Octavio Zava: Apart from the group shows of Cuban artists that have been exhibited internationally (the recent "20th Century Cuba" at CAAM is an outstanding example), there are many Cuban artists living on the island who frequently exhibit individually in other countries - such as Kcho, Tonel, Carlos Garaicoa, etc. - as well as others who are temporarily abroad on scholarships or fellowships, such as Marta María Perez and Flavio Garciandia. As far as I know, you represent the only case of a Cuban artist. living outside Cuba, who has been able to penetrate Havana's restrictive and politically-discriminatory art world institutions. You recently returned to Havana and, for the third time in a couple of years, had an individual exhibition. The first was held at the Casa de las Américas. The second took place at the Espacio Aglutinador, an alternative space conceived of and directed by resident Cuban artists. The third, at the recently-inaugurated Ludwig Foundation, closed a few weeks ago. It might be argued that both the Espacio Aglutinador and the Ludwig Foundation operate independently of political power. but it would be naive to think that they operate without the (at least tacit) authorisation of the official Cuban cultural agents. How do you explain this extraordinary situation, considering that you live in New York, are openly gay, and deal with the controversial subject of the supposedly independent patriarchy?

## The Cuban Trilogy and Ernesto Pujol: Exile, Memory and Return

A CONVERSATION WITH OCTAVIO ZAYA

Ernesto Pujol: First, let me clarify a related matter. My first show in Cuba was held in April 1995 in the Galeria Latinoamericano of the Casa de las Américas. The show was entitled Los Hijos de Pedro Pan. It was up for two months and consisted of five installations. This first show was cosponsored by the Asociación Nacional de Artistas Plásticos de Cuba. The second show. Trofeos de la Guerra Fria. opened in July 1995 in the Espacio Aglutinador, which is an independent gallery that is completely separate from the Culture Ministry's network. The gallery is directed by a couple, both artists, and it brings together a group of people who are discouraged by official cultural policies and who have found their voices in this space. The third. La Mesa de Saturno, was co-sponsored by the Ludwig Foundation of Cuba and the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales. The Ludwig Foundation has a big office in Cuba: it has no exhibition space of its own. It borrows spaces around Havana where, in its capacity as foundation, it mounts various types of exhibitions.

The reason that I am more or less

able to return to Cuba requires a long explanation. I have been traveling to Cuba for about six years. I have made five trips to the island and I have had three shows there, as you already mentioned. The story behind each show is different. But if what you are looking for is a sort of telegraphic answer. a single reason that might encompass all the rest, I would say that there is a generalised state of crisis at the moment, and the cracks in Cuba's official cultural policies let someone like me - Cuban by birth, U.S. citizen. openly homosexual and non-communist - enter and exhibit in Cuba. There is an unmistakably-official element to my exhibitions, since nothing happens in Cuba without an official baptism of some sort or another. What has to be looked at are the degrees of baptism. For example, my first exhibition in Cuba was co-sponsored by the Casa de la Américas and the Asociación Nacional de Artistas Plasticas de Cuba: both institutions are rather official. but they are not (at the moment) the most conservative in the country. Everything institutional in Cuba has a government background and almost everyone has participated at some level in official activities, although later they might have had a falling out and become independent; the state has been and



continues to be rather totalitarian in terms of the single-party political system. In this sense, it is easy to say that the show was completely official. In fact, the two institutions I exhibited in were in the process of changing. Everything in Cuba is changing. The government informed the country's cultural institutions just over a vear ago that it can no longer support them economically, that the institutions themselves have to finance up to 80% of their own budgets. This means that these institutions now have to seek funds and revenue-producing projects outside the island. And this has begun to give them some degree of freedom to maneuver; the fact that the government is not the only source of funds means that the government does not completely control your programming. Of course, changes are not taking place as quickly as one might hope....

In this context, I have made contact with the most progressive elements within the institutions that have held my exhibitions.

O.Z.: Given the existence of these progressive elements – why then does your situation continue to be unique? And even taking into consideration the current moment of transition among the institutions, it is still clear that culture is not yet fully independent of political power. An openly anti-Castro and anti-government artist cannot yet be allowed or invited to exhibit.

