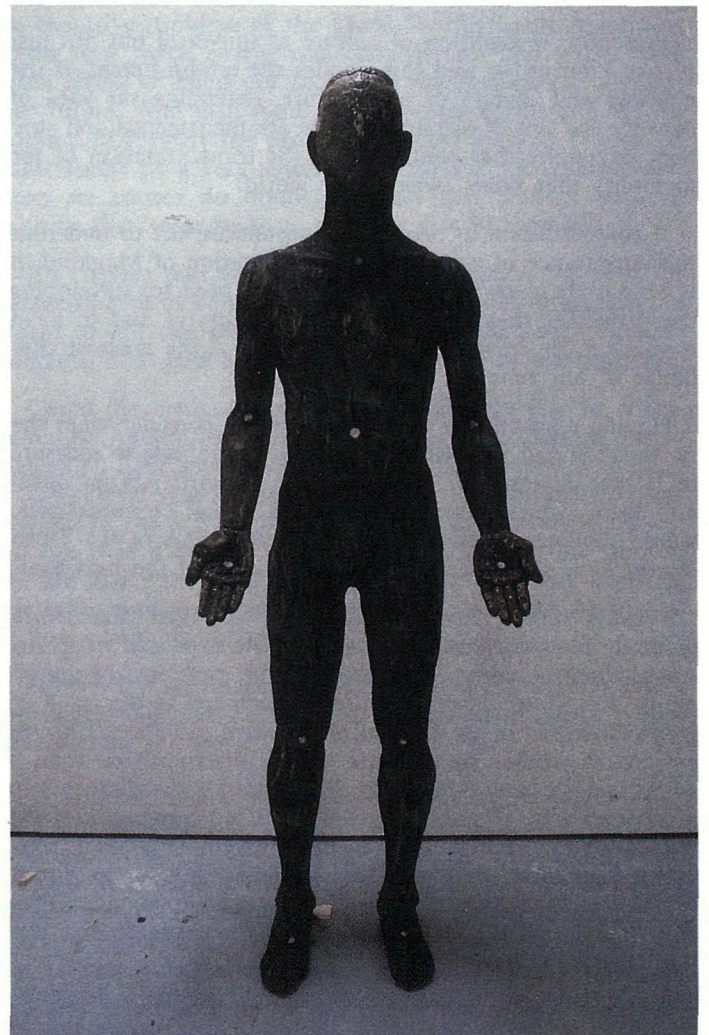


Anthropocentrism in contemporary cuban art

EUGENIO VALDES

If the art movement generated during the 80's decade in Cuba has been called a "Cuban Renaissance", it has been taking into account in the first place the innovatory and revitalizing character it had, and how it replaced the worn out formulas of a "late avant-garde" that never found appropriate space in the dialectics of the revolution's cultural project. Yet there is another aspect that must be considered and that is valid for understanding more extensively the motivations and processes that animate the new generation of cuban artists; these young creators assume the practice of art from a multifaceted and pragmatic point of view. As aesthetic and cognoscible motivations are closely related, the artist began to defend a more rational attitude, less limited to the "artisan" aspect of his activity; he started to interact with other spheres of social and spiritual life: science, philosophy, religion, politics. Distanced from any chance of real isolation, the artist decides to act from within society, processing behavioural models, the manifestations of collective psychology, valid for a definition of identity in current and not in archeological terms, vitalistic and not abstract.

The generation to which Luis Gómez Armenteros (La Habana, 1968) belongs conserves that investigative zest and the syncretic character of the aesthetic object. Incorporated into this generation at the end of the 80's, his first work retained elements of the previous one. The main theme of his work was initially cultural cross-reference; however, his work, characterized by emphasis on conceptualism, didn't stop at etnocultural specificities, but went on to explore an anthropological perspective that would stimulate reflection and reveal the intersections of the particular and the general. Thus a far more general vocation is manifested, that has shed its pretension to local scale social incidence. These global pretensions, this interest in blurring territorial boundaries, provokes the viewer of the work not only to become conscious of his differences as a vehicle for the affirmation of identities, but also to recognize symbols and familiar behaviour as evidence that



Luis Gómez. *La invención natural.*



Marta María Pérez.

hibridness is a common denominator of cultures and that dialogue is a cultural property.

