

I remember that the first time I saw a work by Kcho was during a visit that I made to Youth Island several years ago.

As I walk to the city, my eyes were lured by an object hanging inside an office, and I asked what it was.

Somebody told me it was the work of an island artist. Months later I saw the work in one of the exhibitions that were simultaneously organized with the Fourth Habana Biennial. It was titled *La Jaba* and it brought him nationwide recognition in the artistic media.

Since then, Kcho has developed his creative activity with surprising maturity, especially if we consider his image of overgrown kid, that we noticed first about him and constitutes one of his principle charms. Yet, in my opinion, the basis of his creative efficiency lies in what might seem a paradox. He has managed to hang on to that youthful allure that enables him to express ideas with bewitching sincerity. And far from the naivety implied in his image, is Kcho's responsible confrontation with very sensitive problems of our everyday life. This may indeed account for the originality of his work.

His world view comes from a very intense family experience, characteristic of the semi-urban environment which he grew up in and of the wealth of his personal development.

Notions of time, the character of

Kcho

BY LILIAN LLANES

interpersonal relations and the concept of space change when you come to the city from the country. There you live contemplating the sky, and in the city you protect yourself from the street. The character of relationships in an urban medium are certainly more hostile. However none of this has altered his sensitivity to the environment and the systematic use of natural elements, that he charges with symbolic cultural significances

Ever since his first works he used materials that were at hand in order to develop his own reflexive strategies, in a process of appropriation during which references between materials and meanings have multiplied. Closely linked with the problems and circumstances of his environment, he has gradually changed the course of his investigations, starting from the local, and moving towards themes that allow him to express more general concerns of Mankind.

In his initial work he tried to establish a relation between nature, landscape and popular culture. He was brought up in a carpentry shop, surrounded by lathes and saws, watching how his father worked and observing his mother's artisan craftsmanship. Trained as a painter at the National School of Art he rejected painting as a means of expression to become a sculptor. We can declare without exaggerating that his work today is the result of his rejection of painting, which, in his own words, he detests. He can't stand colours. They irritate him. He is pleased with the hue of materials, with their austerity, that explains partially why his sculptural objects and his drawings are so monochromatic.

Laying aside the techniques learned during his study of painting, he resorted to the knowledge acquired from observing his parents working with their hands, to create works based on the appropriation of popular culture, as a source of creative energy. And in that process he conceived sculpture as a method of ennobling artisan work.

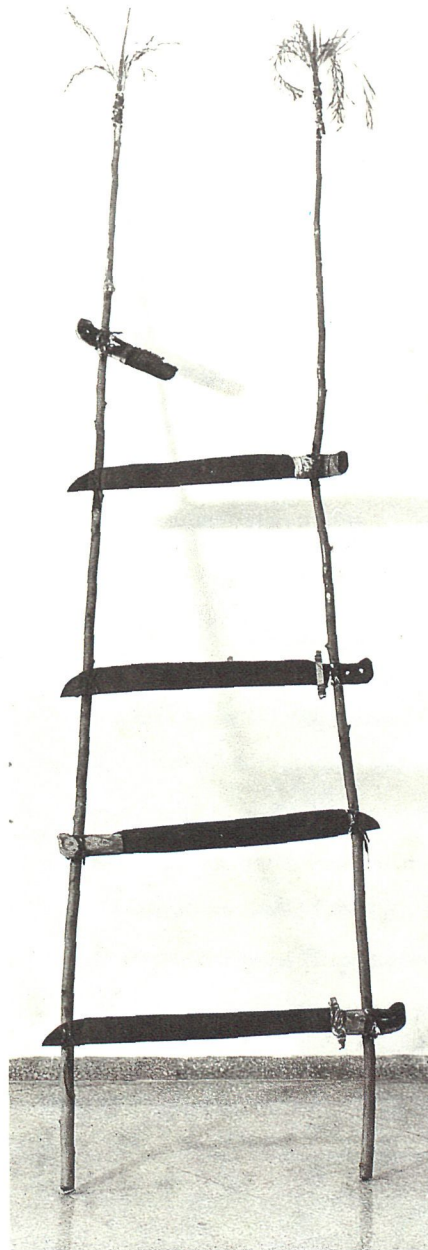
Besides this, the problems he addresses in his works are very much related to the general concerns of his generations. In the artistic ambience of the Habana at that time, the reference to patriotic symbols was extensive. The insistence of this theme has many explanations.

independent of the judgements that can be made of the use and abuse of such symbols during that period, and Keho followed that line in order to express his personal view points.

He also introduced his interest in language into this symbolic field, and created works like *El Escudo* (The Shield) and *La Escalera* (The Staircase), among others. Although they can still be considered tentative and experimental, we can notice in them his dimension as sculptor and his talent as art creator. In some of those early works, the abundance of associations proved distracting, and the need to explain the function of every element seemed obvious. *El Escudo* turned out to be too representational and *La Escalera* was encumbered by too many gratuitous elements. Yet he made seconds versions conceptually efficient.