E.P.: Cuba's situation is very complicated and is full of nuances.

The goal of an interview like this one is to capture the complications and nuances and express them in an almost schematic fashion. I would say two

things. One, that in effect there has been a degree of calculation on my part, but there is also, as you correctly stated, a progressive element in Cuba. There are individuals eager to work with people from abroad. They are not simply waiting for people to come to the island, but instead are trying to invite other artists to Cuba. Most of these invited guests have rejected every kind of cultural relationship. And this is the second point: I have been told that there are Cuban artists in exile who have been invited at one time or another and have not accepted the invitation. And there have been other Cuban-American artists who have gone to Cuba and have had small, quiet exhibitions which, because they were held in the provinces and not in Havana, have not had a very wide impact.

Third: to exhibit in Cuba is to soil oneself. Cuba is a particularly impure place. There are no areas that might be called pure areas, where you could parachute down and remain politically intact and unpolluted. To exhibit in Cuba, whether in the Espacio Aglutinador (which is independent but tolerated) or in the Casa de las Américas (which is official but in transition) means, to some degree, to come into contact with the regime's official side, simply as a consequence of being tolerated or sponsored or cosponsored. And most don't want to participate under these conditions. The conservative position among Cuban exiles is that the act of going to Cuba, of physically setting foot in Cuban territory, is an act of cooperation with the Cuban regime. There are even many who would not allow people to visit their families in Cuba. They see it as bringing dollars to the regime.

The fact that I have gone to Cuba has meant, for example, that I have been accused of being a communist, etc., although these accusations have not been made directly. Some people feel that I have helped the regime sustain the illusion that there is liberty in Cuba, given that they have allowed me to exhibit there, and to exhibit works that specifically deal with the subjects of exile and the abuse of power.

O.Z.: To what extent do you feel that you might have been used as an "example" of this supposed cultural liberalisation and reconciliation with exiled Cubans, particularly considering the government's reinstated hard-line stance toward internal dissidents?

E.P.: I'm a loose cannon. I don't belong to the right or to the left. I don't live in Havana or in Miami, which are the polar extremes in this fight, in this cultural civil war. And I was raised in Puerto Rico. So my personal and professional background don't fit into this contest. I think that to say that I am being used is a simplistic, superficial and reductive argument. I can't denv that there might be some degree of manipulation in the simple fact of my visiting Cuban territory. I referred earlier to soiling oneself, but to define my activities strictly in these terms is overly simplistic.

What is the alternative to soiling oneself? What is the alternative to not going to Cuba and thus beginning to establish a battle front where, to some extent, you are manipulated, but, at the same time, vou are able to sav something? The alternative is to go on waiting. I grew up waiting. First they told me that Fidel was going to save Cuba from Batista. Later they told be that Mas Canosa was going to save Cuba from Fidel. I'm the son of an exile and I'm homosexual, and I've always been told that some tough powerful heterosexual white guy is going to save me, either Fidel or Kennedy or Mas Canosa. I'm tired of waiting for some tough guy to save the country. I don't need anybody to come save me. I have a right to go to Cuba and propose my project, make my arguments, even if I am contaminated and make mistakes. And, after all, I wasn't raised in Cuba. and I am not familiar with all the Dante-esque circles of the Cuban revolution. I wasn't raised in Miami's core of exile, and I am not familiar with its Dante-esque circles either. For better or for worse, I was raised apart from the extremist politics that make up the two sides of the same coin. For me, beyond the "cooperation" that the extremist exile community might accuse me of, and beyond the manipulation that the regime might take advantage of in relation to my presence on the island, Cuba's situation is full of nuances and grev areas that may lead to change, even if the circumstances are less than perfect or ideal. I propose reconciliation. I'm neither fascist nor communist; I'm neither counterrevolutionary nor revolutionary.

