

(Re)Building Identities: the artist against the tribe and the self

*I'm 70% water. Does that make me an ocean?*

*Joe Scrivens*

Artists spend their creative life debating between two primal forces: the necessity to belong, a driving force behind any living creature in a societal organization and their artistic calling, that, when it is authentic, is not about reinforcing generic identities but subverting them. This is why socio-cultural national identity differs from the artistic point of view. The first is a narrow straitjacket of themes, symbols, ideas, and practices imposed on the artists demanding to fit in order to belong, while the fulfilment of the second requires them to break with traditions and stand out.

Art is, essentially one of the most common expressions of conflictual political culture in society - it is commonly in disagreement with that set of widely shared beliefs, core values, and norms that shape the symbolic identity of the nation - artists blitz and subvert, and construct dynamite. Influential art nowadays does not resemble society, but eventually will, because the artists are, first and foremost, identity builders. While national identity consists of gross generalizations, stereotypes and distorted caricatures of reality - part of a long and complex process of oversimplification, artistic individual identity is a solo flight - an honest personal scan, and an inner trip of self-recognition in which the artists deal with the different pieces that compose their own individuality to build the most powerful personal narrative. To belong to a culture you need to blur the borders and mix into the group, show some signs of complicity, being part of a social process of thingification and dissolving into the masses. To create an artistic identity demands, on the other hand, that you reinforce your singular self and highlight those components that make you if not original, at least different. This is the dichotomy of being an artist vs. an artisan. It's that singular vision expressed in a particular way, which makes artists successful or influential in their own realm. How they cope with their natural urge of belonging to their national culture, guild or social group while breaking through tradition is also what defines their importance and impact in the universal canon.

Many collective exhibitions focusing on Cuban art and/or artists attempt to establish a paradigm of similarities while at the same time opening a pertinent window to understand the art of a very dynamic and fragmented country like Cuba under the more objective lens of difference.

It shows what seems obvious but has been trivialized and manipulated for centuries, that a country is more than a homogeneous and convenient narrative. There are always thousands of latent stories underneath the dominant identity, and they need not be marginal. A country is a concert of a myriad of visions that overlap, a panoply of traditions spiced by the arguments of self-representation. A country is also made up of its voids, lack of arguments, obsessions, exiles, myths, fragments, minority voices, dissidents, altogether with the dominant traditional narrative. Since a nationality is not a mere sum of individualities, but a collective social and symbolic agreement around certain shared values, the artists gathered here are connected, but their

practices create a varicose system that is hard to label under a national typification. All of them are international - or multinational - artists with an open and broad view.

What is Cuban Contemporary Art? And, what does it mean to be a Cuban artist? Around those fundamental questions of identity, curators Armando Marino and Meyken Barreto have brought together 17 established and emergent artists connected at different levels to the Cuban nationality. If there is something these artists have in common, other than their Caribbean roots, it is also that their art and lives have directly or incidentally been impacted by exile and displacement.

Cuba is arguably one of the nations with the highest number of artists per square meter, but also, due to two long wars in less than a hundred year period, one anti-colonial war, a national revolution that rapidly radicalized, and three dictatorships in a row in six decades, has become one of the largest exporters of immigrations of all kinds, with four distinct major migratory waves - the initial exodus of 1959-64 (including *Operation Peter Pan* in 1962); 1965-1978; the Mariel boat-lift of 1980; 1989 to present (include the *Rafters Crisis* in 1994). It's not unexpected that this combination results in one of the highest numbers of artists living in exile in the world.

From 1959, the pivotal year in the political and demographic relations between Cuba and the United States, to the present day, the impact of the Cuban and Cuban-American artists in the American art is arguably amongst the most important produced by any single national emigration. Despite the fact that most of the exiles are considered invisible by the mainstream, and sometimes labeled as Latin American or Caribbean art instead of North American Art, the influence of artists such as Ana Mendieta or Félix González-Torres to the level of being worshiped as cult-artists has helped to expose part of the underground dynamics to the connoisseurs. Cuban-American artists also create a hyphenated identity bonding two arch-enemies of the Cold War surrounded by bellicose political factions on both sides of the feud, under the very stressful circumstances of singularity. This, however, lacks the national infrastructure that usually helps to propel artists into the international art circuit. Exiled artists have been resisting the Cuban official political artistic offensive juggernaut for almost six decades. A powerful marketing operation intended not only to promote the "revolutionary" Cuban art produced in the island but also to crush the defectors with the help of international academics, curators, and collectors connected with the Cuban institutions. Cuba is a very (om)phalos centric society with a rigid official aesthetic view but this hasn't been a hindrance to the flourishing of incisive and metaphoric narratives, a sometimes cryptic and symbolic art, but also the development of *artivism* raising social awareness and pushing political agendas.

