



Without Masks... regarding a collection of (Afro) Cuban art

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An interview with the independent Cuban art critic and essayist Orlando Hernández, curator of *Without Masks, The Von Christierson Collection of Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art*. Designed in Cuba, this is a contemporary art collection centered on African heritage as a referent and as part of Cuban art and culture. Held in Johannesburg (South Africa, 2010), *Without Masks* was the first public exhibition of this collection, which now includes 146 works.

ELIO RODRÍGUEZ
La Jungla (The Jungle), 2008
Soft sculpture on canvas
94 x 98 in

How did the idea emerge of creating a collection with a profile centered on “Afro-Cuban art” by a South African collector who lives in England? Was the curating an interest of yours as a critic and curator? Was it the collector’s suggestion?

It was a proposal of mine that the collector immediately accepted, as if he had always wanted to have a collection like this one. I’ll give you a quick summary of the events. Everything came out of a brief visit to Havana by the South African businessman Chris von Christierson and his wife Marina in November 2007. A few hours before returning to London, where the couple lives, Chris tells me that he is seriously interested in putting together a Cuban art collection, and that he wants me to organize it; that is, not just to advise him, but to take charge of everything, of selecting and proposing artworks to him, of carrying out the buying process, applying for the permits, and sending them to London. His proposal took me by surprise. I had never curated a private collection or worked as an art advisor for a collector. I briefly consulted with my wife Lucha—she subsequently joined with me in doing this work for the past six years—and then I told him that yes, I would do his collection, but taking into account certain “conditions.” Now I think that perhaps I was a little bit insolent or unjust in setting conditions on doing such a gratifying job.

And what were those “conditions?”

I told him that I thought it would be appropriate to make a contemporary art collection precisely along the lines of our “African heritage” and the culture and problems of Cuba’s black population. It was an issue (or set of issues) that had always interested me, and in which I had worked only in spurts, and this would give me the opportunity to develop it more extensively. Secondly, whether the collection was privately or publicly owned, it should have a public character, that is, it should circulate, especially in countries where Africans or people of African descent live, which basically means internationally, given that the African and African-American diaspora are all over the world. And lastly, that this collection should generate publications, videos, conferences, and debates to accompany its exhibitions, to address and discuss questions like discrimination and racism, which continue to affect black people in Cuba today and all over the world, and to denounce racial stereotypes. In another sense, all of this should demonstrate the existence of racial consciousness among Cuba’s black and mulatto population, which has a history that has been hidden or unknown due to the hegemonically white character of our society, and the consequent importance that has been given to the processes of “whitening” and the theory of miscegenation. The collection should also reflect the extensive presence in our society of different religions of African origin (Osha, Ifá, Palo Monte, Abakuá), in which millions of Cubans of all colors participate. The presence of these religions has been reflected in our modern and contemporary visual arts, although often in a picturesque way; that is not a defect of these religions but of the way they are artistically represented. Actually, the ritual practices of these religious groups, their sacred objects, attire, music, and dance, are what constitute real “Afro-Cuban art,” and these religions have been the most important reservoir of African elements in Cuba. So, despite the dangers of “folklorization,” we would not for anything in the world leave out the representations of these religions by modern art and Western tradition. Finally, as a subject that had never been included in the “Afro-Cuban” category, we wanted to introduce Cuba’s presence in Africa; that is, not just Africa in Cuba, but Cuba in Africa. We should demonstrate

our ties to black or sub-Saharan Africa, and not just at the racial, cultural and religious levels, but also at the political and military ones. Many Cubans, black and white, fought and died in Angola, Ethiopia, the Congo and other African countries; or they left family there that they’ve never seen again; or they returned wounded or psychologically affected, as happens in all wars. That has been a more or less taboo subject, or it has always been reflected with a triumphalist attitude. Until now, the topic has been represented in our collection through the work of Carlos Garaicoa and José Bedia, but I am sure that there are many other artistic representations by creators who participated or whose relatives participated or died in those wars.

When was the collection shown for the first time and why did you choose the title *Without Masks*?

