbol of that difficulty (NOSTALGIA, 2004). To allude to mental imbalances, he placed a bubble level on a sculptural piece representing a head sustained by a rocker arm, which prevents the level from ever achieving a true balance, LOCURA (Madness), 2004. A column with sections separated by sets of teeth made in brass supporting the weight of each one of the blocks, refers to one of the most common ailments of our tense contemporary urban society, bruxism (STRESS, 2004). To reflect political and economic power and ambition, he built a stairway supported by rockers, upon which it is difficult to keep a balance, VOLUNTAD DE PODER (Will of Power), 2006. The double currency circulating in our country (at the moment Cuban peso and Cuban convertible peso, but previously American dollars), is resolved by the creation of a small hybrid between the two currencies, a Cuban 20 cent coin with José Martí's effigy, and an American quarter, with George Washington's image, which once assembled exchange part of the physiognomies of both personalities and the messages inscribed on

Yoan Capote

El Beso
(The Kiss), 2009
Installation: Bronze with
different patina, perfume
essence and sponge
7,5 x 4 x 4,5 cm (each piece)

those coins, DINERO BILINGÜE (Bilingual Money) 2002. Economic inequality between people is expressed by means of two parallel bricks that form the sign of equality (=) which is crossed by a bundle of bills creating the sign of inequality (\neq), INTRÍNSECO (Intrinsic, 2006).

Although the conceptual formulations and the formal solutions of the works of Yoan Capote make him stand out as one of the few Cuban artists inclined toward a global aesthetic, capable of being assimilated in any exhibition context and market, his ingenious character, wit and interest in addressing problems in contemporary Cuban society result in his work maintaining a strongly vernacular, local tone and social commitment that is not so frequent in global art. The works of the impressive series ISLA (Island), 2005-2009, for example, have been made using thousands of fishhooks to represent the sea that surrounds Cuba, with which the artist transmits a mixture of desire and a sensation of danger, a trap that the act of migrating, of abandoning one's country represents, an adventure that has been attempted by thousands of Cubans with varying degrees of success. The sea of fishhooks also seems to express the dramatic isolation that Cubans experience, both by living surrounded by the sea and because of external and internal political situations, such as the long and absurd economic embargo imposed by the successive U.S. administrations against Cuba and the multiple prohibitive measures applied to the Cuban population by our own government.



Let us say lastly that a notorious characteristic of Yoan Capote is that he has absolute control of the meaning of his works, since these have been minutely planned so that those meanings are compact and offer the viewer a certain route to follow in interpretations. This planning takes place when the work is only a sketch, a project, a scale model. Yoan Capote gives long and coherent explanations about each one of his works. Curiously, our readings always end up coinciding with his.



El Beso (The Kiss), 2009

The first version of this work was part of his second personal exhibition in 1998, titled ULM. Spelling out these three letters in Spanish reads like the words HUÉLEME (smell me). This installation was known locally by this name until the title was replaced by El Beso, maybe to avoid the difficulties of understanding among viewers who do not speak Spanish and also to emphasize the interactive character that the work acquires during its exhibition. Since each nose has an inner pad with different perfumes, the spectator has to go close to smell the different fragrances and is forced to make a similar gesture to kissing a person. As each nose is different, and has different colours and shades, some darker than others, the pseudo-kiss may be understood as an inter-racial kiss between white and black or between people of different racial identities. This is the only work by Yoan Capote that points intentionally to the problem of racial relationships, in this case, proposing an ingenious way of expressing sympathy and making contact. Being a white artist, he

admits, however, that as a child his relatives told him that he had “the nose and the buttocks of a black man”¹, so that the matter of race has been one of his concerns and we may expect more work related to this topic in the future.



The Kiss,
Interactive moment
(spectator action)

¹ Personal communication with the artist.

Artists's CVs

RUPERTO JAY MATAMOROS

1912, San Luis, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba – 2008, La Habana, Cuba.

Solo Shows (selection)

1992 Ya por aquí estuve, L Gallery, La Habana.

1990 Matamoros de Noche, Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas y Diseño, La Habana, Cuba.

Matamoros expone, Museo municipal de San Luis, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.

Día y Noche de Ruperto Jay Matamoros, Centro de Arte, Guantánamo, Cuba.

1988 Jay Matamoros, Arte de Mella Gallery, Santiago de Cuba.

Cuban Painters, Moscow, Russia.

1987 Selective Exhibition to celebrate the 75 years of the artist, Museo Nacional, Habana, Cuba.

1986 II Bienal de La Habana, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, La Habana, Cuba.

1985 Fair of Fine Arts (UNEAC), Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Cuba.

1984 I Bienal de La Habana, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, La Habana, Cuba.

Fair of Fine Arts (UNEAC), Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Cuba.

1983 Exhibition of Jay Matamoros, Amelia Peláez del Parque Lenin Gallery. 3er Salón de la

1979 R.J. Matamoros Exhibit, Ho Chi Minh Gallery at Ministry of Justice.

1975 Personal exhibition at the library of Tribunal Supremo Popular, La Habana, Cuba.

1974 Matamoros expone, Ho Chi Minh Gallery at Ministry of Justice.

1973 International Exhibition of Painting of Socialist Countries, National Fine Arts Gallery, Sofia, Bulgaria.

Exposición de pequeño formato, L Gallery, La Habana, Cuba.

Paisajes Cubanos, Camagüey, Cuba.

1972 Exposición Primitivos Cubanos, Budapest, Hungary

Imágenes de Cuba, Stockholm, Sweden.

1971 Exposición Pintores primitivos, La Habana Gallery, La Habana, Cuba.

1970 Salón 70, Palacio de Bellas Artes, La Habana, Cuba.

1969 Bienal de Grenoble, France.

1968 Pittura cubana oggi, Instituto Italo-Latino Americano de Roma, Italy.

1964 Exhibition of painting and sculpture, Ministry of Justice, La Havana, Cuba..

1939 Part of his work is part of the permanent exhibition at the Prado Gallery.

Awards

1964 Prize at the National Fair of Painting and Sculpture, Palacio de Bellas Artes.

1969 Mention of Honor. 2nd Trienal of Arte Insito (Naif) , Bratislava, Checoslováquia.]

1980 Prize at Salón de Paisaje Leopoldo Romañach, Guantánamo, Cuba.

1982 Distinction by Cultura Nacional by the Ministry of Culture of Cuba.

1994 Orden Félix Varela

Prize at Salón Paisaje '82, Palacio de Bellas Artes.

2000 Medal for the 270 Anniversary

Universidad de La Habana (1728-1998).
National Prize of Fina Arts, Cuba.

BELKIS AYÓN MANSO

Habana in January 1967 and died

September 11, 1999.

Studies

1991 Higher Institute of Art, Havana ISA San Alejandro's Academy

Solo shows (selection)

I Always Return. Collographs of Belkis Ayón. Galería Habana, Havana, Cuba.

Images from the silence. Collographs and wombs of Belkis Ayón. National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba.

For a return. Collographs of Belkis Ayón. Centro provincial de Artes Plásticas y Diseño, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.

The Multiple Print 2002. La Casona Gallery, Havana, Cuba.

Early Work. Patricia Doran Graduate Gallery. Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, USA.

Resurrection. Belkis Ayón (1967-1999).

Collographs from Cuba. Arthur Ross Gallery. University of Pennsylvania and Brandywine Workshop, Philadelphia, USA.

I always Return. Collographs of Belkis Ayón, Cultural Center Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Reencuentro. (with Belkis Ayón's students). Homage to her pedagogical work. Encuentro Nacional de Grabado 2004. San Alejandro's Academy, Havana, Cuba.

Prizes

1997 Prize. Bienal de San Juan del Grabado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

1996 National Culture Award, State Council, Cuba.

1993 First Prize. 1e. Internationale Grafiek Biennale, Maastricht, Holland.

Encuentro de Grabado'93, Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas y Diseño, Havana, Cuba.

Residences

1999 Resident Artist/lecturer/instructor. Brandywine Workshop, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Tyler School of Art, Temple University Printmaking Department

The University of the Art Printmaking Department, Borosky Center Benson Hall Gallery, Intaglio Studio, Benson Hall, RISD Printmaking Department and RISD Museum, Rhode Island, U.S.A.

Collections

Casa de las Américas, Havana, Cuba; Centro Wifredo Lam, Havana, Cuba; Daros Latin American Collection, Zürich, Switzerland; Dr.h.c. Wolfgang Schreiner, Bad Steben, Germany;

Ludwig Museum in the Russian Museum, State Russian Museum, San Petersburg, Russia; Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany; Museum of Art/Fort Lauderdale, Florida, U.S.A.; Galerie Kho Kho René Corail, Fort of France, Martinique,

France; LUAG. Lehigh University Art Galleries, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, U.S.A; Museum of Contemporary Art Sofía Imbert, Caracas, Venezuela; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba; Museo Nacional

de Grabado, Buenos Aires, Argentina; The Museum of Contemporary Art, MOCA, Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.; The Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, California, U.S.A.; The Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, New York, U.S.A.; The Norton Family Foundation, Santa

Mónica, California, U.S.A.; CODA Museum Apeldoorn, Apeldoorn, Holland; Fundación Antonio Pérez, Cuenca, Spain; The Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art the University of Texas, Austin,

U.S.A.; Alex Rosenberg Dies Art, New York, U.S.A.; Brownstone Foundation, Paris, France; The Selden Rodman Collection, Art Galleries Ramapo College of New Jersey, U.S.A.; Central University of Florida Library, Orlando, Florida, U.S.A.; Nelson Fine Art Center, Tempe, Arizona, U.S.A.

PEDRO ÁLVAREZ

Havana, 1967 - Tempe, Arizona, 2004.