After the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States, there have been several exhibitions of Cuban artists all around the United States, but paradoxically not many of them include Cuban-American and exiled artists. With the "final thaw" of the Cold War, there is a natural rising interest, amongst Americans, in the art produced in one of the last historic redoubts of International Communism, but this trend of prioritizing the art that comes from inside the island has made even more the art produced by the Cuban-Americans and Cuban exiles in America invisible. Overlooked amid the hoopla stand the very true protagonist of one of the most sincere and strong visual contemporary narrative - the Cuban-American artists. This collective exhibition, *All That You Have Is Your Soul*, is pertinent, because it's an exceptional opportunity to appreciate the diversity of works produced by artists in terms of medium and context, and because there is

not a better time for Americans to explore one of the most active ingredients of the contemporary American art. Cuban-American art is the fresh blood in the Contemporary American Art stream.

Named after a Tracy Chapman song to highlight the struggle of the artists in the seeking of truth and achievements, their conflict with the status quo, the reinvention of their own identity, some personal passages, *All That You Have is Your Soul* “offers an insight into the distinct ways in which artist have rebuilt their identities, and reimagined themselves within new environments”, in Mariño’s words. If the name of the show doesn’t give a hint or make any reference to the nationality of the artists, it is just because one of the purposes of this show is, in fact, to wrest importance from the national origin and focus on the art, “to subtract weight from the well-worn ‘Cuban Art’ label, and in a way relativize or undermine this notion”, explains Barreto.

This exhibition is focused on highlighting the individual artists, and does not have the purpose of defining the Cuban Art or describing a fictional unity between artists’ work, in this process of unlabelling, the show exposes some of the fundamentals in Cuban contemporary art. The solid theoretical and conceptual frame, Cuban art is, in its natural dyssynchrony, probably the last major stronghold of conceptualism, between the relation between the artistic and the socio-political, the exceptional traditional technical skills acquired by many from elementary school, through the Cuban Art School System - similar to the Cuban model for Sports Development (arguably one of the few real benefits of this educational system) and the way they are applied to the different forms of media, the trans-disciplinary and multi-media approach, the distinctive site-specific artworks, the use of materials and scarce resources, the appropriation, recycling and review of popular culture imaginary and national and art history.

*All That You Have is Your Soul* reunites representative artists born from the last years of the decade of the 50’s to the 80’s. Three of them - Marc Dennis (Danvers, Massachusetts, 1971), Anthony Goicolea (Atlanta, Georgia, 1971) and Juan Carlos Quintana (Lutcher, Louisiana, 1964) - are first-generation Cuban American artists. Alejandro Aguilera (1964), Magdalena Campos-Pons (Matanzas, 1959), Armando Mariño (Santiago de Cuba, 1968), Pavel Acosta (Camagüey, 1975), Jairo Alfonso (Havana, 1974), Elsa Mora (Holguín, 1971), Geandy Pavón (Las Tunas, 1974) and Ariel Cabrera Montejo (Camagüey, 1982) trained in the Cuban art school system, and those born in the 60’s and early 70’s achieving relevance whilst still living on the island; while Enrique Gómez de Molina (Havana, 1963) is a self-taught artist. Ernesto Pujol (1957) and Juana Valdés came to the United States in the 70’s. Maritza Molina also came at the age of ten and has developed all her career in the United States. Juan Miguel Pozo (Banes, 1967), who lives in Berlin and Quisqueya Henríquez (Havana, 1966), raised in the Dominican Republic where she still lives, are the only artists who are not permanently based in the United States.

Despite the fact that the exhibition highlights the heterogeneity of the Contemporary Cuban Art in exile, there are some affinities in practice and responses in this particular process of “building identity within a foreign land”. Goicolea’s, Pujol’s and Molina’s site-specific ephemeral installations and performances address children’s games, rituals and traditions, the mechanics behind group dynamics, the instability of memory and truth and the resilience of the relations of power. Goicolea’s eerie landscapes, innocence, and naïveté depicted as the blindfold, strapped up, injured children - and also his impressive diplopic vision drawings - point to the reality as a sum of overlapped layers, the beauty inside the induced deformity. Molina’s, on the other hand, use the

bandage, gags, and straps to emphasize the patriarchal domination, but instead of building a feminist narrative, her staged-photography seems subtly self-deprecatory, pushing herself to under the spotlights, naked, vulnerable, vilified, sacrificed or discarded in a highly erotic context. Pujol's performances also deal with rituals, bodies, and public spaces, but in a more participative and meditative way. Rather than attaining some particular aesthetic moment, he seems more concerned with changing and challenging the performers into undergoing a transformative experience.