Most people connected to the contemporary art scene, both on and off the island, have come out of backgrounds either in the revolution or in the exile community. One of the

factors that I find particularly interesting is forgiveness for these past relations. Who is forgiven and who is not? What are the factors that make certain people forgivable and others unforgivable? There are many people. both in exile and on the island, who even during the transition are trying to reinvent themselves and to have a future. I may be guilty of idealism. but it seems to me that if the revolution is breaking down, then the resistancein-exile is breaking down. If exile and the revolution are opposite sides of the same coin, then the end of the revolution implies the end of exile. Many of those who predict or already detect this breakdown are trying to reinvent themselves. Those who are forgivable are permitted to reinvent their pasts and can set out on new careers. There are many Cuban artists living in exile who were never dissidents in Cuba, who were used by the system: some of them were even poster-boys for the regime's cultural policies and have triumphed in exile and have apparently been forgiven. Others have not been forgiven. Beyond complicity or noncomplicity with the regime, there is the factor of personal pasts that have been transformed into political questions. In my case, I have no past to redeem, neither in the revolution nor in the resistance-in-exile.

O.Z.: Speaking of pasts, how did you leave Cuba? How long have you been living in New York?

E.P.: I left Cuba with my brother and my parents at the end of 1961, when I was four years old. We were sent for by my grandmother, who had been living in Puerto Rico even before the revolution. My parents, like many other Cubans, were not pro-Batista. Batista was highly unpopular in Cuba, which is why the revolution was successful. My parents staved in Cuba for two years after the revolution. waiting for things to improve. At the time, there was a Social-Christian Democratic movement, especially among the Cuban middle class. But 1961 was a terrible year. Not only for the invasion at Girón Beach but also for the "Patria Potestad" panic that led to the sending off of about 15,000 children from Cuba; this was the event that inspired my installation Los Hijos de Pe Pan. The events that took place were provoked by the panic caused by the rumour sweeping through Havana that the government was going to separate children from their families and was going to send them to the country in order to teach them to read and to indoctrinate them in communism. The government had decreed that the students in the Escuela Superior were to teach poor people and country folk how to read. These students, voung people of both sexes, were going to live in co-ed dormitories in the country. For the prudish class of Cubans with their Catholic morality, this not only meant a separation from their children but also that their children were going to live in promiscuity. There were also rumours that many of the children were going to be sent to Russia. I don't know all the details. About 15,000 Cuban children were sent away during the affair, as in the case of Ana Mendieta. My parents took me and my brother to the airport to be sent in one of those airplanes bound for Miami but the flight was

cancelled. I can remember packing our bags, my parents telling me to take care of my two-year-old brother at all times. I remember when the soldiers stopped us on the way to the airport. and that my grandparents were waiting for us in Miami. It was a traumatic experience. It was one of the most painful moments of the early revolution. That is why my exhibition Los Hijos de Pedro Pan at the Casa de la Américas was so cathartic. On the night of the inauguration people were crying. The five installations conceptually re-created a Cuban home of the period by using borrowed furnishings, organic materials and other elements of domestic archaeology. It was like a journey of memory. The final installation, "El Vuelo", consisted of white clothing of flying children. It was the first time that permission had been granted in Cuba to speak in public about this.

Getting back more specifically to your question. I was raised in Puerto Rico. I studied there until 1979 when I went to the United States. I spent 10 months in Miami, three-and-a-half years in South Carolina and in 1985 I arrived in New York.

O.Z.: Curiously, despite this traumatic event and your obsession with memory, your attitude towards the revolution is reconciliatory. Do you feel that your distance from both daily Cuban life as well as from the open opposition to Castro of most Cubans in Miami has facilitated your unresentful mediating attitude which some classify as "ambiguous" and "collaborationist"?

E.P.: No one has been honest enough to confront me directly with

that sort of accusation. That's a part of the Cuban double-standard that is found on the island as much as in exile. As far as my personal position goes. I think it's easy to be a dissident when you're not in Cuba. The hard part is returning to Cuba and becoming part of the transition. I'm tired of hearing comments like "I left Cuba and nothing's left there anymore", or "I left Cuba and no important artists are left there anymore", or "I left Cuba and no more important exhibitions are held there anymore". The truth is that Cuba. with 10 million inhabitants, is the largest and most-populated island in the Caribbean. It has a cultural life into which artists continue to be born and to be nurtured and to develop, and it has a dissident movement. I have faith in the act of returning to Cuba or of traveling back and forth between Cuba and other countries while remaining conscious that you might be manipulated, that they are going to try to appropriate your activities, but that you are going to struggle against this. My homosexuality is one of my weapons. My homosexuality is difficult for the Cuban government. which is why they have never been able to fully embrace me. I'm not going to be and never could be a poster-boy for a macho. patriarchal regime, just as I would never be a poster-boy for the macho, patriarchal exiles in Miami. Basically. my neutral position toward the exiles and towards the government and my homosexuality are the elements that prevent both extremes of Cuban discourse from swallowing me, although they may chew on me. In my opinion, the argument that "Ernesto Pujol is a naive