Studies

1991 Facultad de Educación Artística. Instituto Superior Pedagógico Enrique José Varona, Havana.

1985 Academia de Artes Plásticas San Alejandro. Havana.

Alvarez worked as Professor of Painting and Drawing at the Elementary School of Art Oscar Fernández Moreira in Trinidad in 1985 and 1986. He was part of the Faculty of Art Education of the Superior Pedagogical Institute Enrique José Varona in Havana between 1991 and 1993.

In 1996 he led a workshop at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cuenca, in the capacity of guest artist.

Solo shows (selected)

2008 The Signs Pile Up. Paintings by Pedro Alvarez. UCR. Sweeney Art Gallery. Riverside, California, USA.

2004 Landscape in the Fireplace. ASU Art Museum, Tempe, Arizona, USA.

2003 African Abstract y otras pinturas románticas. Habana Gallery, Havana, Cuba.

2001 California. Marta Cervera Gallery, Madrid, Spain

2000 ¡La historia del arte cubano ya está contada! La Casona Gallery, Havana, Cuba.

On the Pan-American Highway. Track 16 Gallery, Santa Monica, USA.

Collections

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba; Fundación Ortega y Gasset, Madrid, Spain; Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany; Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville, Spain; Museo Universidad de Alicante, Spain; Arizona State University Art Museum, Phoenix, U.S.A.; Tom Patti Collection, Los Angeles, USA; Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA; Farber Collection, Florida, USA; The von Christierson Collection, London, England.

MANUEL MENDIVE HOYO

Havana, December 15th, 1944

Studies

1963 Graduated from San Alejandro School, in Painting and Sculpturing

Solo Shows (selection)

2009 Exhibition and Performance: El espíritu, la naturaleza y las cabezas (Spirit, nature and heads), Origenes Gallery, 29 de marzo – 29 de abril, 10ma Bienal de La Habana, Cuba.

Exhibition: Mendive at Saint Martin, Amahoro Gallery, West Indies Shopping Mall 97150 Saint-Martin (F.W.I.)

2008 Exhibition: "El color blanco, el azul, el verde y el color de mi piel" (The white, the blue, the green color and that of my skin, Museum of Anthropology and History Merida, Yucatan, Mexico.

2005 Gary Nader Gallery. Feeding the Spirit, the Light, the Ancestors, Olodumare, the most beautiful thing, Coral Gables, Florida, USA.

Series "Madre África", Week of the African Culture, Galería "Casa de la Cultura de Angola", La Habana, Cuba.

2004 Exhibition of Modern Cuban Art, Athens, Greece.

2003 Los Ancestros, orisha, la naturaleza y el pensamiento (The ancestors, orisha, nature and thought), Museum of the Americas, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Social, intelectual y chic (Social, intellectual and chic), Biarritz, France.

2002 Las Aguas, lo cotidiano y el pensamiento (Waters, Daily Life and Thought), Museum of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba

Shangó y la Vida (Shango and Life), La Recova Exhibition Hall, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain

2001 Shangó y la Vida, Sa Nostra Cultural Center, Palma de Mallorca; Capitol Cultural Center, Cáceres, Spain.

Santa Bárbara-Shangó en nuestras Vidas (Santa Barbara, Shango in our Lives), Gallery for Universal Art in Guínes, Havana, Cuba.

2000 Las Aves y los Peces (Birds and Fishes), Latin American Gallery, Casa de las Américas, Havana, Cuba.

Exhibition of Sculptures, Museum of Rhum, Havana, Cuba.

Prizes

2004 José María Heredia Medal Awarding, Council of Plastic Arts, Division of Culture, Santiago de Cuba.

Hacha de Holguín (Axe from Holguín), Division of Cultural Heritage, Holguín.

Consulting Professor, Degree conferred by the Higher Institute of Arts.

2001 National Prize of Plastic Arts 2001, Havana, Cuba. Award for Illustrious Son of the City of Havana, People's Power from the City of Havana.

1995 Medal from the Ville de Fort-de-France, Martinica.

1994 Félix Varela First Degree Order, Council of State from the Republic of Cuba.

Knight of the Arts and Letters Order from the Ministry of Culture and French-speaking nations from the Republic of France.

1990 Medal from Saint Giuliano Terme Commune, Italy.

Medal from the City of Havana.

1989 Junior Olympics Medal, Japan.

1988 Alejo Carpentier Medal, Council of State from the Republic of Cuba.

Collective Prize, Cuban Show at the I Biennial Jaime Guash Foundation, Barcelona, Spain.

1987 Award: V Anniversary Order, Municipal

Division e of culture, Cotorro.

Se parece a la Felicidad (It looks like happiness), VI Biennial of Havana, Wifredo Lam Center, Museum of Colonial Art, Havana, Cuba.

Museum of Modern Art from Cartagena de Indias, San Pedro Claver Plaza, Colombia.

1986 Mention VI Festival of the Culture de Caribbean Origin, Santiago de Cuba.

Diploma IV Quadrennial, Erfurt, Germany.

International Prize of the Second Biennial of Havana, Wifredo Lam Center, National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba.

1985 Prize from Latin American Space Gallery from Paris, I Biennial of Havana, Wifredo Lam Center, National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana Cuba.

1984 Award 1300 years of the Bulgarian Culture, Ministry of Culture of Bulgaria.

1983 Award for the National Culture, Ministry of Culture of Cuba.

1976 Medal from the Municipal Division of Culture from 10 de October, Havana, Cuba.

1970 Diploma Prix National, II International Festival of Painting, Cannes-sur-Mer, France.

1968 Adam Montparnasse Prize, XXIV Salón de Mayo from Paris, France.

National Salon of Plastic Arts Prize, Havana, Cuba.

1967 First Prize, Salon of Drawing, Havana, Cuba.

1962 Prize for Sculpture, Circle of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba.

1955 Prize from Morinaga Society for Enhancing the Mother, UNESCO, Tokyo, Japan.

Collections

National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba; Emilio Bacardi Museum, Santiago de Cuba; Panama Museum of Modern Art, PANARTE, Panama; Museum of Modern Art, Cartagena de Indias, Colombia; Ethnographic Museum of Budapest, Hungary; Museum of Modern Art from the Ville of Paris, France; Atlantic Center of Modern Art, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain; Sa Nostra Foundation, Palma de Mallorca, Spain; France Liberté Foundation, Paris, France; Joan Guaita Art Gallery, Palma de Mallorca, Spain; National Museum of Tanzania; The Jonh F. Kennedy Center, Washington, USA; Gary Nader, Art Gallery, Miami, USA; SEIBU Group, Tokyo, Japan; Cultural Center of Manila, Philippines.

JULIÁN GONZÁLEZ PÉREZ

Regla, La Habana, Cuba, 1949.

Studies

Self taught artist, religious craftsman, Afro-Cuban ritual artist, tattoo maker.

Solo shows

2004–2009 Obra permanente. Museo Municipal de Regla, La Habana, Cuba.

Group shows

2005 De una punta del caimán, L Galley, Universidad de La Habana, Cuba.

2001 Altares del Mundo. Kunstpalast Museum, Düsseldorf, Germany.

Collections

Work in private collections in Saint-Martin, EUA, Germany, UK and Cuba.

BERNARDO SARRÍA ALMOGUEA

Cienfuegos, Cuba, 20 de mayo de 1950.

Studies

Self taught artist.

Solo shows

2007–2009 Permanent exhibition , Unidad 411, Vibora, La Habana, Cuba.

2002 Hotel horizontes Colina, La Habana, Cuba.

2001 Mercado 770, Lawton, La Habana, Cuba.

2000 En mi puesto, Unidad 787 (in Bienal de La Habana), Cuba.

1996 El rey de las papas, Espacio Aglutinador, La Habana, Cuba.

Collections

Private collections in Saint-Martin, Peru, EUA, Puerto Rico, UK and Cuba.

SANTIAGO RODRÍGUEZ OLAZÁBAL

La Habana, 25 de Julio de 1955.

Studies

1972 Academia Nacional de Arte San Alejandro. La Habana. Cuba.

Solo shows (selected)

2009 "Óri. El Órisá personal". Villa Manuela Gallery, La Habana. Cuba.

2008 "Óri. El Órisá personal". Tele Pinar Gallery, Cuba.

2007 "Pequeñas Cosas". La Casona Gallery, La Habana. Cuba.

2006 "Onile". El Espíritu sagrado de la Tierra. Centro de Arte. Romerías de Mayo. Holguín, Cuba

2005 "Onile". El Espíritu sagrado de la Tierra. Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. La Habana. Cuba.

"Ewe Tete". La Casona Gallery. La Habana. Cuba.

"La Tercera Puerta". Centro de Arte Inversiones Arte y Naturaleza Gespart. Madrid, Spain.

2002 "Imagen Saca Palabra" Intemporel Gallery. París, France.

"Preamble". Pequeño Espacio Gallery. Consejo Nacional de las Artes Plásticas. La Habana. Cuba.

"Yo Nunca Morire". Habana Gallery. Cuba.

2003 "Scope Miami Art Fair". Townhouse Hotel, room 410. Miami. USA.

With Intemporel and Bourbon Lally Galleries.

Awards

2007 Diploma of Artistic Merit, Instituto Superior De Arte. La Habana, Cuba.

1997 Mention on the 5th Drawing Fair of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

1992 International Prize Silver Plate. 4Th Bienal of Art of Ankara, Turkey

1990 Drawing Prize. Salón Nacional Paisaje'90, Cuba.

1987 Mención Examen Impreso.

Encuentro Grabado '87. La Habana, Cuba.

