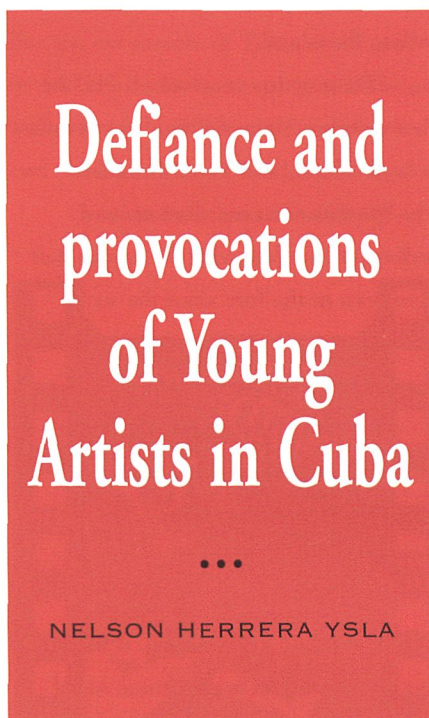


TERRITORIES

In successive waves since the early 1980s, young Cuban artists have been consistently provocative in their works, as a challenge to traditional subjects, supports, and relations with viewers. Some of these practices date much further back, to the 1960s, but today, disturbingly, they have become common to most, if not all, Cuban artists. Moreover, this is the attitude of the artist to creative work, and to the artist's defiant role in society since the second half of the last century, when Cuba began its struggles for full independence from Spanish power. Since then, the Cuban nation has enjoyed few periods of calm, or —to borrow a fashionable journalistic phrase— of tense calm.

Now we are reaching the end of the 20th century and Cuban society continues to express its concerns, affirmations, and discords, as if the project of self-definition remained uncompleted, and as if certain features of life on the island remained in a state of gestation.

In Cuban art, and specifically that made by the youngest generations, the pulse of the nation can be heard, as it navigates the perilous waters and travels the same roads and labyrinths without giving much thought to the consequences. There is a thirst for adventure, a singular way of courting danger, or provoking, and of touching the heart: for these and other reasons, Cuban art today did not fall back on supports and structures, some of them, to be sure, rather feeble, and so we do find some gaps that are difficult to fill, given the ephemeral nature of certain



works (of these, all that remain are photographs, written descriptions, anecdotes, and fragments of video tapes).

In more recent years, and as the international art market has shown a keen interest in the expressions of young Cuban artists, more care is taken in preserving art works, so that these can be acquired by important galleries, museums, and foundations at reasonable prices, as a new medium for promoting the artist inside and outside Cuba.

On the other hand, the young artists don't care where their works are shown, and they are as happy to display them in a municipal gallery or university workshop as in a national or international show. Any space is valid if the art is valid, regardless of localisms, universalisms or expressive trends.

Proof of this are the showrooms throughout the country, or the

contributions to the Venice Biennale the São Paulo show, or the Indian Triennial, and other events. Of all these I have chosen the Havana Biennial of May-June, 1994 to set forth a few considerations about how reflection and criticism of some significant artists of the 1990s have evolved, amidst a problematical context, not only culturally, but also socially, ideologically and politically.

Cuban life in the past eight years has not been easy. Called upon to defend the social achievements made since the 1959 revolution, Cuban men and women have witnessed the toppling of monuments and symbols they had believed to be eternal, as masks were pulled off, and more or less drastic changes were made to preserve the independent national soul and the best traditions of thought and action that date back to the independence struggles of the 19th century.

These have been difficult years for art, too, although the context is different. The climate in which works are brought to light tends to help make them understood since each and every citizen, whatever his or her station in society, is aware of the need for criticism and reflection as a key ethical factor in a world of trends towards change, to the improvement of humanity through all human resources except violence, and, of course, war.

Alexis Leyva (Kcho) aptly dubbed emigration as one of the running sores of contemporary Cuba. Using flotsam found on seashores and riverbanks, in the tradition of the avant-garde *objet trouvé*, along with the boats and rafts he

himself constructs, he deploys installations profuse in materials and forms, pointing to an imprecise location on the horizon, pointing to a path, a way, a destination to be attained or missed by the one who launches himself on the risky venture of emigration, leaving behind his memories, people, and places. Almost obsessively, Keho has persevered in this form-sign of the boat to lend structure to linear or circular installations or to use life-size archetypes of launches for putting to sea, logically from an island that is surrounded by the water. The human drama, the psychological reflection, the recovery of the individual memory, all are signs of identity of contemporary Cuban life, in a manner that is simultaneously baroque and ingenuous, that surprises us by its simplicity. All this and more is to be found in the recent work of this Cuban artist, endowed with an exceptional, natural talent.

On this same tightrope walks Sandra Ramos, whose early printmaking showed the first signs. Now, unexpectedly, she flings herself at the altered object, in this case a painted suitcase. The suitcase as the indispensable item for carrying some of the most precious and cherished things. On them Sandra even paints the dreams of the traveller, the worlds desired if the journey should reach a happy destination. Symbolically richer than Keho's boat-object, they do not, however, achieve such dramatic atmospheres, but rather are illustrative. Placed side by side, they constitute closed chapters, discontinuous texts that illustrate the saga of the emigrant on the road marked by a series of risks and

dangers, seen at times with humour and satire that addresses not only the individual but the whole society, the nation, the island.