creature utilised by the left in order to remain in power" is an unenlightened argument and is intellectually bankrupt.

O.Z.: What role does your religious experience play in all of this and in your artistic activity?

E.P.: When I graduated from the Universidad de Puerto Rico in 1979. it seemed to me that the art world made little sense, that is was a world in which the work itself was increasingly ruled by the market. I liked little of what I saw and, basically. I was concerned with searching for meaning in art. Since my concerns were never formal but rather related to the work's social and political and psychological content, this weighed heavily on me. So what I did was to go to a Trappist monastery where I was a Trappist monk from 1979 to 1985. I took the vow of silence and spent five vears there without talking. When I left, I had to learn how to speak again: I had lost the sense of how to begin and end a conversation. When you keep silent for such a long time, what you experience within the stream of consciousness doesn't have periods or interruptions or paragraphs. It's like James Jovce's Ulysses: a continuous stream. In the monastery I had no choice but to confront my identity: I was born in Cuba and was a U.S. citizen because my parents had chosen it for me when I was a minor; I had family in Spain and I even studied Art History at the Complutense in Madrid in the summer of 1978; I was gay; I was an artist. I was a sort of cultural salad. So that those five years were a sort of inner search. Who was I? Where was I going? And most of all, What did I hope to do in my work? I had already begun to

make art in the university. Although I exhibited as far back as 1976, those exhibitions are not included in my CV; I was still a student then and those works were just adolescent artistic attempts.

O.Z.: How did you end up in New York, given that it is precisely the centre of those commercial artistic activities that did not interest you?

E.P.: It wasn't so much that I wasn't interested in them as much as that I didn't trust them. In the end I decided that it was precisely here that I had to fight. Basically, after five years of introspection and of asking myself what in the world did I want to do with art, I didn't want to just add one more image to a world already overpopulated with images that are bad and superficial and trendy. I saw New York as the heart of contemporary art, the site of art's best and worst. New York was where I had to test myself. Of course, I could have gone back to Puerto Rico and repeated, yet again, the whole "big fish in a small pond" dynamic, but instead I came to New York without knowing anyone, with \$500 and a suitcase of clothing. I had left the world for five years and had come to New York without any relationships or acquaintances, determined that the content of my work would be relevant.

O.Z.: As a Latin American artist it could not have been easy....

E.P.: When I came to New York in 1985 I didn't have any kind of support. For the first few years I devoted myself almost exclusively to political activism against AIDS. My concerns centered around the work's social content. But now a small opening is being made for contemporary Latin

American art and there are galleries that now have one or two Latin American artists in their portfolios.

O.Z.: It is true that Latin American artists have more visibility. In addition to Felix Gonzalez Torres, Gabriel Orozco and Ana Mendieta, this year in New York we have seen individual shows by José Bedia, Liliana Porter, Carlos Garaicoa, Miguel Río Branco, Consuelo Castañeda and Quisqueva Henriquez, Kcho, Miguel Calderón, Sèrgio Vega and others in important galleries. But to what extent can we speak of change?

E.P.: Things are changing, not only in that they are being slowly absorbed, but also in that they are being accepted without the Third World label. Before, some artists had no alternative to playing the Third World card if they wanted to be active in New York. But the artists you have mentioned are being represented by first-rate galleries as good artists, beyond the labels of origins that might or might not be defined. In any event, New York is very difficult.