In the work of Luis Gómez the monumentality doesn't necessarily depend on the dimensions of the object, but on its symbolic force and its capacity to condense an impressive psychological content and an autonomy that allows the subconscious to function simultaneously (or perhaps prior to) the consciousness of the messages that the image carries. This is the aspect that he has been developing up to the present, combining it with a supradimensionality of the semantic artefacts, which increases effect, the almost paralysing action exerted on the spectator, and finally to unfetter a desire for participation, a physical desire of the object and its spiritual content. He toys rationally with the possibilities of mystifying the symbolic object which artists of acclaimed recognition like Rodríguez Brey, José Bedia and Elso Padilla had already experimented.

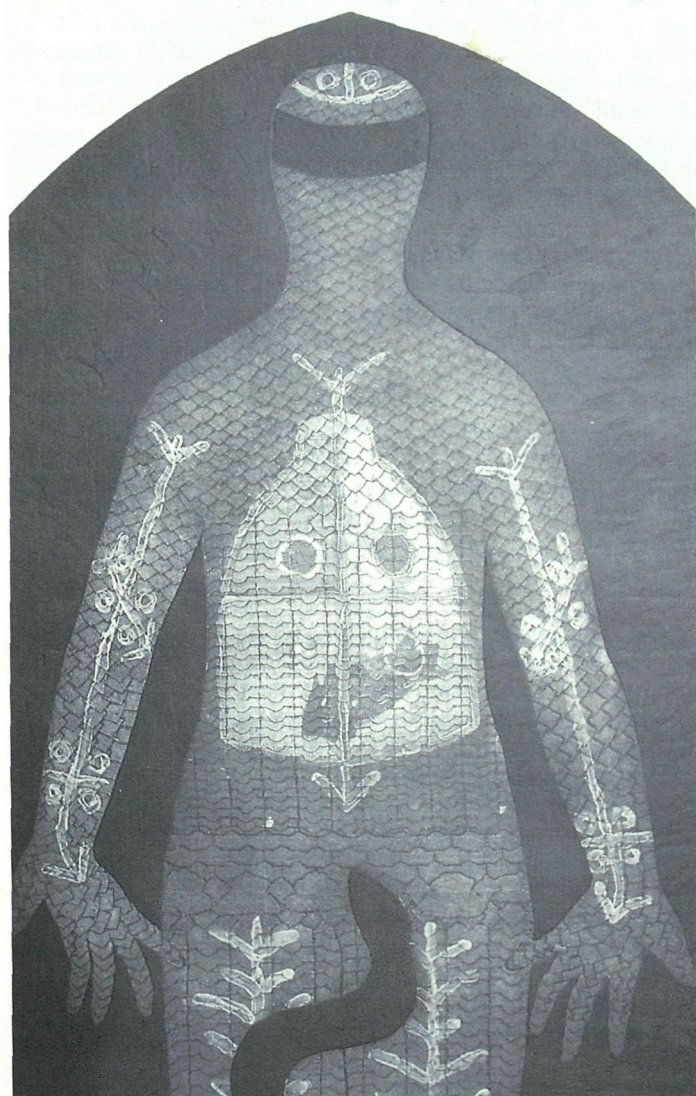
Like them, Luis begins with a reflection on the universality of certain processes and psychosocial behavioural models, the uniformity of their nature (and of the symbology they generate) independent of the socio-cultural or historical singularities that they may manifest. However, Luis Gómez reveals in the construction process of symbology and cultural models an immanent substratum of violence, which is one of the concepts that is enlarged in his work. Thus pain becomes a parable of the self, of sacrifice, mutilation and confirmation of his existence.

In this context man's "natural inventiveness" is allied to pain and genesis. The concept of man as metaphorical expression of the universe (and consequently, as a "summary" of perfection) engages in an almost ironical contradiction with the image of man emergent out of chaos, and conserves his roots. This a very contemporary reformulation of an anthropocentrism localized historically in "classical" cultures, and an example of neo-humanism proposed by contemporary cuban art.

This anthropocentrism is present in most of the works produced by the new generation of cuban artists. It appears not only in the conceptual reflection on humanist concerns (reason of being, origin, death), but also explicitly in the new variants of anthropomorfism that make up the core of the figurative tendencies of the most recent cuban art.