1986 Drawing Prize. Salón de la Ciudad. La Habana. Cuba.

1984 Medal of Illustrious Son of the City of Guanabacoa, Cuba.

Selected Collections

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. La Habana. Cuba; Centro Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam. La Habana. Cuba; . La Casona Gallery. La Habana. Cuba; Latinoamericana Casa de las Américas Gallery. La Habana. Cuba; Grafik Museum Stiftung Schreine, Germany; Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno. CAAM. Las Palmas

de Gran Canaria, Spain; Saro León Gallery.

Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Spain; Afrika Museum. Berg en Dal, Nijmegen. Holland; DAROS - Latin America Collection. Zurich. Switzerland; Galería Intemporel. Paris. France; Skandar Maleki Collection. London, England; The von Christierson Collection. London, England; Consejo Nacional de las Artes Plásticas, La Habana, Cuba.

RICARDO RODRÍGUEZ BREY

La Habana, Cuba, 1955

Studies

1974 – 1978 National School of Art (ENA), Havana, Cuba

1970 – 1974 National School of Art "San Alejandro", Havana, Cuba

Solo shows (selection)

2009 "Save the world before bedtime", Dagmar De Pootter Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium

2007/2006 "Universe", S.M.A.K. museum of contemporary art, Ghent, Belgium

2005/2004 "Ricardo Brey. Hanging around, GEM, museum of contemporary art, The Hague, The Netherlands

2001 "Terrestrial impact structures", Lumenva Travo Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

"...and other stories", Pand Paulus, Schiedam, The Netherlands

"New links", Gallery Tanit, Munich, Germany

"Two flat fishes and the Chimaera", Roger Vandaele Edition, Antwerp, Belgium

2000 "Sources", Centre D'art Contemporain, Crestet, France.

RENÉ DE JESÚS PEÑA GONZÁLEZ

La Habana, Cuba, 1957

Studies

Self-taught photographer.

Studied English at the Instituto Superior Pedagógico de Lenguas Extranjeras, Universidad de La Habana, Cuba.

Solo Shows (selected)

2007 Territorios y cartografías en blanco y negro. René Peña, Fran Herbelot. C-5 Gallery. Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

Relaciones negativas [with Marta María Pérez]. Habana Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.

René Peña. Exposición fotográfica. 23 y 12 Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.

2006 Icon. IX Biennal de La Habana. Casa de Asia Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.

René Peña. Fotografías. [Con Marta María Pérez Bravo y Juan Carlos Alom]. Fototeca de Cuba. La Habana, Cuba.

Territorios y cartografías en blanco y negro. René Peña, Fran Herbelot. C-5 Gallery (Santiago de Compostela). Feria Internacional de Grabado y Ediciones de Arte Contemporáneo. Madrid, Spain.

2005 Descartes. Espacio Abierto Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.

René Peña. Fotografías del cuerpo. Casa de México Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.

2004 René Peña. Fotografías del cuerpo. Romería de Mayo, Holguín, Cuba.

Public Duty. Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam. La Habana, Cuba.

René Peña. Fotografías. Galería Intemporel. París, France.

2003 Dentro y Fuera. Concha Ferrant Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.

La piel como metáfora del mundo. UPEC Gallery. Pinar del Río, Cuba.

René Peña: Fotografías. Diana Lowenstein Gallery. Miami, USA.

Suru. Galería Casa de la Poesía. VIII Bienal de la Habana, Cuba

2002 René Peña. Fotografías. Joan Guaita Art, Palma de Mallorca, Spain.

René Peña. Introspectiva. Casa de los Tíos, Granada, Spain.

Rene Peña. Fotografías. Fototeca de Cuba, La Habana, Cuba.

2001 Piel Negra, cosas blancas. Espacio Abierto. La Habana. Revolución y Cultura. La Habana, Cuba.

Man made materials. Suyama Space. Seattle, USA.

Rencontres-Photographiques en Caraibe. Habitation. Saint Etienne, Martinique

From Man Made Materials to White Things. Galería La Casona, La Habana, Cuba.

René Peña. Fotografías. Fototeca de Cuba. La Habana, Cuba.

2000 Rene Pena. Fotografías. Joan Guaita Art. Palma de Mallorca, Spain.

Collections

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. La Habana, Cuba; Colección Nuestra América, Casa de las Américas.

La Habana, Cuba; Fototeca de Cuba. La Habana, Cuba; Foundation Ludwig de Cuba. La Habana, Cuba; Reinhard Schulz Collection. Germany; Archivo Fotográfico Toscano.

Italy; Southeast Museum of Photography Dayton, USA; Houston Museum of Fine Arts. Houston, USA; Duhran Contemporary Art Gallery Nuevo México, USA; Throckmorton Fine Arts. New York, USA; Collection of the Province of Hainaut. Belgium; Lehigh University Pensylvania, USA; Beatrice Liskowsky Collection. Zurich, Switzerland; Reynald Lally Collection. Haiti/USA; Farber Collection. Florida, USA; The von Christierson Collection, London, England; Malba (Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires). Buenos Aires, Argentina.

MOISÉS FINALÉ

Matanzas, Cuba, 27 de septiembre de 1957

Studies

1984 Instituto Superior de Arte, La Habana, Cuba.

1979 Escuela Nacional de Arte, La Habana, Cuba.

1975 Escuela Provincial de Arte, Matanzas, Cuba

Solo Shows (selected)

2009 "El peso de su cuerpo", Collage Habana, La Habana, Cuba.

"El peso de su cuerpo" Revista La Jiribilla, La Habana, Cuba.

2007 "La cuerda Transparente", Convento de Santa Clara, La Habana, Cuba.

"Se fueron los 80", Galería Servando, La Haban, Cuba.

2006 "Back to Reality", Galería Servando, La Habana, Cuba.

2005 "Simulacres Atípicos", Universidad Valenciennes, France.

"Simulacres Atípicos", Galería Habana, Cuba.

2004 "Doble Realidad", Museo del Ron, La Habana, Cuba (shared exhibition with the artist Maylis Bourdet).

ARTCUBA. United Nations Palace, Geneve, Switzerland (shared exhibition with the artist Agustín Bejarano)
 "Aqui vivo yo", UNESCO, París, France.
 2003 "Herido de sombras", Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, La Habana, Cuba.
 "Estudios y Divertimentos". Galería El Perro Verde, Madrid, Spain.
 2002 Château Dampierre, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Anzin, France.
 Paris- Miami- La Habana, Gallery Silvana Fachini, Miami, EUA.
 2001 "Historia para Anaya", Galery Brûlée, Strasbourg, France.
 2000 Art Miami, Miami, EUA.

JOSÉ BEDIA VALDÉS

Habana, Cuba, 1959.

Studies

1981 Instituto Superior de Arte de La Habana, Cuba

1976 Escuela de Arte San Alejandro en La Habana, Cuba

Solo Shows (selection)

2009 RE-corridos..., GEGalería, Monterrey, Mexico.

Analogía Mística, Galería Sandunga, Granada, Spain.
 Bedia, Lam, Martínez; Museo Nacional Palacio de Bellas Artes, X Bienal de La Habana, La Habana, Cuba.

Solo Project, Arteamericas 09. Latinamerican Art Fair, Cortesía Galería Lyle O. Reitzel, Miami Beach, Florida, USA.

2008 A mi aire, Enlace Arte Contemporáneo, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

MAKISHI + NKISI, Galería Lyle O. Reitzel, Santo Domingo Rep. Dominicana.

STATUS QUO, Constantini Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy

Project Rooms, dentro del proyecto: EN EL POSTERIOR DE LAS AMERICAS, MIART'08, Galería Lyle O. Reitzel, Fiera Internacional d Arte, Milán, Italy.

Historias del Sur, Galería Animal, Santiago de Chile, Chile.

2007 Obra Reciente: Pinturas & Dibujos. Stand Galería Lyle O. Reitzel, en 'CIRCA 07', San Juan, Puerto Rico.

FIRST HAND, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA.

"In-Project" Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Art Basel Miami Beach 08, Miami, Florida, USA.

Imágenes Primigenias II, Enlace Arte Contemporáneo, Lima, Peru.

Imágenes Primigenias I, Enlace Arte Contemporáneo, Lima, Peru.

IM-PULSE, Galería Ramis Barquet, Chelsea, New York, USA.

Paintings & Drawings (1992-2006), George Adams Gallery, New York, USA.

2006 El Estado de las Cosas, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA.

Obras Recientes 2002-2005, Museo de Arte Moderno, Santo Domingo, República Dominicana.

2005 Al menos una señal, Galería SPATIUM, Caracas, Venezuela.

José Bedia, There, Around the corner, Galería Ramis Barquet, Chelsea, New York, USA.

Galería Ramis Barquet, Monterrey, Mexico.

Fieldwork, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA
 One Man Show, Palm Beach Contemporary Fair Art & Photography, Stand Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida, USA.
 2004 Obra Reciente, Galería Thomas Cohn, São Paulo, Brazil.
 Galería Lucía de la Fuente, Lima, Perú
 José Bedia (Obra de 1990-2004), Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Panamá, Panamá.
 Estremecimientos, MEIAC (Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo), Badajoz, DA2 (Domus Artium 2002), Salamanca, Instituto de América / Centro Damián Bayón, Santa Fe, y el Museo Casa de los Tiros, Granada, Spain.
 Galleria Claudio Poleschi, Lucca, Italy.
 El Jaguar y la Anaconda, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA.
 2003 Opere Recenti, Galleria Alessandro Bagnai, Florencia, Italy.
 Último fruto de temporada, Iturralde Gallery, L.A., CA, USA.
 José Bedia. Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
 Lo que me dijo la Virgen, Galería Ramis Barquet, New York, USA.
 Narraciones Incompletas, Galería Nina Menocal, Mexico.
 Nsila-El Camino, Cantor Arts Center's, University of Stanford, San Francisco, USA.
 Santos y Bandidos, Galería Nader, Santo Domingo, República Dominicana.
 Tú tienes que estar allí, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA.
 2002 Lección Silenciosa, Klaus Steinmetz Arte Contemporáneo, San José, Costa Rica.
 José Bedia, Gallagher Gallery, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, Ireland.
 Fieldwork, Miami-Dade Community College Wolfson Campus' Centre Gallery, FL, USA.
 The Transportable Cultural Hero, Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, MO, USA.
 José Bedia, Centro Cultural Español, Santo Domingo, República Dominicana.
 Blanco Espiritual, Museo de Bellas Artes de Granada, Palacio de Carlos V, Granada, Spain
 Proverbios, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA.
 2001 Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, USA.
 Condición Visionaria, Iturralde Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, USA.
 Works On Paper, Galería Ramis Barquet, New York, USA.
 Back In Africa, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA.
 Elson Artist-in-Resident Project: José Bedia. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, USA.
 2000 Rodeado de Mar. Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, USA.
 Diámetro Negro, FIAC 2000, Galería Ramis Barquet, Paris, France.
 Things We Need. New Paintings, George Adams Gallery, New York, NY, USA.
 Fragmentos de una Historia. Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, USA.
 Fellowships and Awards (selection)
 1997 Oscar B. Cintas Foundation Fellowship, NY, EUA.