The title has to do with the frankness or sincerity that should be used in addressing this subject, which has always been so controversial among us, and which still generates uneasiness in some groups. In plain Cuban, it would be something like “*a careta quitá*,” (with the mask removed), without fear, “without mincing words,” although some people have interpreted it as if the exhibition is “revealing” secrets, or “unmasking” something. That could also be true.

The collection was shown for the first time in 2010 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) in South Africa, one of the countries where anti-black racism has been strongest and most aggressive. South Africa was the country that invented apartheid, but also the country where the leader of the anti-racist struggle, Nelson Mandela, was born. The exhibition was very well-received by the South African public, not only because of its identification with these themes and the quality of the works, but also because—as odd as it might seem—it was the first Cuban art exhibition to be held in that country. It is surprising, even embarrassing, that with all of the history that ties us to Africa, Cuban art has not become as well known on the African continent as it has been in Europe and North America. And Cuba has not had yet a good African art exhibition (neither ancient nor contemporary). While it has been said that we are a “Latino-African” people, it is true that schools do not make much emphasis on teaching African history, or on the legacies left to us by the Africans, or, in fact, on the history of their descendants, Cuba’s black population.

Returning to the exhibition in South Africa, we selected some 80 works by 26 artists of the approximately 100 works that we had at that time, because even though we occupied six of the JAG’s exhibition halls, not everything fit. We were not interested in following an alphabetical order, or a thematic or technical one, in setting up the works; instead, we did it by birth date: from the oldest to the youngest, and beginning with those who had passed away. This is the same respectful attitude followed by our afrocuban religions. The exhibition therefore opened with Jay Matamoros, who, while he might seem relatively distant from “contemporary,” participated in different moments of Cuban art from the late 1930s until his death in 2008, so he could be considered as a revered ancestor of our collection. Then, we presented the work by Belkis Ayón and Pedro Álvarez, who, together with Matamoros, made up a trio of late artists included in the collection. In order of age, they were followed by Manuel Mendive, the self-taught artists Julián González and Bernardo Sarría, Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal, Ricardo Brey, René Peña, Moises Finalé, José Bedia, Marta María Pérez, Rubén Rodríguez, Magdalena Campos, Juan Carlos Alom, Elio Rodríguez,

Carlos Garaicoa, Oswaldo Castillo, Alexis Esquivel, Armando Mariño, Ibrahim Miranda, Alexandre Arrechea, Juan Roberto Diago, Douglas Pérez, José Angel Vincench until we reached the youngest until now, which is Yoan Capote. The order could have been different, of course; we could have assembled all of the works that refer to race on one side, and religious-themed ones on another, but there are always works that combine different problems—racial identity, social, religious.

Given that this collection is centered on recognizing the African legacy in Cuban contemporary art, doesn't it run the risk of exhausting the work of a group of artists from the last three decades? The investigative work must be intense and specialized; has the idea come up of extending it to previous eras of Cuban art, or keeping it focused on the present?

We have focused on that period, and perhaps more emphatically on the 1990s, because in the work of artists from that decade—which saw the beginning of the Special Period, the daily black-outs, the social unrest, the major exoduses, and the awakening of awareness about inequities, inequalities and marginalization that had been occurring in our society—new approaches were taken to many aspects of Cuban reality that had been treated in a superficial, picturesque way. We were interested in a socially-committed collection, not a contemplative or hedonistic one; a controversial, problematizing one that would bring a greater preponderance of reflection, criticism of racism, and denunciation or mockery of racial stereotypes, where artists would try to analyze through art about these troublesome situations faced by the black population. Of course we were interested in expanding the collection at both ends, toward the past and toward the latest, but we preferred to take it step by step, without hurry, and to include only what we would not regret later. In reality, the curating of thematic collections, and doing so under premises that go beyond questions of esthetics or the renown, fame, or commercial value of the work involved, is a quite unusual thing. For me it has been a privilege to have had Chris's almost absolute trust in creating a Cuban art collection like the one we are creating. I always explain to him clearly why I think it is appropriate to buy a given piece of art. I extensively argue for each acquisition proposal, and I always base my proposals on the suitability or capacity of each work to reflect an issue, a problem, and of course, its esthetic qualities. And while it is true that many artists from this collection are among the most important of Cuban contemporary art, there are also some popular artists, who are not very well known, and who are self-taught without a long résumé. This is because the collection has not been conceived as an investment, or taking into account a future commercial operation, but more as a thesis, as a big "essay", an investigation, a reflection that we are conducting through the selection of certain works and the writing of the texts that interpret, explain or comment on them.