The thought of Marta María Pérez develops along these lines directed to visual reconstitution of the myths surrounding fertility and the place of the maternal figure in society. Marta María uses three essential elements; at a conceptual level the myths and tabus handed down from *santería* and other afrocuban ritual practices (these are proclaimed and violated simultaneously, in what can also be seen as a metaphorical violation of the modern discriminatory tabus that the West has conferred on maternity); at a functional level, in the practice of body action, dramatic and realist by turn, that acquires the characteristics of a performance solitarily acted out in front of a photographic camera. The presence of the camera determines the third element, which is representational, resumed by the photographic format as a testimony of a definitive artistic action and text.

This text has connotations that go beyond the mere literalness of the image; those that derive from the aggressive and hard image that characterizes maternity. The womb appears



Belkis Ayón.



Belkis Ayón.

like a dangerous territory for the mother and child, like a materialization of confluence, in one sole event (conception), of antagonist concepts: life and death, harmony and violence, innocence and harm, purity and filth, rule and transgression.

On account of its compromise with a historically marginalized sexual identity, the work of Pérez is perfectly relatable to that of Belkis Ayón, while its references to cosmogonic ideas within a rational-aesthetic tradition, make it akin to the creations of Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal.

The origin of the artistic research of Belkis Ayón is the secret society Abakúa and the group of myths that has fomented the continuity of certain behavioural models it establishes. Her work overcomes trite versions that exhibit this mythology. She can muster many cases of artistic research into the nature of myth as intellectual precedent, and she is able to offer new exploratory and speculative focuses, above all because her discourse is marked in its roots by a sexual consciousness that is almost radical.

“Abakúa, a secret society exclusively for men, self-financed by subscriptions and tithes collected from its members, and which has a complex hierarchical organization of dignitaries and attendants, the presence of spiritual beings, an obscure ritual whose secret, jealously guarded, materializes in a drum called *ekwé*, initiation ceremonies, renewal, death and purification, eternal and temporary benefits, internal laws and punishments that must be summarily executed and accepted, an hermetic language, esoteric and graphic, that has a compliment of seals and secret signs constitutes up to the present, an unmatched cultural phenomenon in Cuba and Latin America.”

The Abakúa myth explains the alliance of two african tribes, the very origin of the secret society, and that is why it is an all-male society. La Sikán, a central mythic character, is a woman who revealed the secret of Tanze, a fish that incarnated the spirit of an old Ekoi chieftain. This, in turn, is related to a type of totemic worship of matrilineal character. Fishing was the most productive activity of the Calabar zone at that time and also representative of feminine hegemony. The Sikán myth, justifies, the imposition of a new social order under control of the leopard-men, the penetration of the female totem by the male totem, the substitution of matriarchy by patriarchy. Belkis tries to unravel hidden truths in the mythic arguments and offers her own version of the facts.

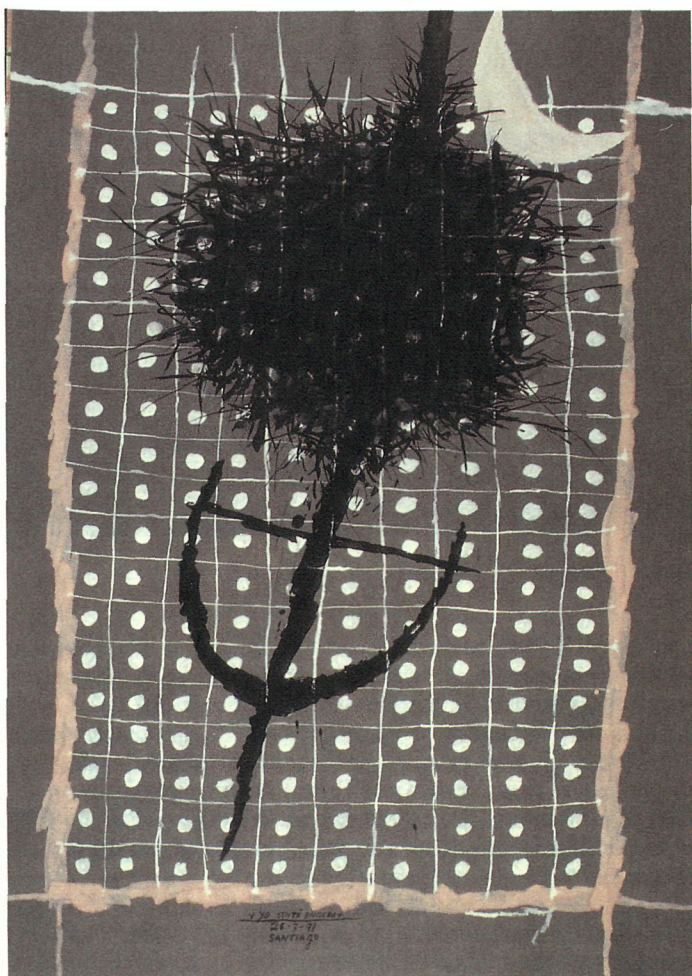
The perturbing sensation of her art is to a great extent generated by the subtly marginal and heretical character of the proposition. In order to magnify her conflict, Belkis has had to violate certain bounds that delimit gender, the mythical and the sociological, the artistic and the religious.