Continuing the line of popular culture appropriation and bent on producing a personal image of the more common themes then frequent in young cuban art, he created works like *El Garabato* (The Scythe), and the trilogy of *La Jaba*, *La Jaula* and *El Papalote*. If all of them are remarkable for their extraordinary degree of synthesis, in my opinion *El Garabato* and *La Jaba* could be considered the most finished works of that period.

In them Keho revealed his extraordinary



Keho. *The Staircase*. Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.

ability to unify concept and image visually.

El Garabato, a type of scythe used to cut grass in the Cuban countryside, became the symbol of Cuba. To do this he chose the branch of a tree, using the same method of the guajiros. What was more important in this work was the

concept and how his eye sought Nature in its quest for expression. In the first version, *El Garabato* didn't hang on the wall but lent against it. Some time after, unsatisfied with the effect so produced he decided to hang it, that improved it greatly.

Then came *La Jaba*, a further step forward in that continuing appropriation process of everyday, as part of a strategy of structuring and using symbolic artistic elements. *La Jaba* (reed basket), a very common object of our daily reality, became in his hands an image loaded with multiple meanings and allusions that enabled him to establish a relationship between domestic life and the contemporary circumstances of Cuba. It was also a concise work.

La Jaba manifests the predominance of a concept where the hierarchy of the artisan element had a specific importance. To make it he used vegetable fibres taken directly from the country, skillfully interwoven in the synthesis that it achieves between image, symbol and concept.

A swift glance at his production would force us to highlight two constants in his creative process. In the first place, the permanent self-criticism that the artist accords to a work, from the artistic angle, and the significance he attributes to the same work at a more intimate level.

For example, according to Kcho, *La Jaba* proved therapeutic. He did it while he was doing his military service, taking up the offer made by the Development Centre for the Visual Arts to participate in the Polish Sculpture Triennial. He conceived it in the countryside: and the materials that went into its making were rural. During the confinement that barrack life brings, the creation of this work became a means of alleviating separation from family and professional life. He didn't spend much time in service, yet every moment he did have he devoted it to it. When they told him he could leave, that same day he made a special effort and finished it. Thus *La Jaba* was useful to him as a passtime initially, yet in the long run it became one of his best works. To it are related some other pieces, where the artisanal element was as important as the idea. It wasn't until *Tatlin's Spiral*, one of the works by him exhibited at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, that a real change occurred in his thinking. He began working on it at the same time as on the *Tree-Oars*, and evidently both helped him to modify his basic conception of sculpture, departing from such a close relation with the artisan idea, that had been the nucleus of previous concerns. Till that moment, in his works at large one could notice the link between formal preoccupations and those derived from specific context, through the recycled use of popular elements. However, in the light of his most recently exhibited works we can

also perceive in the artist a continuing interest in exploring human thought in a more general sense. And if this element underlied his past works as an allusion that stemmed from his discourse, from that moment on, what gains predominance, is the interest in reflecting on human conduct and its implications, from a cultural and social point of view.

Although we may admit that within the evolution of Kcho's work *Tatlin's Spiral* and the *Tree-Oars* signified a change in his creative process, so revealing a manifest modification of his thought, it wasn't until *La Regata*, that is related to them, that, in my opinion, a definite change took place in his artistic production. This isn't to say that Kcho has rejected that other line of work, for the idea of the *Tree-Oars* is still open and he has taken it up again, this time from the perspective that the strategy developed with *La Regata* has offered.

It would be an error, considering the ideas he is currently engaged with, to ignore the fact that the *Tree-Oars* were the origin of this thoughts on emigration and its effects, and with all that has been related to this theme henceforth. We can't either ignore the fact that parallel to his evolution in terms of language related concepts, this artist has simultaneously intensified the elaboration of his concepts.

Poetic, sensitive, at times moving, he

expresses his preoccupations in a very formal way, giving a particularly original feel to his works and exposing his view points with heartfelt sincerity. This is the reason why a very special communication occurs between his work and the most varied types of public, for he is touching extremely emotive issues of our reality.

A problem like the one of the Cuban "balseros" (the raft people), creates all kind of suspicions. It depends on the interlocutor how the discussion develops. However, for Cubans, it is a heart rending question because of its multiple associations. Kcho has been able to express deepest popular sentiment and has communicated it in a work charged with profound poetic force. This is a question that can't accept simplifications and less so any kind of melodrama. The theme of migration implies many circumstantial problems whose human drama is prone to successive manipulations of political overtones. Kcho was able to avoid superficiality and melodrama.