Does the collection have its own physical exhibition and storage space, or is that a question for the future? How has its promotion or socialization gone since the *Without Masks* show in South Africa? What response did it get in that country, with its heavy past of apartheid?

The collection does not have its own exhibition space. From the beginning, we have had a warehouse in Oxfordshire, northwest of London, with the appropriate conditions for preserving the works, but without public access. That is why we must constantly

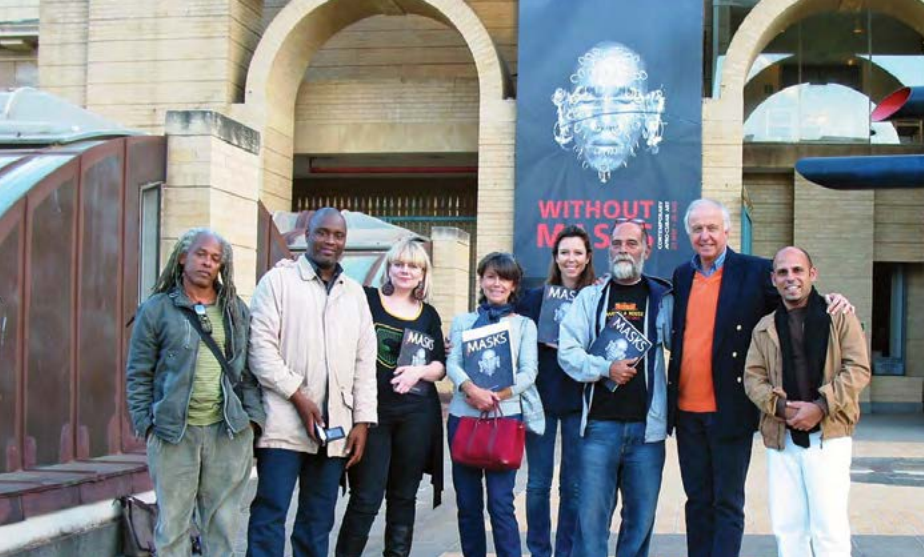
propose it to galleries, museums, and art centers. We have been making attempts in many places (Brazil, Mexico, United States, France, UK). Exhibiting the collection is difficult and costly, but we keep insisting. We are still happy about having been able to show it in South Africa, where its reception was magnificent. References to our show appeared in almost all of the city's newspapers and magazines, with interviews, reports, and positive articles. One of the city's most popular radio stations interviewed Chris, me, and his daughter Nadia, who along with my wife was one of the assistant curators of this exhibition. All of this publicity helped so that many people visited during the three months that the show lasted.

Has the collection been designed and formed in Cuba, working directly with living artists or estates (in the case of deceased artists) or have there been purchases and acquisitions through commercial galleries and/or auctions on or off the island? Has the Cuban art "market" been a factor taken into account?