The strategy of postmodernist feminism, cunningly labelled as a “defense of difference”, adopts in artistic expression a form of non gratuitous exhibitionism. It’s a kind of imposition of the feminine as appearance and as psychology, at the same time a denouncement of how false certain perceptual conventions and symbolic conventions established by the male can be. In Belkis’s case the imposition adopts the form of influx. That precisely a woman devotes herself to artistically recreating the contents of this religion is almost provocative, above all when she adds the feminine figure to her tentative iconography, and many of its symbolic attributes, as centre, as protagonist of a myth that in ritual terms belongs exclusively to the sphere of male dominance.

Belkis reexposes visually the reasons for the exclusion of the feminine factor by the brotherhood. She shows how dramatic is the separation between woman and the consecrated male. In truth one of the versions of the myth tells how the first ordained subject and the first initiatee was a woman. The loss of her attendance right and even the totem that protected her is explained revealing the conciliatory essence of the myth as apparent argument that consolidates and institutes through its own origins a whole status quo. The prohibitions, tabus and rules that the myth sets up pretend to fix a definitive system of social relations that underestimate the role of woman.

The reinterpretation formulated by the artist is artistically resolved through ubiquity and syncretism. The author has admitted the visible references to bizantine iconography, some of which merge with the suggested abakúa signatures (the *ereniyó* graphic system), or with some highly stylized evocation of landscape where the scenes of the myth supposedly take place, and are reinforced by an efficient use of the significant gesture or the suppression of the sign as signifier (e. j., the absence of a mouth connotes secrecy). It’s a highly symbolic and expressive use of colour, that imposes different readings based on the articulation of codes, backed by the technical treatment of the objects, like a collage stuck on cardboard.

Deep down there’s a type of nostalgia for the mythic origins of the abakúa society. Those origins determined by the struggle for possession of the secret, when feminine intervention proved crucial. From this depth of mythopoetic memory one could perhaps extract the origins of female marginality



Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal.

today, not only in the midst of the secret society, alienated and stigmatized as it is, but also in a world that takes pride in being civilized and yet continues to be patriarchal.

On his part, Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal concentrates on the world of la Regla de Ocho (the Rule of Eight), or Santería. He derives his reflections on death and violence from this world. He doesn't understand death as the continuity of the life cycle, that is initiated by maternity and gains its maturity with the advent of rational experience; death, for him, is "the contingency that marks the end of that experience, the journey of the spirit into an unknown world, searching the redemption of a superior existence".

This somewhat mystical focus of the subject is related to the artist's religious belief. Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal conserves in his philosophical system the ethics of the practising believer. When distance is taken in order to create the work of art, this ethics becomes poetry, though it retains its rational character as explanation of the world.

In spite of the manifest popular streak that the cultural references of this artist possess, these are not, however, easily decypherable for the common observer, the reason being the process of intellectualization that the artist imposes on them. His works have a strong narrative, even autobiographical character, yet they are not anecdotal, they don't stop short at mere event but go on to establish causal relationships, to search for essence, for internal logic.

This explains the level of abstraction that the artist's figuration has. His works don't just literally narrate the visual universe of santería, nor do they recreate mythological structures with folklorical vision; to the contrary, they tackle what is most difficult: the intellectual system on which the beliefs are founded. It's a kind of conceptualism that takes into account (as well as the already described intellectualization of the artistic artefact), an emotional relation, a comprehension of the universe, that doesn't even exclude the oneiric.