MARTA MARÍA PÉREZ BRAVO

La Habana, Cuba 1959.

Studies

1975 Academia de Artes Plásticas "San Alejandro" La Habana , Cuba.

1979 Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) La Habana, Cuba.

Solo Shows (selection)

2009 "An Instable Object of Desire-The Imaginary of the Breast in Fine Photography". Fratelli Alinari. Fondazione per la Storia della Fotografia. Padova, Italy.

2007 Fernando Pradilla Gallery. Madrid, Spain.
 "Relaciones Negativas", exhibition with René Peña. Galería Habana, Cuba.

2005 Luis Adelantado Gallery, Valencia, Spain.
 Instituto de Arte y Diseño Arte AC, Monterrey, Mexico.

2004 Horach Moya Gallery, Mallorca, Spain.
 Luis Homs Gallery, Barcelona, Spain.
 Algepsar Gallery, Castellon, Spain.

Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, USA.

2002 Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, USA.
 Luis Adelantado Gallery, Valencia, Spain.

2001 BASTA Gallery, Hamburg, Germany.
 Iturralde Gallery, Los Angeles, EUA.

Universidad de Salamanca, Spain

Ema Molina Gallery, Monterrey, Mexico.

La Casona Gallery, La Habana, Cuba.

2000 Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, USA.
 Luis Adelantado Gallery, Valencia, Spain.

Fellowships and Awards

1999 Premio de Salón de Fotografía. Monterrey, NL, Mexico

1998 Scholarship of Guggenheim Foundation, EUA.

1997 Revelation Artist at ARCO, Madrid, Spain.
 Collections

Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, USA; Museum of Art, Pori, Finland; National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba; Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain; Museo Español e Ibero-americano de Arte Contemporáneo, Badajoz, Spain; Norton Collection.

RUBÉN RODRÍGUEZ MARTÍNEZ

Studies

1975 Graduated from the Provincial School of Plastic Arts, Villa Clara, Cuba.

1980 Graduated from the National School of Plastics Arts, Havana, Cuba.

Founder of the experimental Serigraphy Workshop, René Portocarrero.

Professor of serigraphy at the Engraving Department in the Cuban University of Arts (ISA).

Solo shows (selection)

2009 Four Cats. La Acacia Gallery, Havana, Cuba

2008 Busy Beds. Orígenes Gallery, Havana, Cuba.

2007 Chocolate Flavor. Inglaterra Hotel, Havana, Cuba.

2006 Amulets. Palace of the Count of Lombillo Gallery, Havana, Cuba.

2005 Red, Black and White Drapery. Villa Manuela Gallery, Havana, Cuba.

Drawings and Paintings. Gallery of the NH

Central Park Hotel. Havana. Cuba.
 Serenade to Sensuality. Oscar María de Rojas Museum, Cárdenas, Matanzas. Cuba.
 Drawings and Paintings. Santa Clara Art Gallery, Santa Clara, Cuba.
 2004 Reflexes II. Bezalel Gallery. Raquel Hotel, Havana, Cuba.
 Cuban Erotic Art. The Avenue 50 Studio Gallery, Los Angeles, EUA.
 Proverbs and Initiations. Havana Gallery, Havana, Cuba.
 2003 Double Forms. Espacio 304 Gallery, San Juan, Puerto Rico.
 Reflexes. Museum of Colonial Art, Havana, Cuba.
 2002 Robes. René Portocarrero Gallery, National Theater, Havana, Cuba.
 Graphics. Gallery of the NH Central Park Hotel, Havana, Cuba.
 Silhouettes. Pequeño Espacio Gallery, National Council of Plastic Arts, Havana. Cuba.
 2001 Drawings and Paintings. La Acacia Gallery, Havana, Cuba.
 Memory. Contact. Remembrance. Lausin & Blasco Gallery, Zaragoza, Spain.
Awards
 Mention on the Eighth Young Plastic Arts Salon. Matanzas, Cuba.
 Prize at the Engraving Salon. Havana, Cuba.
 Collective Prize Jaume Guasch Foundation. Barcelona, Spain.
 Special Mention at the City Salon. Havana, Cuba.
 Mention Abanico Hispano Cubano 1994. Havana, Cuba.
 Mention on the First Erotic Art Salon, 2000. Havana, Cuba.
 Distinction for National Culture. Havana, Cuba.

MARÍA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS

Matanzas, Cuba in 1959
Studies
 1988 Massachusetts College of Art, Painting, Media Arts, Boston, MA, USA.
 1985 Higher Institute of Art (ISA), Painting, Havana, Cuba.
 1980 National School of Art, Havana, Cuba.
Solo exhibitions (selection)
 2007 Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything is Separated by Water, Indianapolis Museum of Art, USA.
 2006 New Work Gallery Pack, Milan, Italy.
 2005 Backyard Dreams, Julie Saul Gallery New York, NY, USA.
 New Work, Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Miami, FL, USA.
 Pan African Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Museum of Modern Art, Salvador Bahia Brazil.
 2004 3X3 Dak'Art Biennale: Threads of Memory, Dakar, Senegal Talking Pictures, Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Miami, FL, USA.
 Elevata, Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston, MA, USA.
 Something New, Something Old, Schneider Gallery Chicago IL, USA.
 2003 Interiority or Hill Sided Moon, La Marrana, Montemarcello, Italy.
 One Thousand Ways to Say Goodbye, Henie Onstad, Kunstcenter, Oslo, Norway.
 2002 M.M. Campos-Pons, Gallery Pack, Milan, Italy.

2001 Nesting, Schneider Gallery, Chicago, IL, USA.
 2000 Nesting, Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston, MA, USA.
Performance/Multimedia (selection)
 2004 Domestic Rhapsody; Getting Emotional (live performance, 45 minutes) ICA, Boston MA.
 2002 One Stitch at a Time, (live performance, 60 minutes) Henie Onstad Museum, Oslo Norway
Awards and Fellowships
 2004 The Artist Resource Foundation, MA, USA.
 2002 LEF Foundation, Cambridge, MA, USA.
 2000 Polaroid Artist Support Program, Boston, MA, USA.
 1997 The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, NY, USA.
 Visiting Foreign Artist, The Photographer's Gallery, Saskatoon, Canada
 Visiting Artist, Rutgers University Center for Innovative Print and Paper, NJ, USA.
 Polaroid Artist Support Program, Boston, MA, USA.
 1996 Ella Jackson Artist and Scholars Fund, Truro Center for the Arts Castle Hill, MA, USA.
 Nominated for the Rockefeller Foundation Intercultural Film/Video Multimedia Fellowship Installation / Interactive Category, NY, USA.
 1995 Art Reach 95 Award, National Congress of Art & Desing, Salt Lake City, UT, USA.
 BAM, Visual Artist Initiative, finalist 94 - 93
 Bunting Fellowship, Radcliffe College at Harvard, Cambridge, MA, USA.
 New England Foundation for the Arts, Regional Fellowship, MA, USA.
 1992-1991 Foreign Visiting Artist Grant, Media Arts, Canada Council Painting Fellowship, The Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada
 1990 Painting Fellowship, The Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada
 1989 Medal of Honor, City of Guanabacoa, Cuba
 1986 Honorary Mention - XVII International Festival of Painting, Cagnes Sur Mer, France
 1985 Symposium of Scientific Studies, Research Award, Higher Institute of Art, Havana, Cuba
 1983 Mention, Painting - 13th of March Competition, University of Havana, Cuba
Collections (selection)
 Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA; The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, USA; Polaroid Collection, Boston, MA, USA; The Fog Museum Harvard University Cambridge MA, USA; The Norton Museum, West Palm Beach, FL, USA; The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada; The Mac Arthur Foundation, Chicago, IL, USA; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, USA; Rutgers University Center for Innovative Print and Paper, NJ, USA; The Museum of the National Center of African American Artists, Boston, MA, USA; Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen, Germany; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan; Fort Lauderdale Museum of Arts, FL, USA; National Museum of Fine Arts Havana, Cuba; Center for the Development of Visual Arts, Havana, Cuba; The Good Culture Fund, Havana,

Cuba; Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, USA; Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA, USA; The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England.