Dennis, Alfonso, and Pavón are masters of hyperrealism who pursue different outcomes while exploring the archeology of cultural representation from different aesthetic angles. In Pavón's *Trompe-l'œil* paintings optic pieces of paper are balled up depicting a crumpled iconography in a violent gesture of desacralization. In profaning the architecture and portraiture of the narrative of power, the artist pursues diminishing and destabilizing them, empowering the marginal and subjugated with a visual discourse of resistance. Dennis's provocative and playful artwork subverts the cultural visual tradition intervening masterpieces and de/re contextualizing them with a new visual meaning. Dennis is an innate provocateur who intertwines graphic humor, pop and kitsch to create a visual pun that scandalizes and reconciles at the same time. Alfonso's accumulations are part of an obsessive socio-cultural taxonomy. In his monumental inventories, he mixes the drawings of *objets trouvés* creating a visual database of consumerism and popular culture.

Pavel Acosta manipulates and reproduces canonical masterpieces, but his 'trademarked' technique allows him to achieve unique results. He is a very successful art thief and his art a perfect crime since Acosta returns his 'heist' back into galleries and museums. Transforming them into copies made of acrylic wall dry paint chips on drywall or sheetrock in his *Stolen Paintings* series, he minimalizes them creating a monochromatic clone that can be considered *Povera* at its finest elegant level. In a kind of Beltracchi forgery scheme —Acosta's copies are also very original - and give new meaning to the lezarian concept of *irradiant poverty*. His impressive concept updates and quotes art history, reframing it, a formal operation hard to achieve with originality, because appropriation has been a played-out device for easily creating narratives in contemporary art<sup>1</sup>.

Race, ethnicity, religion, memory, migration, and gender are topics at the center of Quisqueya Henríquez, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and Juana Valdés. Dealing with autobiography, experimental art, and theory through diverse media, from photography to site-specific projects, performances, and ceramics, they draw the cartography of women's lives in and outside Cuba. Their works also define the coordinates of a woman's body as a territory in conflict historically determined. Multimedia artist Campos-Pons traces the route of her own mixed cultural identity recomposing her visual DNA through a complex transdisciplinary searching process decoding the biopolitics of slavery, surocracy, plantation economy and human trafficking as an intrinsic part of the Caribbean and American culture, and the role of historical memory and oblivion on the reification of race and gender. As a result, she creates pristine and provocative works in which balance and symmetry are at the core of the composition. Valdés' current work focuses on the otherness and displacement. Her ceramic sculptures embed all the weight of lightness in a tropological figurative sense through a sort of parallel counterfeit, masking and interchanging materials. Her colored China Rags in bone china or paper boats origami in cast porcelain - durable

yet fragile materials - could be read as the endurance and vulnerability of the displaced. Valdés alters clay chemical composition inserting pigments perhaps as a metaphor of the impure, polluted, enriched life of emigrants. Quisqueya's reproduction of fractal geometric pattern, collaging photographic fragments or multiplying Rorschach inkblot tests, are all part of the same obsession of self-recognition of her fragmented and dispersed identity. Under the same impulse, she explores the human connection in the hyperconnectivity era and the mechanics of authorship versus digital neo-appropriation of free-usage media content available at the online repository.

Operatively distant from his iconic Cuban-centric previous works like *La patera (The Raft, 2002)* - a pre-revolutionary era Plymouth automobile supported by dozens of naked brown legs instead of wheels - or *From Koons to Duchamp (1999)*, Armando Mariño has evolved from the use of the pastiche and parody, typical of Cuban postmodern art, to a more expressionist artwork, in some cases almost bordering on abstraction, addressing subtly the politics behind race, emigration and individual freedom, but also contrasting with nature, from a more personal, intimate yet universal perspective. Technically and formally Mariño has moved to a more Eurocentric tradition, winter landscapes, with a warm but glazed palette and involving the viewer through the use of silhouettes and *rückenfigur*. The disturbing faceless hooded figure that implicitly alludes to a dark passage of America's recent history is also a spectral wanderer representing, in a sense, the human being beyond all the artificial barriers.