Representing pictorially his own visions and dreams, Santiago is offering the spectator a context of the contingent, of what the will can't control; even violence, death or any other accident in human existence appears as predestined, as inevitable. Thus the importance the artist gives to the number systems generously used in his drawings and installations. At a structural level of his work, numbers are cardinal points, foundation for a geometry of artistic form. Semiotically they contribute to the *sense* of the image, they charge it with significance, they provide a symbolic metalanguage that dialogues with iconography. As text, the number is no doubt more significant than the icon in the semiotic system of santería; it constitutes the basis of the divining complex, it is the key for decyphering the mysteries that surround human destiny, it is identified with the gods (it fixes an algebraic relation as fundamental link between man and godhead). Every orichá has its number, and in turn has several numbered "paths", and so the gods exist and act upon men following a metaphysical computation, with infinite variables, all of them paradoxically invariable, since the individual can't change his destiny. This is one of the most important messages of Olazábal's work, that so becomes a metaphor of the inevitable, the uncontrollable and the immeasurable of human fate.

The universalist character of these principles leads him to search for symbols beyond a restricted cultural context, it is a quest of cultural and anthropological constants. This gives him a global perspective of human conduct, that includes an analysis of violence as invariant in the development of culture. This analysis finds visual resolution in anthropomorphic figuration, that highlights man's physical strength, paradoxically combined with the unfinished appearance of the figure, its dissolution in the pictorial plane, that transmits that sense of "half baked product", both imperfect and dangerous. This danger is reinforced by the frequent use of the knife image, aggressively, menacingly wielded. To this variant is added the image of man as universal victim, as consequence of his own aggressiveness (the paradigmatic image of the bleeding Christ hasn't escaped this figuration).

From a similar perspective we can behold the work of Magdalena Campos, who has explored diverse areas where anthropocentrism, violence and pain as fundamental concepts flourish. Two of these aspects are essential: firstly, the one where she becomes the object of the work, a somewhat more individualistic, autobiographical formula, marked by her female condition and her ethnocultural characteristics; the other, with a more engaged view of the anonymous in history, with the philosophical interest in exposing the falacies of historicist narratives. In this latter style is included the work she will present at the Fourth Habana Biennial, which aims to shatter all of the idyllic narratives of the historical and formative processes of Cuban culture. In this installation, entitled, *Tra, Tra, Tra*, Magdalena hopes to portray the physical psychosocial and cultural shock that the triple encounter of European, American and African culture caused in the context of the New World, as well as the continuity of its effects on the syncretic culture thus obtained.

The artist begins with a play on the words: TReats, TRAuma, TRAnsculturization, TRAgedy..., that she relates to photographic portraits that depict the modern creole negro, not fully mentally decolonized. It is a search for the aesthetic in the psychological projection of one of the strongest ethnic components of cuban culture. Her difference with respect to Santiago Olazábal lies in the fact that while he works with already established cultural products, Magdalena seeks out the origins, she explores the genesis of such products, taking delight in the historical document, appropriating it, resorting even to photography in order to testify identities, using the written text dynamically that legitimates and simultaneously draws on the verosimilitude of the historiographical narrative.

The engravings of Ibrahim Miranda, on the other hand, convey that postmodern suspicion of the presumed objectivity and rationality of history. As is well known, in the same way as mythology, history bases its ethical structures on extremely variable narrative models. The main effect of Ibrahim's manipulation of the historical texts, is their loss of narrative personality. Confining characters that are narrative constructs to their real present (in a clearly recontextualizing way), he is able to portray with greater emphasis this mytho-historical confusion. In this sense, not only does a change of context occur, he also manages to dislocate the texts themselves.

The images that the author offers us are like frozen moments, alien to the temporal dimension that originally conferred on reinserted them their primary meaning and theme in a new dimension, of a predominantly spatial and semiotic character. Their structure is important in terms of aesthetic and significative organization of space (nothing that it is a virtual space built into the plane) capable of provoking a series of emotional and mental reactions in the spectator.

Such reactions respond above all to the exceptional character of the treatment of signs. All symbology related to the christian universe or to grecoroman mythology. (When not to a certain morphology rooted in the medieval bestiaries) has been used by the artist with personal and eminently profane ends (to express his own universe, his personal reality), although not losing sight of his own concrete ideology. The outcome is a syncretic and polysemic iconography that lays bare a wide range of existential and "terrestrial" conflicts.