JUAN CARLOS ALOM

Habana, 1964
Studies
 1986-1989 Institute of Journalism, Semiotic, Havana, Cuba
 Course of Photography, Fototeca de Cuba.
 Solo shows (selection)
 2009 "Monte Soy", Galeria El Torco, Suances, Cantabria, Spain.
 "Esperando en el Monte Claro", Galeria Villa Manuela, Habana. Cuba.
 2004 "Ritual a la Ceiba", Performance / film projected over a tree with live music, 8^a.
 "Pabellón Cuba", 8^a Bienal de la Habana, Cuba.
 "Scope" Contemporary Cuban Images Festival, Toronto, Canada.
 "Free Roaming: A Compilation of Contemporary Artists", Video Marathon, Museo del Barrio, New York, USA.
 2001 "Shifting tides: Cuban photography after the revolution", Tim B. Wride. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Los Angeles, USA.
 "Evidencia", La Casona, La Habana, Cuba.
 2000 "Sombras Secretas", Throckmorton, New York, USA.
Filmography (selection)
 2009 "Diario" 16mm, b/n, 15', Galeria Zona O, La Habana. Cuba.
 2004 "Pabellón Cuba". 35mm b/n 54', 8^a Bienal de la Habana, Cuba.
 2004 IROKO. 16mm b/n 15', Ciudadela la California, Bienal de la Habana.
 2001 "Lo más alto que tu vuelas". 35mm b/n 8', Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales. Habana, Cuba.
 "Evidencia". 16mm b/n 4', Galería Génesis.
 2000 "Habana Solo". 16 mm b/n 15'
 "From the Negative: Conceptual Photography from Cuba", pARTS photographic Arts, Minneapolis, MN, USA.
 Art & General NY. Jazz Gallery NY, USA.
 Instituto de Arte de San Francisco, USA.
 Iturralde Gallery. LA, USA
 "Scope: Contemporary Cuban", Images Festival, Toronto, Canada
 "Free Roaming: A Compilation of Contemporary Artists", video marathon, Museo del Barrio, NY, USA.
 "Parallax Effect", Centro Cultural Español, Miami, FL, USA.
 "17e rencontres video art plastique", Wharf Centre d'Art Contemporain de Basse-Normandie, France
 "LA Freewaves: TV or not TV", Los Angeles, CA, USA
 Inedit Festival, Barcelona, Spain.
 "No island is an island" Contemporary Cuban Art, Sawhill Gallery, James Madison University, Harrisonburg. USA.
Prizes
 2000 One of the best 10 Latin American photographers of the Millennium, Time Magazine, New York

Public Collections

Ludwig Forum for International Art, Germany; Fototeca de Cuba, Habana, Cuba; The Menil Collection, Houston, TX, USA; IF, Milan, Italy; FotoFest, Houston, TX, USA; Art institute of Chicago, IL, USA; Metronom, Fundacion de Arte Contemporaneo, Barcelona, Spain; Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona, USA; Lehigh University Art Gallery, Bethlehem, PA, USA; Walker Art Center. Minneapolis, USA; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA; Arte y Naturaleza, Spain.

ELIO RODRÍGUEZ

Habana, Cuba, 1966.
Studies
 1989 Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), Habana, Cuba.
 1984 Academia San Alejandro, Habana, Cuba.
Solo Shows (selection)
 2007 Remakes. Frick Fine Arts Gallery, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA. EUA.
 2006 Elio Rodríguez/Mayra Alpizar. Instituto Cervantes. London, England.
 Ceiba (con la artista española Susana Guerrero) IX Bienal de la Habana. Centro Provincial de Arte, Habana, Cuba.
 2005 Remakes Galería 23 y 12, Ciudad Habana, Cuba.
 2003 Quilts & Co. Estudio Abierto, VII Bienal de la Habana Casa Gaia, Teniente Rey # 157, H. Vieja, Habana, Cuba.
 2001 El Macho: Made in Cuba. El Museo Diego Rivera & Francisco Oller, Buffalo, NY, EUA.
 2000 Vogue. Fundación Ludwig de Cuba, Habana, Cuba.
 Elio Rodríguez UNEAC/Fundación Nicolás Guillén, Habana, Cuba.
 Elio Rodríguez/René Peña Galerie Winance-Sabre, Tournai, Belgium.
Residencies (selection)
 2003 Artist in Residence. El Museo Diego Rivera & Francisco Oller, Buffalo, NY, EUA.
 2002 Invited teacher. Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, EUA.
 Invited artist. Ceramic workshop. Harvard University. Boston, EUA.
Collections
 Museo Nacional de Artes, Cuba; Jersey City State University, EUA; Cuban Embassy, China; Foundation AMBA, Brazil; Hainaut City Hall, Belgium; Museo del Humor. San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba; Bratton Gallery, New York, NY, EUA; Southside Gallery, Oxford, MS, EUA; La Boheme Fine Arts Gallery, Miami, FL, EUA; Cinque Gallery, New York, N.Y., EUA; Center for Cuban Studies, New York, NY, EUA; Peggy Grafton Collection, Washington DC, EUA; The von Christierson Collection, London, England.

CARLOS GARAICOA MANSO
 Havana, Cuba, 1967
Studied
 Instituto Superior de Arte, Havana, 1989-1994
Solo Shows (Selection)
 2009 La mala semilla, Château de Blandy-les-Tours, France.
 Triunfo, Duda y Celebración, (with Ilya

& Emilia Kabakov) Gallery Continua, San Gimignano, Italy.
 How to become a millionaire through the Junk Mail, Luisa Strina Gallery, Sao Paulo, Brazil.
 Yo no quiero ver más a mis vecinos, Exhibición de video, Salle Zero, Alianza Francesa, La Habana, Cuba.
 La enmienda que hay en mí, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, X Biennal de La Habana, Cuba.
 The Observatory, Bridge Arts, Castleford, UK.
 2008 Carlos Garaicoa, Caixa Cultural, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2008); CCBB, Brasilia, Brazil (2009); Palacio das Artes, Belo Horizonte, Brazil (2009).
 Revolution or Rizhome?, Gallery Continua, Beijing, China.
 2007 Casablanca's Real Passion, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA.
 Latin Kings Music Vol. I-V, Elba Benítez Gallery, Madrid, Spain.
 2006 Casablanca's real passion, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.
 The drawing, the writing, the abstraction (With Ezequiel Suárez), Galería Lombard-Freid Projects, New York, USA.
 Yo no quiero ver más a mis vecinos, Castello di Ama, Gaiole in Chianti, Italy.
 Das Gast (videos 1996-2006), Kunsthalle de Fribourg, Switzerland.
 Overlapping, IV Bienal de Liverpool, Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, UK.
 Postcapital, Palacio de la Virreina, Barcelona, Spain.
 2005 Casablanca's real passion, M.O.C.A (Pacific Design Center) Los Angeles, EUA.
 Things that happen when life goes very wrong, Continua Gallery, San Gimignano, Italy.
 Because every city has the right to be called Utopia, Oriel Mostyn Gallery, Wales.
 Carlos Garaicoa, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Yorkshire, UK.
 Carta a los censores, XXXIX International Contemporary Art Prize, Quai Antoine I, Montecarlo, Monaco.
 Vamos fazer barullo agora, porra! (with Ezequiel Suárez), Galería Habana, Havana, Cuba.
 El mapa del viajero, Luisa Strina Gallery, Sao Paulo, Brazil.
 Self-flagellation, survival, insubordination, Aspen Art Museum, Colorado, EUA.
 2004 La misura de quasi tutte le cose, Palazzo delle Papesse, Siena, Italy.
 2003 Carlos Garaicoa, Elba Benítez Gallery, Madrid, Spain.
 Lecciones de Historia. Casa de América, Madrid, Spain.
 Nuevas Arquitecturas. Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana, Cuba.
 Autoflagelación, Supervivencia, Insubordinación. Sala Montcada, Fundació "La Caixa", Barcelona, Spain.
 Carta a los censores, Piccolo Teatro dell'anarchia, Volume!, Roma, Italy.
 La habitación de mi negatividad. La Casona Gallery, VII Havana Biennial, Cuba.
 Letter to the censors. Artist Statements. Art Miami-Basel, Lombard Freid Fine Arts, New York, USA.
 «El asesino de la baraja», Espacio C, Camargo, Spain.

2002 Now let's play to disappear. Continua Gallery, San Gimignano, Italy.
 Ni Christ, ni Marx, ni Bakounine. Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France.
 2001 «Carlos Garaicoa», Art & Public Cabinet PH, Geneva, Switzerland.
 The last 10 days of the market. Aarhus Festival. Gallery Image, Denmark.
 Because every city has the right to be called Utopia. Lombard-Freid Fine Arts Gallery, New York, USA.
 2000 Nouvelles Architectures. Farideh Cadot Gallery, París, France.
 Recuadros (with Federico Herrero). Jacobo Karpio Gallery, San José, Costa Rica.
 Carlos Garaicoa: La ruina; La Utopia (obras 1990-2000). Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Banco de La República, Bogotá, Colombia; Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, USA; Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas, Venezuela.
 Artist residencies and awards
 2006 Artist in Residence project, Coleção Teixeira da Freitas, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
 2005 XXXIX International Contemporary Art Price, Montecarlo, Monaco
 Katherine S. Marmor Award, Los Angeles M.O.C.A
 1999 Artist in residency project. Parts Gallery. Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.
 1998 Artist in residence project, at the Mario Abreu Museum, Maracay, Cuba.
 Artist in residency project. Yaddo Corporation, New York, USA.
 1997 Artist in residence project, Civitella Ranieri Center, Umbertide, Italy.
 1996 Artist in residence project, Art in General, New York, USA.
 1995 Artist in residence project, City of Biel-Bienne, Pro Helvetia and the Canton of Berne, Switzerland.
 1993 Artist in residence project, City of Düsseldorf and the Paul Pozzoza Museum, Germany.
 Public Collections (selection)
 Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, USA; Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach Florida, USA; Los Angeles County Museum (LACMA), Los Angeles, California, USA; The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, USA; Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain; Tate Modern, London, UK; Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, USA; The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York, USA; Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada; Dallas Museum of Art, Texas, USA; MUSAC, León, Spain.