O.Z.: Your 1994 installation at Intar in New York already contemplated one of your work's fundamental themes - memory - but we might say that among your most outstanding shows, the three in Cuba have addressed this subject perhaps more deliberately. Memories of your childhood, memories of Cuba. This repetitive obsession also inspired the work that you created for the Ramis Barquet Gallery in Monterrey, Mexico in 1993. In these paintings and installations, memory and exile are présented simultaneously and

interwoven. What role does memory play in your work and in the construction of the identity of the uprooted child?

E.P.: The importance of memory, the obsession with memory, comes into my work from the experience of exile. When you lose everything (as my family did leaving Cuba), to recall who we once were is the only thing that remains for us. Memory is your only inheritance; it is the only thing that you can bring with you and the only thing that defines you. Sometimes memory is the only weapon available for defending yourself against a hostile present and an uncertain future. So without a doubt, exile, uprooting and the diaspora are what have made memory become so important for me as an artist and as an individual. But this is a very particular sort of memory, since I lived in exile as a child. So it is the memory of a child who does not know what is happening. A child simply records intuitively and documents instinctively but does not analyse. A child's memory is not selective; it is like a sponge. The individual is constructing himself or is being constructed by his family, by his society....I use the dynamic of remembering, the dynamic of a child's memory, in order, as an adult, to present images that at first glance seem rather inoffensive. But beyond the mere quick, superficial glance, in the gestalt that one makes in associating images, of reconstructing stories out of the iconography of cradles, children's booties, etc., a reading of pain and violence is projected...

Del documento, los autores. Digitalización realizada por ULPGC. Biblioteca Universitaria, 2006.

O.Z.: In this work certain elements appear for the first time, such

Del documento, los autores. Digitalización realizada por ULPGC. Biblioteca Universitaria, 2000

as scissors, castrated members, luggage and other elements that would imply separation or a traumatic break; elements that no longer refer to the past but rather to its perpetuation, to its determining presence in the present. These narrative elements appear in the second exhibition in Havana, in the Casa de las Américas, where, to a certain extent a series of concerns are brought together or coincide, and which have continued appearing in your work ever since. Can you elaborate on these elements?

E.P.: Obviously I'm not interested in living in the past or making work that is strictly limited to dealing with the past. I'm not interested in that kind of sentimentality or that kind of nostalgia. Basically, the past is a place I resort to in order to perform domestic archaeology, an archaeology of obsessive memory. I am interested in using the dynamic of memory (the memory of a little boy) in order to comment on the present; to comment, for example, on the construction of gender. As a homosexual man, I am quite interested in how the idea of what we understand as "the man" or masculinity or the macho is constructed, in Latin American society as well as in that of North America or Europe. So I begin with the voung boy: how a boy recalls his own construction and how we construct a boy and the sense of being macho through toys, through his relationship to his father, through his relationship to other men, teachers, etc. I am also interested in the construction of whiteness. The obsession with being white is very Latin American, from the colonial occupation

up to the present. It is a fragile sense of whiteness, suspicious of everything stained.

O.Z.: You are obviously referring to the racial problem...

E.P.: Yes, basically it's a question of race. My experience of "the white Latin American" is like that of a city under siege. Traditionally, white Latin Americans in the oligarchies had mixedrace, light-skinned servants; they avoided all other dealings with nonwhites, because the mere fact of socialising with a non-white person posed a threat to your own whiteness. Maybe you weren't so white after all if vou associated with blacks and mulattos and mestizos and indians. And in Latin America, which continues to be a very neo-colonial region, whiteness continues to be associated with professional and social success and with class. Paradoxically, white Latin Americans in exile in the U.S. are quickly classified as people of colour. North Americans are blind to Latin American whiteness, although among Latin Americans in exile these racial and class distinctions are maintained. I find this kind of categorisation fascinating, especially since we are progressing towards a world where racial purity and the concept of racial purity won't be anything more than fossils.

O.Z.: The problematics of gender seem obvious in the overwhelming presence of masculine sexual organs, whitened and castrated, in many of your installations. But what elements address race in your work? After all, your work only "illustrates" the experience of a white person...