The work moves towards a meaning that goes beyond a specific anecdote, and refers to the waste that remains as a result of journeys seeking different destinies. I happened to meet Kcho the day that the North Americans refused him entry visa to the States. Both of us met at the Interest Section where we asked for visas and I was with him when they stamped on his passport the

denial with the tag of “possible immigrant”. I remember saying to him, “Kcho, there’s too many people like you in the Bronx”. Yet this confirmed what people commonly say in Cuba. As an artist he couldn’t get in, as a balseiro he’d be a hero.

“The frustration I felt when they denied me the visa made me go fishing sardines off the coast with a rough cane rod”, he told me a long time after. What lay at the bottom of that civil servant’s denial of entry visa was the condition of “posible balseiro”; the shock that this experience meant for him started to combine with his preoccupation about the cultural effects of the migrations, that had originally emerged while he worked on the *Tree-Oars* series.

At the same time, the everyday experience of fishermen in their ships, and contact with the sea and childhood memories, inspired the first ideas of what eventually would be *La Regata*, his work in the Fifth Habana Biennial. Seeing the fishermen’s boats moored off the coast, he recalled the little boats that he made when he was a child; they were far less elaborate, made with several layers of wood, yet keeping a certain special kindred spirit. And so, little by little, the work developed like a child’s game.

In its first version, he made it to be hung, like a children’s toy made by hand. The different navigational objects

would be fixed to the wall, hanging from cords. Yet while he was thinking about this piece he began drawing small boats that soon filled up many sheets, and the idea of the work started to change in his mind. The objects alone didn’t please him nor did the dimensions. Furthermore, he preferred a more static work, like something frozen, and suspended, the work acquired a mobility that didn’t interest him.

Thinking the work over in his mind he took a look at the work of Vito Acconci, which made him think about other possible solutions for his installation, rejecting the idea of hanging the objects and displaying them instead on the floor. If *La Regata* is indeed indebted to the work of another artist, it is to Acconci, whose spirit it shares.

However, in the creation of *La Regata* other factors, by no means less decisive, intervened.

The first version was exhibited several months before the Fifth Biennial, and Kcho’s opinion was more “disciplined”, as someone remarked to him upon seeing the new version at the Biennial. When he saw it in exhibition he realized that the use of the little ships as the sole elements of the work was a bit cold. On the other hand, some friends told him that the ships should be better made as the market required better finish. However, his real lack of interest in the market triumphed over the idea of a more complete finish to the little boats, and he

maintained his idea that his work shouldn’t be influenced by others’ tastes.

Obviously such discussions paved the way for the definitive version of the work shown at the Biennial, that was composed of flotsam and jetsam he picked up along the beaches, and which definitely transformed the character of the work.

Kcho says frequently that he is very fond of *La Regata*, remembering the circumstances that surrounded the work. For him, and in a different dimension altogether in relation to visa denial, both the episode and the work is intimately linked to the hard months of summer 1993. A friend of mine says that when we are old we’ll refer to those months as “that old 1993 Summer”. It was a time of unending blackouts, of unbearable heat, of extremely harsh food conditions. Kcho simply states that, “during that summer such gruesome things happened to us that I let off steam doing the work, and I spent almost all my time on it”.

The debate as to the country’s conditions, the struggle for survival while maintaining the quota of dignity that is indispensable for any human being, the phenomenon of the balseiros and the relation of this to the state of Cuban-American affairs, are issues that are discussed daily, while protest is made against the energy cuts, the scarcity of food and the absence of

leisure activities. To reduce this work to these implications, moreover, is to detract from its universal character. Its motivations and its associations are far more complex.

In *La Regata* we can perceive Time's implacable passing, as if everything it touches grows old, disappears, and decays; as if the work's own fate was disappearance. The work emphasizes physical and human deterioration. The furthest end of the work, where the bits of ravaged ships appear, the flotsam and the jetsam of the sea provokes the idea that something is inexorably dying and ending; and the perception of that irreversibility produces a sentiment of deep anguish.

There's no doubt today that *La Regata* is his most complete work, although it is probably his saddest one as well. When Marta Aguirre gave us lessons, she used to say that maturity is painful. *La Regata* is full of drama, and there's a perception of real drama that is deeply moving too.

In contrast to those who claim that contemporary art can only resort to quotation, Keho proves that reality is far richer than any reference. The authenticity of this work lies precisely in the vehemence of his approach to his own environment; this he achieves appropriating images taken straight out of his most immediate context, metaphorically recreating them within

the scope of a context where human, not aesthetic concerns, are uppermost. The new ideas he has been developing since *La Regata* are closely connected with the spatial idea of that work. His interest has moved towards group compositions thereafter, the accumulation of objects and the construction of big spaces where he can distribute his ideas; towards the structuring of large spaces where stories can be managed, not only told but lived: spaces where the spectator can freely move and interact.