OSVALDO CASTILLO VÁZQUEZ
 Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 1967
 Studies
 Self taught artist.
 Solo shows
 2008 Galería de Arte Diago, La Casona, La Habana, Cuba.
 2007 Galería Amahoro, Saint-Martin.
 Prizes
 1994 First Prize "Salón René Portocarrero", municipio Contramaestre, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.

1993 First and Second Prize "Salón René Portocarrero", municipio Contramaestre, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.
 1992 Second Prize "Salón René Portocarrero", municipio Contramaestre, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.
 1991 Third Prize "Salón René Portocarrero", municipio Contramaestre, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.
 Communitarian Projects
 Banco de Ideas
 Communitarian Project, grupo "Yely"
 Mural Project "Huellas"
 Project "Los Abstractos"
 Project "Las Banderas"
 Collections
 Museo de Ciencias de la Florida, USA; LG Gallery of New York, USA; Galería de la Universidad Autónoma de Alicante, Spain; Galería da Universidade, Portugal; Casa de la Cultura de Cancún, Mexico; Galería "Diago" de La Habana, Cuba; Galería Indigo Arts of California, USA. Private Collections in Canada, Mexico, Italy, France, Spain, Haiti, Saint-Martin, Norway, Denmark, Colombia, Cyprus, Perú, USA, Portugal, Israel, UK and Cuba.
ALEXIS ESQUIVEL
 La Palma, Pinar del Río, Cuba, 1968
 Studies
 Instituto Superior Pedagógico "Enrique José Varona," Havana City, Cuba
 Degree in Art Education
 Solo Shows (selection)
 2006 "Criollo Remix", Galería Habana Club , del Museo del Ron, Havana City, Cuba.
 2001 "La luna me está mirando." Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA.
 Fellowships and Grants (selection)
 2002 Creation Grant for Young Spanish-American Artists Foundation Carolina, Madrid, Spain.
 2001 Grant for Creativity in the Arts Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA.
 1999 Creation Grant Asociación Hermanos Saiz, Havana City, Cuba.
 Professional and Academic Activities
 2000-2002 Professor, Academia de Artes de San Alejandro, Havana, Cuba.
 2001 Visiting Fellow, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA.
 2000 Visiting Fellow, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA.
 Collections
 David R. Bailey, United Kingdom; The von Christierson Collection, London, England; Howard Farber, USA; Giovanni Ferrero and Carey Ferrero, USA; Ignacio de Lasaleta, Spain; Tufts University, Collections, Medford, Massachusetts, USA; Other private collections in Canada, Cuba, Spain, United States of America, Brazil, Italy and Mexico.

ARMANDO MARIÑO
 Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 1968. Live and work between Madrid and New York.
 Studies
 1980-1987 Escuela Provincial de Arte "Joaquín Tejada". Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.
 1987-1992 Facultad de Educación Artística del Instituto Superior Pedagógico "Enrique José Varona". La Habana, Cuba.

Solo Shows (selected)
 2009 Drilling America, Pan American Art Projects, Miami, FL, USA
 2007 Tervuerns Tales, Grusenmeyer Art Gallery Deurle, Belgium.
 Interiors. Fernando Pradilla Gallery. Madrid. Spain.
 2006 Crash/Clash, Hof & Huyser Gallery Ámsterdam, The Netherlands
 2005 Beautiful World, Project Room Oost, Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Ámsterdam, Holland.
 2004 Paintings, Project room east, Rijksakademie van beeldende wachten, Amsterdam, Holland
 2003 Esteticamente correcto, Galería Fernando Pradilla, Madrid, Spain.
 2002 Arte en las Venas. Sala Rivadavia. Fundacion de la Diputacion Provincial de Cadiz, España.
 Arte en las Venas, Museo Cruz Herrera, La Linea de la Concepción, Cadiz, España.
 From my bathtub, Galería RAY GUN, Valencia, España.
 Obra Reciente, Galería María Llanos. Cáceres, España.
 Con permiso de mi antropólogo, Galería Ad Hoc, Vigo, España.
 2001 Más Allá", Museo Iberoamericano de Arte contemporáneo, (MEIAC)Badajoz, España.
 La angustia de las influencias", Galería Theredoom, Barcelona, España.
 "In utero", Gary Nader Fine Art, Miami, USA.
 2000 "Más Allá", Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana, Cuba.
 Recent painting, International Art Studio Valjevo, Yugoslavia.
 Group Shows (selected)
 2009 Peregrinatio, Arte en las ermitas, Sagunt, Valencia, Spain.
 Pintar, Colectiva, Ad Hoc Gallery, Vigo Spain.
 2008 Deconstruct, Hof & Huyser Gallery, Amsterdam, Holland
 Cuban Avant-garde: Contemporary Cuban Art from the Farber Collection, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, California, USA.
 Visiones Publicas, Pasiones Privadas, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Vigo, Vigo, Spain.
 Something and Something Else . Exhibition Oce Art Foundation in Museum Van Bommel van Dam, Venlo Holland
 2007 Cuban Avant-garde: Contemporary Cuban Art from the Farber Collection, Harn Museum of Art, Florida, USA.
 Cuban Avant-garde: Contemporary Cuban Art from the Farber Collection, Ringling Museum, Tampa, Florida, USA.
 Restos, Estudio Arqueológico, Muestra temática de la colección permanente, Contemporary Art Museum of Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico.
 2006 New Acquisitions, CBK Ámsterdam, Holland.
 Looking Back, Looking Black African-American, African, and Latino Images from the Robert E. Holmes Collection, The Kansas African-American Museum, Kansas USA.
 More than Meet the Eyes, Perspectives from The Robert E Holmes Collection, California Africa-American Museum L.A, USA.
 2005 Contemporary Paintings of LatinAmerica,

The DeVos Museum, Northern Michigan University, USA.
 Mi Cuerpo ,Mi País. Cuban Art Today, U.V.A Art Museum.University of Virginia, Virginia, USA
 Open Ateliers, Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam, Holland.
 Berezdivin Collection, Espacio 1414, Opening Exhibition, San Juan, Puerto Rico.
 Winter Show.Group show, Hof & Huyser Gallery, Ámsterdam, Holland.
 Young Painters, Grusenmeyer Art Galerie, Deurle, Belgium.
 New Paintings, Group show Hof & Huyser Gallery, Ámsterdam. Holland.
 New acquisitions, The Nederlandsche Bank, Ámsterdam
 2004 Inside/outside ,Contemporary Cuban Art, Charlotte and Philip Hanes Art Gallery, Wake Forest University, Florida, USA.
 Colectiva, Galería METTA, Madrid, Spain.
 Open Ateliers, Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam, Holland.
 Affirming a Legacy .Art from Robert E. Holmes Collection H.C. Taylor Gallery of the Dudley Building, North Carolina, USA.
 2003 Centimetro a centimetro, Galería Fernando Pradilla, Madrid, Spain.
 Catastrofe Minime, Museo de Nuoro Cerdana, Italy.
 La Colección, Espacio Camargo, Cantabria, Spain.
 VIII Bienal de la Habana, La Cabaña, La Habana, Cuba.
 2002 Itinerarios.VII Convocatoria Becas de Artes Plásticas Marcelino Botín, Fundación Marcelino Botín, Santander, España.
 Decada de los 90, The Berardo Modern Art Collection, Museo de Sintra, Portugal.
 2002 Atravezados, Fundación Telefónica. MADRID, ESPAÑA
 Show y Basura, Foro Sur, Cáceres, Extremadura, España.
 DerGlobalKomplex, OK, Centrumfur Gegenwartskunst, Linz, Austria.
 Premio L'Oreal de Arte Contemporáneo.XVIII Edición, Madrid.
 Erased Border, ContemporarFair, ProjectRoom, Miami, FL, USA.
 2000 The Young Ones, Gary Nader Fine Art, Miami, USA.
 Paraíso Cero, Evento 5. Bienal de Arte Contemporáneo, Uppsala, Suecia.
 Prizes and Awards
 Segundo Premio, I Salón Nacional de Arte contemporáneo Cubano, Castillo de la Fuerza y Palacio de Bellas Artes, La Habana, Cuba.
 Mención de Honor, XXXe. Festival International de la Peinture, Château-Musée Grimaldi, Cagnes sur Mer, Francia.
 Recidences
 Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DCO/IC.2005
 Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DCO/IC.2004
 Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten/Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2004-2005.
 Fundación Marcelino Botín 2000, España ART/OMI Residency, Nueva York, USA, Julio de 1999.
 Collections
 Centro Wifredo Lam. La Habana. Cuba.
 ART/OMI Residency. Nueva York. USA; ASU

Art Museum: Arizona. USA; Royal Ontario Museum.Toronto .Canada; Colección Berardo Museo de Arte Moderna. Sintra. Portugal; Museo Extremeño Iberamericano de Arte Contemporáneo. MEIAC; Fundación Marcelino Botín.Spain; National Museum of Valjevo. Yugoslavia; Espacio C. Camargo. Cantabria. España; Diputación Provincial de Cádiz .Sala Rivadavia. Cádiz. España; Fundación COCA COLA .España; CEGAM.Centro Gallego de Arte Contemporáneo.Galicia .España; University of Virginia Art Museum.Virginia. USA; Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten .Amsterdam. Holland; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. La Habana .Cuba; Stichting Oce Kunstbezitp.Venlo Holland; De Nederlandsche Bank.Holland; Arttoteek Den Hagg.Holland.