E.P.: The fact that I have reduced

my palette to white is fundamental. When I paint, I only paint with pure white pigment, straight from the tube or the can of paint. I don't mix pigments. I play with the illusion of the purity of white. I simply apply the white directly onto the surface. I may smudge or stain it, but I don't mix it. Once the white is dry I can add another colour or earth or grease, etc. If you look at the iconography of my work - beyond its content - everything is white; the scissors, the knives, the silhouettes...They are a white's memories of whites. In other words, where I basically show this concern is in the white colour and its industrial purity. But when I created the series "Taxonomías" for the Ramis Barquet Gallery - a few emblematic paintings, medieval to some degree, where objects were repeated on cotton surfaces - some of the objects and body parts were white and others were black. Basically, it was a combination of white images with black images, there were black hands, black silhouettes and black profiles. You could find a colonial world there. I was born in 1957, when the dynamic of the servant, the maid and the butler, the cook and the nanny, were already beginning to disappear, especially among the Latin American middle class. There were already . washing machines, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners and, on the other hand, servants were becoming more expensive, etc. So, the presence of the black and the mulatto began to fade from within white Latin American families. I was educated within a white family, I lived in a white neighborhood and I attended a white, private Catholic school. I didn't have any friendships with people of colour until I was 18, when I entered the University of Puerto Rico.

It is clear that my recent work diverges from those "Taxonomías". where the ideas of "white" and "black" were in counterpoint to each other and where, as in the colonial mentality. "black" symbolised the unconscious and pure nature and "white" symbolised civilisation and the repression of the libido. At this time "black" is absent from my work: but the thing is that the absence of "black" was part of the fantasy of the Latin American bourgeoisie, which considered itself an extension of Europe. where they didn't rub elbows with blacks or mestizos. living in a glass bubble as the Creole colonising class. So, the absence of black is part of the dynamic of that bourgeois Creole fiction that bans it from its domestic. private space.

O.Z.: We spoke earlier of one aspect of your religious experience. Religion also plays a part in your work. perhaps as hidden as the racial question, although it is evident in a video you made in 1995. A recurring element in the work is the role of the Catholic church, represented by figure of the nun, in the dynamic of generalised castration...

E.P.: I think that an element missing from both modern and contemporary Latin American art is the genealogy of power, as power is construed in Latin America. Of course I'm not arguing in favor of pamphleteering art, but I am very interested in the dynamic of white power, which is both that of the

Americas and that of Europe. I am very interested in violence among men and how that violence is a part of the construction of man. The man who is the victim of violence, the man who takes power and thus can practice violence on other men. Castration as metaphor threatens many people. For me it's a bit like my weapon. It seems to me that emotional castration - because we're not talking about a real castration after all - is quite prevalent in our world. I use it literally: I show some male genitals, uncircumcised. flaccid, vulnerable and prepubescent. I am quite interested in everything that castrates: the church, the father, the political leader, etc. I turn to the boy's memory because the boy is the recipient of a good part of social violence. from warfare to domestic violence. In the video the boy is situated in the context of an educational industry and the church castrates him. edits him emotionally and socially. This is one of the officially approved castrations. It is a clean, surgical castration,

O.Z.: With the introduction of the patriarchal symbolism in your most recent work. La Mesa de Saturno. this same theme of castration is inserted into the political tradition of Latin America and might be read as a commentary on the current Cuban regime, even though it is not an overtly political installation. Here the headpiece identifies the patriarch's seat, where the sceptre of power rests. in front of which are the instruments of real and symbolic castration. The amputated genitals of the citizens are displayed on a silver tray in the centre of the table. Apart from the repetition of the usual images.

there is not so much childhood memory here as there is psycho-social narrative. How is this latest work linked with your previous works dealing with the process of identity construction?