In Cuba, along with buying at the studios of the artists themselves, we have acquired pieces at Galería Habana, and La Casona, and some through Subasta Habana. But we have also found works in foreign galleries, given that many artists live and work outside of Cuba. For example, we bought the work of María Magdalena Campos-Pons at a U.S. gallery, the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery in Miami. But what we're interested in is the quality of the work, and it doesn't matter if it is in an auction, gallery or artist's studio—which is where I prefer to go first—or if the person lives outside of Cuba, I ask him or her to send me good images of the work available. Funny things happen, such as with Elio Rodríguez; I was his undergraduate thesis tutor at the ISA for the 1989-90 year. During those years, Elio created a piece called *La Jungla*, which was an exact replica of Lam's *La Jungla*, with the same measurements and vegetable forms.... But his jungle was not painted, it was made on stuffed canvas, like a soft sculpture, and colorless, completely white; that is, a "whitened" jungle. It seemed to me to be an intelligent, critical commentary on the history of Afro-Cuban art, whose most well-known and important work, or the most-publicized, was not in Cuba but in New York's MoMA. With the passing of time, that work by Elio was lost, destroyed, and almost two decade later (in 2007) I asked Elio to remake it, in order to acquire it. So that work was saved, recovered, and it seemed important to me that it happened. This matter of "commissioning" artworks is delicate, but very interesting, like inviting artists to try to make a new "version" or to remake a work or important series that belongs to another collection, or to encourage them to tackle a given subject that might interest them, but which they've never done before. All of that is absolutely valid and "legal."

In an interview that you gave at the opening of *Without Masks* in Johannesburg (2010), you noted the need or interest in having the show travel through Brazil, the U.S., Cuba, and Europe, given its importance not only for esthetic reasons, but also ethical and political ones. Was that possible? Do you have any upcoming shows in mind that will make it possible to *reinterpret* the collection, but now with a larger number of works than the 100 or so of three years ago?

In May 2014, that is, four years after its first presentation in South Africa, the collection will be shown again at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver (Canada), and we are working on possibly moving it to other cities



In front of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa, 2010, during *Without Masks* exhibition. From right to left, the artist Douglas Pérez, the collector Chris von Christerson, the curator Orlando Hernández, Nadia and Marina von Christerson, the Gallery director Antoinette Murdoch and the artists Roberto Diago and René Peña.



PEDRO ÁLVAREZ
War is Over, 1999
Oil on canvas
45 x 57 in

in that country. These academic, university spaces, are very attractive to me because the public tends to be more analytic, and able to participate more easily in the debates that we program. In Canada we will exhibit a good part of the new acquisitions that we have made from 2010 to date, some of them by artists we already had, and others by five artists that have recently joined (Manuel Arenas, Reynerio Tamayo, Frank Martínez, Andrés Montalvan and The Merger). For this occasion, we will publish an insert for the existing catalog. As you say, it will be an opportunity for “reinterpreting” the collection.

What importance and relevance does the debate about religion and race/racism as the thematic axis of this collection have for the Cuban context? In curating, the different editions of *Queloides* have initiated or strengthened this debate, but it is not enough; how would a collection like this, which is focused on this insufficiency, contribute to the debate?

I’m interested in the discussion on racism, discrimination, stereotypes and prejudice that still exists against the black population in Cuba because I think that it is the fundamental problem that we must address, much more important than the study of “linguistic remnants,” the “route of the slave,” or studies on religions of African origin. The discrimination, racism, and inequality based on skin color that exist in Cuba are extremely hurtful for that part

of our society and impoverishing for us all. Only public, open discussion done by any means will help to solve this in the future. In that sense, I agree with the basic interests of the different *Queloides* from 1997 to date. They were pioneering exhibitions and I have a lot of admiration for the curators and artists who made them possible. Most of the artists from those *Queloides* are in our collection. But our project does include other aspects that are also important, such as what I mentioned about Cuba’s presence in African wars, for example, and I am sure that many other artists will appear that have not been so evident yet, or that even our artists, perhaps with a few exceptions, have not addressed extensively in their work: the life stories of black families, the problems of endemic poverty within that sector of society, the large number of blacks in prisons, the history of “associations of color,” the decisive presence of black people in our wars of independence and in the formation of our nation and our cultural identity, among many other things. All of this will have to be made visible, first through creation by the artists and then through curatorial projects like ours, which has had both the luck and the privilege of being assembled into a permanent collection that can be exhibited and circulated throughout the world. I think that we are only at the beginning of clearly understanding what we call our “African roots,” and the problems of the black population today. We always talk about “roots,” but I think that in many senses, unfortunately, we are still at the level of “branches.” ▀

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