IBRAHIM MIRANDA RAMOS
 Pinar del Río, Cuba, 1969
 Studies
 1988-93 Higher Institute of Art. Havana.
 1984-88 National School of Visual Arts. Havana. (Majoring in Engraving)
 1981-84 Elemental School of Art. Pinar del Río.
 Solo Shows (selection)
 2008 Loop. Osvaldo Yero, Ibrahim Miranda. Galería 23 y 12. Havana, Cuba.
 2007 Anamorphosis. Havana Gallery. Zurich, Switzerland.
 Metamorphosis. C5 Colección Galería. Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain.
 2005 Regression. Galiano Gallery. Havana, Cuba. Out of this world. Alonso Art. Florida, EUA.
 Instinct. La Confronta Gallery. Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.
 2004 Impulses. Villena Gallery. Havana, Cuba. Urban Islands. Havana Gallery. Havana, Cuba.
 2002 Maps. Havana Galerie. Zürich , Switzerland.
 Coves. The Multiple Trace , IV edition. Experimental Graphic Workshop. Havana, Cuba.
 2001 The Journey. Encounter of Engraving. Development Center of Visual Arts. Havana, Cuba.
 Maps. Arguibel Space. Buenos Aires, Argentina.
 2000 Dioptric. Simulacra. Sol del Río Gallery. Guatemala City, Guatemala.
 Maps. Couturier Gallery. Los Angeles, Estados Unidos.
 Cartographic Dissections Bogotá Higher Academy of Arts (ASAB). Bogotá, Colombia.
 Awards
 2005 Distinction by Cultura Nacional. La Habana, Cuba.
 2004 First Prize of Grabado. VI Encuentro Nacional de Grabado. La Habana, Cuba.
 2003 Regular Award of MTG Krakow 2003. International Print Triennial 2003. Krakow, Poland.
 2002 National Prize of Curaduría. Consejo Nacional de las Artes Plásticas. La Habana, Cuba.
 1993 1st Prize. X Bienal de San Juan del Grabado Latinoamericano y del Caribe. San Juan, Puerto Rico.
 Mention of Grabado, Concurso La Joven Estampa. Casa de las Américas. La Habana, Cuba.
 1991 1st Painting Prize. Concurso 13 de Marzo, L Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.
 1990 Mention of Grabado, Concurso 13 de

Marzo. L Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.
 1988 First Prize of Grabado, VII Salón Provincial de Artes Plásticas Pinar del Río'88. Pinar del Río, Cuba
 1987 Mention of Grabado, V Salón Provincial de Artes Plásticas Pinar del Río'87. Pinar del Río, Cuba
 Collections
 Museo Nacional. Palacio de Bellas Artes. La Habana. Cuba; MOMA. Museum of Modern Art. New York; E.U.A. Thyssen - Bornemisza Contemporary Art Foundation. Anit. Austria; Museo de Gravura. Curitiba. Brazil; Van Reekum Museum. Appeldorn. Holland; Museo de la Xilografía. Buenos Aires. Argentina; ASU. Arizona State University Museum of Arts. Tempe, Arizona. E.U.A.; Fort Lauderdale Museum. E.U.A.; National Gallery of Art. Washington. E.U.A.; Fundación Cultural Televisa. Mexico D.F. Mexico; Casa de las Américas. La Habana. Cuba; Graphicstudio. Tampa. E.U.A.; Museum of Contemporary Art. USF. Tampa. E.U.A.; Ninart. Centro de Cultura. Mexico D.F. Mexico; Colección Wolfgang Scheiner. Germany; Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. San Juan. Puerto Rico; Fundação Biblioteca Nacional. Rio de Janeiro. Brazil; LUAG. Lehigh University Art Galleries. Bethlehem, P.A., E.U.A.; Comercial Europea de Artes Plásticas. Bilbao. Spain; Brandywine Workshop. Philadelphia. E.U.A.; Albany University. Albany. E.U.A.; Peter Norton Collection. Santa Mónica. Los Angeles. E.U.A.; Polk Museum of Art. Lakeland. Florida. E.U.A.; LAM. Latino Art Museum. California. Los Angeles. E.U.A.; UCLAA. University of Essex. England; Lowe Art Museum. Florida. E.U.A.; The von Christierson collection. London, England.

ALEXANDRE ARRECHEA
 1970 in Trinidad, Cuba
 Studies:
 He graduated from the "Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA)" in Havana in 1994. For twelve years he was a member of the art collective Los Carpinteros, until he left the group in July 4th of 2003 to continue his career as a solo artist. The interdisciplinary quality of Alexandre Arrechea's work reveals a profound interest in the exploration of both public and domestic spaces. This quest has led him to produce several monumental projects like "Ciudad Transportable" (2000), "The Garden of Mistrust" (2003-2005)
 "Perpetual Free Entrance" (2006) and "Mississippi Bucket"(2008)
 Solo shows (selection)
 2010 Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, USA.
 Casado Santapau Gallery, Spain
 Magnan Projects Gallery, NY, USA
 Savannah College of Art and Design, USA.
 Un día después del futuro. Galleria Villa Manuela [September 4] Habana, Cuba.
 Black sun, Time Square Project, NY, USA
 Todo, Algo, Nada. CAB Centro de Arte caja Burgos [October 9] Burgos, Spain
 ARCO, 2009
 MISTRUST, [September 2–October 26]
 American University Museum at the Katzen, Washington D.C. USA.
 Suicide landscape, [May 13]Casado-Santa-Pau Gallery, Madrid, Spain.
 2007 What could happen if I lie, Magnan Projects, NY, USA.

Emerich Gallery. NY, USA
 "Espacio Derrotado", Casado-Santa-Pau Gallery, Madrid, Spain
 "Scalpel and cotton" & "Contemporary Links", Museum of Art, San Diego, U.S.A.
 2006 "Perpetual Free Entrance", Patio Herrero, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Español, Valladolid, Spain.
 "The Limit" Mary Goldman Gallery, LA, California. U.S.A.
 2005 "DUST", Magnan Projects. NY. U.S.A.
 "POLVO", Miramar Trade Center, Habana, Cuba.
 NADA ART FAIR, Mary Goldman Gallery.
 PULSE, Magnan Projects, NY, USA.
 "Nowhere" Alonso Fine Art, Miami, USA
 "Raúl Cordero, Felipe Dulzaides, Alexandre Arrechea en la Casa de las Américas" Casa de las Américas, Habana , Cuba.
 2004 "Dos nuevos espacios", Espacio Aglutinador, Habana, Cuba.
 "Arte público", Mari Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA, USA.
 "Sudor", Proyecto de arte público, Havana, Cuba.
 2003 "Novos Desenhos", Galeria Fortes-Vilaça, São Paulo, Brazil.
 2002 "Ciudad Transportable", Contemporary Art Museum of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii.
 2001 "Túneles Populares", Palacio de Abrahante, Salamanca, Spain.
 "Los Carpinteros", Galería Camargo-Vilaça, São Paulo, Brazil.
 "Ciudad Transportable", PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, USA.
 "Los Carpinteros", Grant Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA, USA.
 "Ciudad Transportable", Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, USA.
 "Los Carpinteros", San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA, USA.
 2000 "Los Carpinteros", Grant Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA, USA .
 Awards and Residencies
 2005 Braziers International. Oxfordshire, England.
 2002 Artist in residence, The Baltic Center for Contemporary Art, Newcastle, England
 2000 Prize. Fomento de las Artes, UNESCO, 7ma Bienal de la Habana, Havana, Cuba
 1997 First Prize, Contemporary Art-People's Award, El Mundo Magazine, Argentaria Foundation. ARCO Fair, Spain
 1995-6 Endowment. Departamento de Exposiciones y Colecciones, Ministerio de Cultura Español, Madrid, Spain
 Collections
 Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, New York, USA; Artist Pension Trust; CIFO, Miami; Brooklyn Museum, NY, USA; Würth Museum of Modern Art of La Rioja, Spain; MAM. Museo de Arte de Miami, Florida;USA; Elipse Foundation, Portugal; Museo del Barrio. New York. NY,USA; Fort Lauderdale Museum, Miami, USA; San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego, CA, USA; Museum of Contemporary Art, MOCA, Los Angeles, CA, USA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, LACMA, Los Angeles, CA, USA; The Martin Margulies Collection, Miami, FL, USA; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba; Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany; Arizona State University, ASU Art Museum, Arizona, USA; Museo Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain; Centro Cultural Arte Contemporáneo

A.C., Mexico City, Mexico; Daros Collection, Zurich, Switzerland; Fundación ARCO, Museo Galego de Arte Contemporáneo, Spain; Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo MEIAC, Badajoz, Spain; San Diego Art Museum, San Diego, CA, USA; Thyssen-Bornemisza; Contemporary Art Foundation, Vienna, Austria; Ulrich Museum, Wichita State University, Kansas, USA; University of California at Santa Barbara Museum, CA, USA; Fredrick Weissman Foundation Beverly Hills, CA, USA; Cincinnati Museum of Contemporary Art Cincinnati, OH, USA.

JUAN ROBERTO DIAGO DURRUTHY

23 de febrero de 1971, La Habana, Cuba

Studies

Graduado de la Academia de Artes Plásticas "San Alejandro", en 1990.

Profesor Consultante del Instituto Superior de Arte

Solo shows (selected)

2009 Obra reciente, Fayad Jamis Gallery. Habana, Cuba.

2008 Evento Ritos y representación, Casa de Mexico. Habana. Cuba.

Roberto Diago. El Torco Gallery, Suances, Cantabria, Spain.

Alegria de Vivir Fair ARCO'06. Parque Ferial Juan Carlos I, Madrid, Spain

Yo lo que quiero es vivir, (e)spacios Gallery. Madrid, Spain.

El Poder de la presencia. 9th Bienal of Habana, Cuba. Art Fair Lisboa. Lisboa, Portugal.

Dibujos, Roberto Diago. Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad. Camaguey, Cuba.

2005 Roberto Diago. Pan American Art Gallery, Dallas, Texas, U.S.A.

Alegria de vivir. Habana Gallery. Habana, Cuba. Un poco de mi. SPATIVM Gallery. Caracas, Venezuela.

Alegria de vivir. Brownstone Foundation. Paris, France.