That is the concept dominating the work that he'll present at the São Paulo Biennial, conceived as penetrable, as walkable, open to the participation of the spectator and intended to intensify the relationship with the public. Thus his interest in situating it in a transit area, between two rooms, so that people have to walk inside it in order to get somewhere else. Moreover the central idea of this work, following the significance of the *Tree-Oars*, is set for a reflection on the cultural effects generated in Man by spatial displacement. While Man attempts to keep his identity when he lives outside his milieu, although he does it unconsciously, as a fundamental instinct of self-preservation, he is subject to other contingencies for survival, as indeed are plants. When Man changes environment he faces traumas that are as strong as those suffered by plants during their processes of ecological

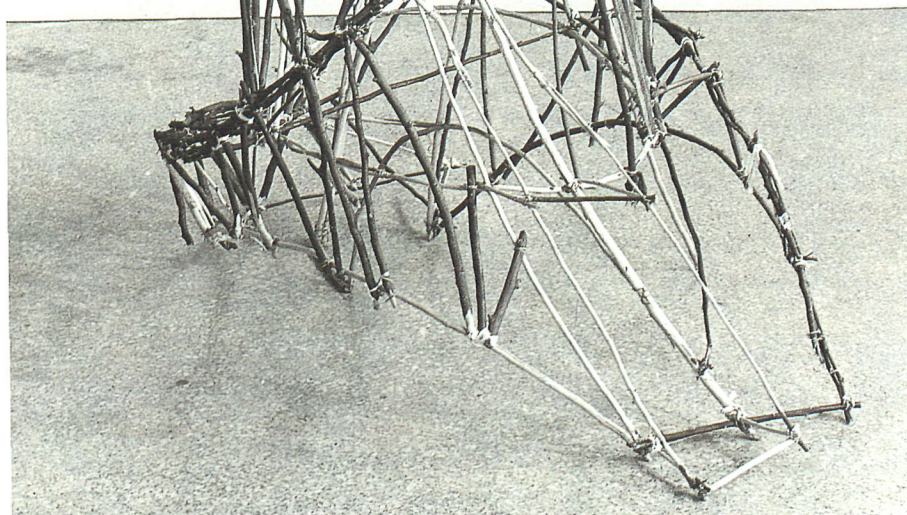
adaptation. He may or may not adapt, depending on his will to integrate with the environment, yet what is plainly true is that he is transformed and he may even disappear during the experience. This accounts for the references to tomb stones among the *Tree-Oars* of the work, that express the feelings described.

In harmony with his present ideas, the installation has been conceptually conceived, but it will adopt the form that the space at Ibirapuera suggests and the emotions that the people he will meet may awaken in him. Even when the artist rejects the scenographic character of an installation, he is aware of the need to consider the spatial dimensions and the nature of the public who will see the work. No work is ever the same once it changes location. During this year he will also participate in the "The Raw and the Cooked" exhibition, curated by the Reina Sofía in Madrid, with a work titled *Lo Mejor del Verano* (The Best of Summer), that completes the trilogy. He has imagined it as a great tide of objects suspended above the spectator who will mirror the multitude of hanging forms. This work similarly appeals to audience participation.

With this work the artist develops to the limit the ideas and the spirit that stemmed from *La Regata*. For the piece *The Best of Summer* he didn't use objects. Most of the elements that

composed it are real and taken from the environment. He hasn't invented them. People may think that he made them but it's not so. He bought them from those that genuinely make them, and they are mainly parts of boats and other used items. He only made some structures that contained these, but basically, the work is conceived as a great number of objects that have been gathered in different ways.

After *La Regata* Kcho feels that he shouldn't invent the objects, that it is far better to take them from reality and use those that have already been spent and that possess their own energy. For *Lo Mejor del Verano* he has preferred to use boats that have been sailed in, objects that fulfilled a purpose and that had a life. That is why one of the pieces in the work is a cork boat that an emigrant used. While I still think that *El Carabato* and *La Jaba* have been his most synthetic works, I see in them the evolution towards Kcho's actual production. These works meant a clear step forward in this process. In this initial works he had abused associations, gradually rejecting that mechanism until the bare essentials were left. This was the way towards *La Regata*, that activated associations at a superior level and that achieved synthesis of concept in another fashion. In *La Regata* nothing is gratuitous nor excessive. It has no invented time scheme. Nothing has been hidden or artificially aged. The boats were made



Kcho. *Tatlin's Spiral*. Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.

of wood that was already old, with materials eroded by life. If in works that preceded *La Regata* he deceived us, ageing artificially and manipulating them to invent Time, he goes much

further in *Lo Mejor del Verano*. The objects are real, and their energy comes from their past lives, just like Kcho's energy comes from his existence.