E.P.: My three exhibitions in Cuba constituted a trilogy. The first dealt with the experience of leaving. the second with the experience of growing and becoming an adult outside the country, and the third with returning, with my commentary on what I encountered. In this I specifically establish the visual dynamic of castration: a commentary on Cuba today. When I returned to Cuba I encountered hunger, real hunger, a serious problem of food shortages. I encountered a place where, given the overall national crisis, people were taking advantage of tourists as well as taking advantage of each other in order to survive, as occurs on a sinking ship. And I encountered power that was completely monolithic, pyramidal and centered in a pharaoh-like leader, an omnipotent power which certainly had enough to eat and in fact was devouring everything. The metaphor of La Mesa de Saturno is that of the patriarch who sits down at a large banquet table: what he is going to eat is his own children. My specific reference is to the myth of Saturn. based on the image in Gova's painting. It is a cannibal feast. At the same time, if you look closely at the images in the exhibition, you notice that while Saturn is the only one eating (and in fact Saturn's table is surrounded by hundreds of silver knives and forks scattered across the floor and which you have to step on as you approach the table): the table and the chairs are old

and covered with dust and the atmosphere in the shadowy dining room is suggestive of a tomb: it seems to have been the victim of the inexorable passage of time. and power, if it is in fact still powerful, it is in decline, almost dead. The only thing that is alive in this place are the castrated genitals. They are the only things that by design (they are shaped individually by hand) seem to be moving. They are also the only things that receive the room's meager light. So, it is in what has been castrated. in what seems to be inoffensive, that life is found. In other words. I think that Latin American society, with is macho culture and its abuse of power. makes the mistake of thinking that homosexuals and women are weak. But in the installation there are a hundred genitals and only one Saturn. And while the genitals seem to be about to jump off the table. Safurn's chair is scratched and broken and covered by dust; and the colonial sceptre is decapitated and impotent.

O.Z.: Might we say that, independent of the importance that you place in your identity as a gay man, the fundamental interests of your artistic career are concentrated around the concepts of separation, memory and castration?

E.P.: I would say that the themes of separation, memory and castration are present in my work, but to establish them as the central axis around which the work has developed might open the way for misunderstanding. If I were to use such a fixed analysis, my work would belong to the mortuary, it would be no different from a wake. To the contrary, I think my work participates

in the resistance against the pain inflicted by these situations. In my work there is life and subversion, because in the end its focus is not he who castrates: the focus of the work is he who is castrated, who at the same time is the one who stays in your memory, the one who is the liveliest.

O.Z.: Up to what point is the work not elegiac or even victimised?

E.P.: It's obviously not victimised. It would be if it dealt with a mere recounting of pain. I see my works as evidence of a crime. The crimes of the bourgeoisie are refined crimes, clean and clinical and highly secret. To some degree, I devote myself to testifying to these crimes. In testifying. I systematically dismantle the dynamic. reveal the crime and point out the criminal. And the work is not confessional - it is a challenge. We live in a confessional culture where the television is filled with programmes where people appear and spill their guts about their mother and their father raping them. etc. It is a culture that is completely voveuristic, sentimental and spectacular. The work. however, doesn't facilitate any narrative. It offers a certain crudeness but in a refined way, not because I tried to bargain it down and make it more palatable but rather because that is the dynamic of bourgeois crime, of white-collar crime. I am also playing with the bourgeois sense of refinement and of what is considered proper, with good manners. I play with the same dynamic that is concealing the crimes. a dynamic of morals, discretion and elegance. It is the morality that covers everything up with good taste. You can

go into the different installations and it seems as if we were selling furniture, fine furniture. You are going into an antique dealer's shop. There are display cabinets, bureaus, chairs and beautiful art deco cradles. There are slippers... It is the taxonomy of a good Catholic family: upper class, refined, welleducated, white, Latin American. This is the first impression, and this is how the crimes are covered up - with good taste. On closer inspection you start to discover something else. Of course, many people only eat the cake's icing. There are other works, cruder and more visceral, such as the video vou referred to earlier....but the work that I am most interested in creating and in continuing to create is full of nuances; it doesn't offend you or upset you on primary impact. Above all else, given this obsession of mine that the work should have integrity, and considering that I am a white, upper middle class Latin American man. I have sought to make the work represent all of this. I think it would have been quite easy to immerse myself in what is "black" or "mulatto" in Latin America. I think one of the biggest temptations of modern and contemporary Latin American art is immersion in and appropriation of the exoticism of the "black" and "mestizo" and "oriental". It is clear that there is a tendency towards saturation in white culture. towards boredom and ennui and existential emptiness, and that white culture looks to the South for entertainment or catharsis. To the contrary, what I strive for is to deconstruct my class and my race and my personal experience.



