

## Interview with Alejandro Aguilera by Dinah McClintock

After earning his MFA at the Instituto Superior de Arte (Higher Institute of Art) in Havana, in 1990 **Alejandro Aguilera** earned a postgraduate fellowship to attend the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Before arriving in Boston for his fellowship at MassArt, Aguilera joined other young artists, students, curators and others in a [September 1989 baseball game](#) to protest the relentless censorship of art and systemic suppression of free speech by Cuba's communist government. While in Cuba artistic creation was necessarily "political," for Aguilera coming to the United States has meant freedom to follow a variety of artistic paths.

**McClintock:** You explained that you love this country because it has given you the freedom to be "apolitical." But some might consider some of your artwork, based on recent political events or situations, as inherently political. How would you reply to the suggestion that your work is still political?

**Aguilera:** My opinions on Cuba are largely political opinions. When I speak of "freedom" living in the United States, I refer to the rescue of freedom of expression and association prohibited in Cuba since 1959. Freedom of expression and association are two political principles protected by constitutions, and are the basis of the democratic life of any country. Today, the line of demand for these principles is maintained in Cuba by dissidents and opponents, something that artists are prohibited from doing.

**McClintock:** After leaving Cuba, you were able to focus your art on concepts that you understand as fundamental to contemporary culture and life. You have cited the search for freedom, the acknowledgement of the plurality histories and cultures, and a redefinition of the Western definition of beauty. Explain how these themes are reflected your artwork in "All That You Have is Your Soul?"

**Aguilera:** The two works included in "All That You Have is Your Soul" are *Black and White Tree* of 2013, and *Silhouette* of 2017. They are both detached from an immediate political content. *Black and White Tree* is an allegory of the interracial relationships here in Atlanta. The Tree is made of four trees; this work refers to strength and growth; to the union. It also represents permanence, the lasting and the immovable. *Black and White Tree* is a place and its four cardinal points where the races converge.

**McClintock:** Do you think that these relationships are experienced differently in Atlanta (and the U.S.) than back in Cuba, or in Mexico, or elsewhere in the world?

**Aguilera:** Interracial relationships in Atlanta can serve as a model for interracial relationships in the world. In Atlanta there was a history of vindication. That is what I mean when I speak of the four cardinal points represented in four trees. A current example is the exhibition NUEVOLUTION! LATINOS AND THE NEW SOUTH at the Atlanta History Center. *Silhouette* is a sculpture that combines direct carving with the tradition of the "found object." It is one of my most African works, made with the intention of celebrating that influence. The tree speaks of permanence and the silhouette celebrates the world of

artistic influences, in particular the influence of the African tradition on modern art. They are works connected formally with the pre-modern languages.

**McClintock:** You have remarked that "Art" is different from "Activism" or politics, and you frequently cite self-taught "outsider" artist Bill Traylor as an individual who left a "symbolic inheritance" of "art" as a means of personal, if not institutional liberation. Can you elaborate on the importance of Traylor's example?

**Aguilera:** The work of Bill Traylor is tremendously unique because it rescues the artistic sensibility of a person who was treated as a slave. It is a work that was developed in the middle of the Street, in the middle of the Great Depression, and that also survived half a century of anonymity. In 1998 we saw his originals here in Atlanta, we got to know his personal story, and from there the idea of honoring his work arose. His drawings interested me because of the level of synthesis they have, because of their authentic connection with the Street, which is a subject of modern art, and because of the way in which he treated people of different origins in his work. His drawings are in the first instance a testimony of personal liberation. Until the decade of the 40s when his personal story was discovered, it ran parallel to – but never intersected-- the history of art.

**McClintock:** The notion that "Art" is a "universal language" was a widely held belief by Modernist artists throughout much of the twentieth century. Is that still a valid idea? Do you think of "Art" as a universal language?

**Aguilera:** In my work I use more the idea of Creation than the concept of Art. What is called the Universe is a creation in expansion that solidifies in forms. Art is one of those forms. But it is a fact that equally art and anti-art, as well as culture and counterculture, have become nowadays artistic traditions.

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