2004 Carta Menú. Hotel Inglaterra, Habana, Cuba.

2003 Momentos. XII Feria Internacional del Libro. Sala Onelio Jorge Cardoso, Habana, Cuba.

Aquí lo que no hay es que morirse. Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, Habana, Cuba.

2000 El negro y el puro. Espacio Abierto Gallery, Magazine Revolución y Cultura, Habana, Cuba.

No hay que volar para hacer un sueño. La Guarida, Film Location

Fresa y Chocolate, Habana, Cuba.

Pinturas de Roberto Diago. XIX Festival de XIX Festival de Jazz, Hotel Riviera, Habana, Cuba.

Awards

Distinción por la Cultura Nacional by the Ministry of Culture of Cuba.

Prix Amédée Maratier

Remis par la Fondation Kikoïne sous l'égide de la Fondation du Judaïsme Français.

Premio Especial Raúl Martínez. III Premio.

Premio Nacional Anual de Pintura Contemporánea "Juan Francisco Elso". Museo Nacional Palacio de Bellas Artes. Habana, Cuba.

Mention. Concurso 13 de Marzo. Sala Talía, Habana, Cuba.

Mention. Salón Mirta Cerra. Municipal de Bejucal Gallery, Habana, Cuba.

Collections

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Habana, Cuba; Guislain Etats D'Art Gallery, París, France; Cernuda Arte, Miami, USA; Pan American Art Gallery, Texas, USA; Sacramento Gallery, Aveiro, Portugal; La Luz Gallery, Mérida, México; Coral Capital Art Collection. Panamá; Spativ Gallery, Caracas, Venezuela; Foundation Kikoïne, París, France; Brownstone Foundation, Paris, France; The von Christierson Collection, London, England.

DOUGLAS DARNIS PÉREZ CASTRO

Santo Domingo, Villa Clara, Cuba, 27 de noviembre de 1972

Studies

1996–2001 Professor of painting at Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), Cuba.

1996 Graduate with specialization in Painting at Instituto Superior de Arte, La Habana, Cuba.

1991 Graduate at National School of Fine Arts, Cuba.

1987 Graduate at school "Rolando Escardó" Fine Arts, Cienfuegos, Cuba.

Solo Shows (selection)

2009 "Como regresar", part of X Bienal of Habana, Cuba.

X Bienal of Habana, La Habana Cuba.

2007 "El tiburón y la sardina" Servando Gallery. La Habana Cuba.

2006 "Prehistoria" Metis NL Gallery, Amsterdam, Holland.

"Vedado" 23 y 12 Gallery , La Habana, Cuba.

2004 "Las Flores del mal" Servando Gallery, La Habana, Cuba.

2003 "Las Flores del mal" Metis NL Gallery, Amsterdam, Holland.

2002 "Open Ateliers", Rijksacademie van beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam, Holland.

2001 "Crossover" in CCA Trinidad & Tobago.

"Calicanto" Estudio Galeria "Suyu" La Habana, Cuba.

2000 "El buen cuadro y la mala idea", La Casona. La Habana, Cuba.

Fellowships

2001 Caribbean Contemporary Art Center. CCA7 Port of Spain. Trinidad & Tobago.

1996 Premio "Raúl Martínez", a la Expresión Creadora, I.S.A, La Habana, Cuba

1994 Premio "Académica 94", Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes visuales, La Habana, Cuba.

Mención Salón Provincial 5 de septiembre

1993 Premio Salón Provincial 5 de septiembre

1991 Premio Salón Provincial 5 de septiembre

1989 Premio Salón Provincial 5 de septiembre

Collections

Museo Nacional de La Habana, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Cuba; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Junta de Andalucía, Seville, Spain; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Extremadura, Badajoz, Spain; Tom Pattchett, Los Ángeles, CA, USA; Don Algodón Collection, Madrid, Spain; Ninart Collection. México D.F.; Martjin Sanders Collection, Amsterdam Holland; Collection "British tobacco", Amsterdam Holland; Collection "Océ" Ámsterdam, Holland; The von Christierson Collection, London, England; and in other privatecollections in Belgium, Spain, EUA and Brazil.

JOSÉ ANGEL VINCENCH BARRERA

Holguín, Cuba, 1973.

Studies

1992–1997 Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), La Habana, Cuba.

1988–1992 Escuela de Nivel Medio Superior de Holguín, Cuba.

1985–1988 Escuela Elemental de Artes Plásticas de Holguín, Cuba.

Solo shows (selected)

2009 Obra reciente. Estudio-Galería, La Habana, Cuba.

2007 Lo que te puedo decir. 23 y 12 Gallery, Habana, Cuba.

Rogación de cabeza. Casa Iberoamericana, Holguín, Cuba.

Behind the abstract. Axis Contemporary Art, Calgary, Canadá.

2006 Realidades mágicas. Havana Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland.

Social y Religioso, intervención en el estudio del artista, La Habana, Cuba.

2005 Una imagen vale más que mil palabras. Intervención en la casa del artista, La Habana, Cuba.

2003 Una cosa lleva a la otra. Habana Gallery, La Habana.

2002 Freezing Memories. dpm arte contemporáneo, Guayaquil, Ecuador.

2001 J. A. Vincench, MAM Gallery. Douala, Camerún.

2000 Ni es lo mismo ni es igual, Habana Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.

Desde el interior de la tierra, Havana Gallery. Zurich, Switzerland.

Desde el interior de la tierra, Centro Cultural de España. La Habana, Cuba.

Desde el interior de la tierra, Juan David Gallery. La Habana, Cuba.

Awards

1998 Mención especial V Salón de Dibujo de Santo Domingo, República Dominicana.

1995 II Premio I Salón de Arte Contemporáneo Cubano. Museo de Bellas Artes, La Habana.

1994 I Premio Salón de la Ciudad de Dibujo. Centro de Artes Plásticas y Diseño, La Habana.

Residencies

2004 Cuban Artists Found. New York, 2004.

1999 APT Studios. London, England.

Fordsburg Artists' Studios. Johannesburg, South Africa.

Collections

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, La Habana, Cuba; Galería Berini, Spain; Galería Van Der Voort, Spain; Havana Gallery, Switzerland;

Galerie MAM, Douala, Cameroo; Galerie Bourbon-Lally, New York, USA; Galería Cadaques2, Barcelona, Spain; Axis

Contemporary Art, Calgary, Canada; Private collections in Spain, Switzerland, Germany, South Africa, Cameroo, USA, Israel, Austria, Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico, Canada, UK and France.

YOAN CAPOTE

Pinar del Rio, Cuba, 1977

Studies

2001–2003 Professor of Visual Art at the Higher Institute of Art (Instituto Superior de Arte), Havana, Cuba.

1996–2001 Higher Institute of Art (ISA)

Havana, Cuba.

1991–1995 National School of Art (ENA) Havana, Cuba.

1988–1991 Provincial School of Art, Pinar del Rio, Cuba.

Solo Shows (selection)

2008 PSICOMORFOSIS, Galeria Habana, Cuba.

2006 Parallel Thoughts, Havana Galerie. Zurich, Switzerland.

2004 ANIMICA, George Adams Gallery, New York, USA.

Between The Lines, Paul Sharpe Contemporary Art, New York, USA.

Preparations: studies for sculpture on paper. Andre Zarre, Gallery, New York, USA.

2003 Drawings and Projects. Brownstone Foundation, París, France.

2001 The design of the hybrid. Galeria Habana. Havana, Cuba.

Fellowships, Residencies and Awards (selection)

2006 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, New York, USA.

2005 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Award, New York, USA.

2004 Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, invited artist, Omaha, Nebraska, USA.

Mattress Factory Residence, (MF 2004–05 New Installations, Artists in Residence Cuba) Pittsburgh, PA, USA.

Cuban Artists Fund Grant and fellowship, New York, USA.

2003 Residency Brownstone Foundation, Paris, France.

2002 Fellowship VERMONT STUDIO CENTER, Vermont, USA.

Residency American Friends Ludwig Foundation of Cuba, New York, USA.

Mention (Curator prize) Consejo Nacional de las Artes Plásticas. Havana, Cuba.

2000 UNESCO PRIZE, VII Havana Biennial (with Galería DUPP). Havana, Cuba.

Curator Prize, Consejo de las Artes Plásticas, (with Galería DUPP) Havana, Cuba.

1998 Fellowship Teodoro Ramos Blanco.

Ludwig Foundation of Cuba. Havana, Cuba.

First Prize. II Sculpture Biennial. Galería Teodoro Ramos Blanco, Havana, Cuba.

Selected Collections:

Kadist Foundation, France; Museum Beelden aan Zee, The Netherlands; Arizona State University Art Museum, USA; Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, New York, USA; Beth DeWoody, New York, USA; Karen and Robert Duncan, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA; Gilbert Brownstone, Paris, France; Alex and Carole Rosenberg, New York, USA; Michael Bishopberger, Zurich, Switzerland; Howard Farber, New York, USA; Aldon James, New York, USA; Stephen Wilkes, New York, USA; Barbara Zand, New York, USA; Jeremiah Newton, New York, USA; Mercedes Mestre, New York, USA; Babette Goodman, New York, USA; Michael Bewley, California, USA; Ben Rodriguez, New York, USA; Beatrice Liaskowski, Zurich, Switzerland; Felicitas Rausch, Zurich, Switzerland; Andreas Winkler, Zurich, Switzerland; Santa y Sebastián Berger, Holland; Diane and Robert Moss, New York, USA; Karen Present, New York, USA; Victoria Ryan Lobo, FL, USA; Diane L. Ackerman, New York, USA; Mort Spitzer, New York, USA; Sybil Sheinwald, New York, USA; Schönewald Fine Arts GmbH, Dusseldorf, Germany; The von Christierson Collection, London, England.