In Juan Miguel Pozo's acrylic paintings multiple layers overlap to create the effect of timeless city walls covered by the remains of peeled posters, graffiti, paint, stain... Inspired by vintage advertisements and propaganda, Pozo introduces urban graffiti and non-figurative graphic elements to his compositions, re-assigning a new symbolic meaning to the stencilled appearance of decorative patterns. The artist centrifuges elements around a formal and conceptual principle of contrast and reconciliation of opposites.

Cuban-American artist Juan Carlos Quintana's work is the most obviously and openly political work in this show. Quintana's guerrilla punk army of one man, arranges a platoon of cartoonish neo-expressionist characters, to portray, like John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, a social and political satire of mottled, bizarre and grotesque proportions, which is probably the only possible way to punch society in the face. He whips his context with implacable mordacity: whether Reaganomics or Cuban Communism, he doesn't seem to care.

Playing God in a controversial scheme, Enrique Gómez de Molina creates an exotic hybrid fauna of flamboyant dancers, mutants, freakish feathered creatures. Unlike Nicholas Di Genova or Gerard Ellis, Gómez de Molina uses actual taxidermy work to assemble his sculptures. Through his surrealistic surgical labor, Gómez de Molina pushes an aesthetic paradigm shift about beauty and monstrosity in the ordinary daily realm while at the same time imposing the bizarre fantasy that comes from devastation.

Elsa Mora has elevated the work on paper to a mesmerizing artistic level of laboriously never seen before in the Cuban art. Her paper cut sculptures of complexity and embroidery appearance have been exhibited and published in numerous publications. As a multimedia artist with a broad range of practices from drawing and digital illustration to video art to ceramics, Mora explores universal issues of identity, connectivity, and survival.

Alejandro Aguilera's artwork preserves the energy and irreverence of the emblematic Cuban art of the 80's, the Cuban trans-*avant garde* period, in which Aguilera had a leading role as artist and curator. A skilful draftsman, consummate craftsman and virtuoso sculptor, he has developed a very versatile career spanning four decades, but whether it is illustration, sculpture, assemblages or political cartoon, at the core of his artwork remains that primal incisive critical view.

The Cuban War of Independence which led to the Spanish-American war of 1898, and the subjacent theatrical narratives of what could be considered the first imperialist (interventionist) war - in all its complexity as a marketing operation and publicity stunt - is at the center of Ariel Cabrera Montejo oils and watercolors. More than building a body of historical revisionism Cabrera Montejo produces as if he were unearthing the impressionist artwork and sketches of an unknown old master. Cabrera, a skilful copyist, creates work which resembles the vintage erotic painted postcards emulating George Grosz erotic scenes. This series with its vintage style, technique, and palette portrays his own irreverent vision of history as an orgy. Playing with concepts like *Tregua Fecunda* (Fertile Truce), as the interwar period was dubbed, he transforms the battlefield into a massive wild debauch. In some of his work reality and fiction get intertwined in a sort of movie set, and the war becomes a lucrative enterprise, a spectacle or raw material for the entertainment of the Industrial Capitalism. If Eros and Thanatos (Love and Death) are the binary driving force behind most of the human history, in Cabrera's artwork they are one and the same.

Like a visual metaphor of the Spanish saying "la procesión va por dentro" (the procession runs inside), in Armando Mariño's *National Anthem*, a central figure with a red hood, flanked by ravens, is a focal point and hot chromatic torch in the middle of the bluish iced ghostly landscape, summarizing all apparent conflicts of identities displayed in this collective exhibition. Cuban art is what happens beyond stereotypes, the personal testimonies, and the latent identity underneath, it is a complex relationship in which provenance, geographical journeys and the current circumstances are incorporated into the artists' visual identity. Juan Miguel Pozo explained it in an interview years ago<sup>2</sup>: "I am as Cuban as I can be. The rest of it is my work and the circumstances determining me". Like the song after which this exhibition was named, the artists gathered here believe that they could "find a way to beat the system/to make a deal and have no debts to pay". Rebellious children of the heresy, they "take it all and run away", only to discover that all they own is just their own (damn) soul.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Badajoz, Joaquin. How Many Cuban Lives Will it Take to Build an Island? (Notes on An Island Apart: Cuban Artists in Exile). Ameryka Łacińska, CESLA, Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2018.

<sup>2</sup>Betancourt, Juan Carlos. Juan Miguel Pozo: my work is my bond. Art OnCuba, June, 2017.

Joaquin Badajoz. Manhattan, January 2018.