Within this subversive vision of history, and furthermore of historical texts, and among these, of course, artistic texts, lies the work of Lázaro García. Lázaro García's painting is a good excuse for a dissertation on art history as cycle; and what's more, for a discourse on the annulment of history given its own constants. With an attitude that has more of exorcism than of commemoration, the artist appropriates historical styles and traditional genres in order to reveal an inherent value of the image: its potential condition as fetish. He assumes the thesis that the relationship between the observing subject and the observed object (what euphemistically is termed "aesthetic communication"), is just a simulacrum of the primitive rituals of worship, an exercise in religiosity, that Lázaro carefully dramatises using a christian iconography reproduced with rare excellence.

The artist introduces distance in the phenomenon of reception so that the viewer doesn't find himself drawn along against his will by the ceremoniality that characterises it. Yet this proposition doesn't deny the sacred meaning of the image, rather it exposes it using certain means that can reach levels of profanation (a profanation that is the consequence



Ibrahim Miranda.

of the appropriational formulas employed, that above all attack the supposed immobility of the concept of "style" and the apparent immunity of the historical). In short, sacredness isn't the exclusive property of the conventional religious image, but is contained in the formulas of approximation to the artistic object and is determined by its ancestral quality of the double of the ideal subject or as materialization of a concept.

In both cases contact with the image represents an approach to the intangible, to the realm of abstraction. It is evident why up to the present such contact has been a cult and pleasure object. Indeed, the concept of aesthetic pleasure hasn't changed all that much since Aristotle elaborated the idea of catharsis: compensation, consolation, self-satisfaction; all of these things can be found in the agenda of any of the known religions.

The themes, genres, the standardized uses of iconography are modes of worship. Aesthetic pleasure, and art in general, are ritual manifestations of communication. Lázaro García, unlike many, isn't opposed to the sacredness of the artistic work, but rather explicits such status (through its multiple paradigmatic variants) as a phenomenon that can be included within an anthropological perspective.

For Lázaro García it's important to lay bare, to make transparent his own creative process, the selection and reproduction of images extracted from art books. His work partakes of that exhibitionism that characterizes post-modern art, whose origins lie in the duchampian poetic that hoped to destroy the principle of authorship, the secrets of mastery, the mysterious aura of the processes of creation, the muse of inspiration.

Yet the work of this artist acquires particular connotations in the light of relations between the latin american periphery and the hegemonic centres, and of the new analytical progress on this situation that debate on postmodernity in the latin american offers. Lázaro wants to demonstrate an attitude that seems invariable in latin american art.

Historically, latin american culture, in its marginal and subservient condition vis-à-vis the authoritarian centralism of the



Lázaro García.

metropolis, has resorted to “copy”, when not to deceit and simulation, spurred on by its desire for transcendence and legitimacy. “Like any secondary culture, Latin America has always been accustomed to relating to the ‘originals’ (understood as models of truth and perfection) by means of cheap translations or diluted substitutes: a culture of imitation, fatally condemned as a non-valid option by the latin american discourse of the autochthonous, that has found in the postmodern repertory a surprising encouragement to get rid off its plagiarist complex.” What comes out as really significant is the fact that Lázaro García, a latin american artist, can take apart the whole sacred structure of western art and at the same time leads us to reflection on centre to periphery relations, rendering problematic an apparently paradoxical behaviour: the “acceptance” of models imposed as defense mechanism. The simulacrum, the semantic reinvigoration of those models, the recontextualization and the reordering of those foreign codes, concealment, all gradually informed our resistance strategy. That appropriating will commonly attributed to Latin America has been the culture setting for pastiche, parody and subversion; and Lázaro ignores this. In this way, his work is part of that contemporary train of thought that, from the margins, conceptually reformulates the discourse of colonization.

The philosophical and aesthetic preoccupations of this new generation of artists, don’t differ greatly from those that beset cuban art during the past decade. Though we can perhaps predict a more metaphorical and less political art for the 90’s, we can also observe the continuity of creative principles that began ten years ago. Cuban art of the 90’s apparently seems to concentrate on anthropological aims, seeking the interaction of universal aspects with cultural situations specific to our context. The character, that which enables one to define this epoch as a new stage in the development of our fine arts, partly lies in the recycling of the same theoretico-conceptual elements, but with a concept of form that is qualitatively different. The “return to form”, the emphasis on technique, professional skill, the constructive component are oriented towards a conceptual relocation of the artistic object, a renewal of the value system it generates and transmits. In this way new perspectives are opened up to the sociological field of creativity, and in particular to the actual materials of aesthetic communication, and possible channels for solution of the internal conflicts that artistic practice itself constantly generates.



CENTRO ATLANTICO DE ARTE MODERNO