These artists (and others like the photographer Manuel Piña, the engraver Rolando Rojas, and Tania Bruguera, who specialises in installations and performances) deal with the values that have been at the fore since the social catharsis was aborted by the massive Mariel exodus sixteen years ago.

Far from being a circumstantial, perishable, digressive phenomenon, emigration by sea has become an integral part of the Cuban *modus vivendi*, despite its dramatic and sometime tragic implications. It is the way a certain, real and genuine social and political dissent is expressed under current circumstances.

It is a recurring topic of daily conversation. It is also a matter for high-level diplomatic discussions and arrangements.

And so the artist returns to absorb the substance of life. Again he drinks from the common fountain, and nobody dares accuse him of turning his back on reality, or failing to be "an implacable judge of his times", the unbribable "critical conscience" that many fear and others complain about.

Showing again the possibilities of humour as a key ingredient of criticism in Cuba, a group of artists took it upon themselves to continue the tradition manifested to such effect at the third Havana Biennial in 1989 and in previous exhibitions. The roots of this attitude go back to anti-colonial journalism at the end of the last century and to that which began later, with the establishment of the republic in 1902, and also in the

behaviour of the Cubans, product of artificiality and the masquerade of that "independence." Everyone knew that it was a trick, and very far from the real popular aspirations for which Cubans struggled for more than 30 years after 1868.

Humour was one of the few means whereby Cubans could express their dissent, and the most corrosive version, mockery, gave rise to a type of popular theatre with resonances throughout Cuban society. There was some graphic humour as well, but, above all, humour was in gestures and behaviour that persist to this day. The generation arising in the 1980s made this a sort of invisible manifesto, with every wink, allusion and quote meant to be picked up by every possible spectator.

The insults and provocations of Lázaro Saavedra, Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas, Tonel, Glexis Novoa, Ciro Quintana, Aldito Menéndez, the Puré group, Reynero Tamayo, Osneldo García, René Francisco and Eduardo Ponjuan, among others, was now carried on by Pedro Alvarez, Fernando Rodríguez, Osvaldo Yero, Esterio Segura and to a lesser extent by Abel Barroso, all of them former students at the Havana Art Institute.

Pedro Alvarez is the most strident of the group, the most witty, the most sarcastic. He topples some of our most treasured symbols.

Into the same pot he adds spoonfuls of African heritage, grammes of caricatures of Spaniards and Creoles alike, a half-portion of architectural pastiches, U.S. objects to taste, socialist political slogans and lots of salt, pepper, vinegar, garlic and onion, against a foggy Hollywood backdrop reminiscent

of “B” gangster films of the 1940s, so that the viewer may do his job calmly and cook slowly in his consciousness this sort of national hotpot or overdone tropical soup as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Pedro Alvarez chops up his own folkloric bent and rearranges it in tourist postcards in vivid national colours. Freed of social and political prejudices, he uses the most delicate humour to attack new forms of self-colonisation, self-blockade and self-deceit that have never stopped showing their claws in the interstices during the construction of the new order in Cuba, the new life. “Venceremos” and the “United Colors of Benetton” grapple in his canvases to exorcise the train of demons watching over us from the Baroque cathedrals of the 18th century to the broad avenues of Havana, ready to seize our souls at any time.

Fernando Rodríguez prepares his polychromed woods from the paroxysm of Baroque and popular Latin American carved images to illustrate the vicissitudes of the wedding of Fidel Castro and the Virgin of Charity, conceived by the blind artist Francisco de la Cal, for whom Fernando is spokesman and executing hand, as he is at pains to show.

Medium-size formats of irregular dimensions are the basis for one-piece carvings where the roughness of his results are made explicit as a welter of imprecisions that highlight the ingenuousness and primitiveness of the author-maker. The celebration encompasses the religious and the civil ceremony, the substantial dinner, the dance, the photographs taken by the groom, the drive in the car, all in a pastoral atmosphere, evoking nostalgia

for a paradise a hairsbreadth from being attained. The series has infinite possible readings: the idea is a complete fantasy, like the encounters of Tzara and Lenin in the Café Voltaire, verging on Dadaism with a Latin beat; visually it is naive and childlike, as in a wooden comic.

Oswaldo Yero unearths cast-off



Reynero Tamayo (Cuba).

political and historic symbols, codifies them in multicoloured plaster, making objects ready to take home to hang on the wall. The ex-Soviet factory workers and peasants, bearing their hammers and sickles, with their gazes fixed on the luminous future of the fatherland and of humanity, are recycled by Yero and transformed into Cuban kitsch, via sophisticated scenographic compositions with plenty of the little stars, points, fabrics, shines and tinsel seen in decorated shop windows. His irony is aimed also at the American Indian whose image has been duplicated in hundreds of versions on domestic objects, coins, labels, T-shirts, belt buckles, pennants, and shoe trimmings

and which now gaze from the two ends of the Island of Cuba like a new way of revealing ourselves as plaster birds flying in the same direction: an immaterial, volatile, island, ready to emigrate like a bird of passage seeking refuge and food when conditions are unfavourable. Less aggressiveness and problematics in these pieces by Yero, but still they are subtly, ably, acquiescently provocative. Smooth to the touch as if thus to call forth the kitsch that we all have within us.

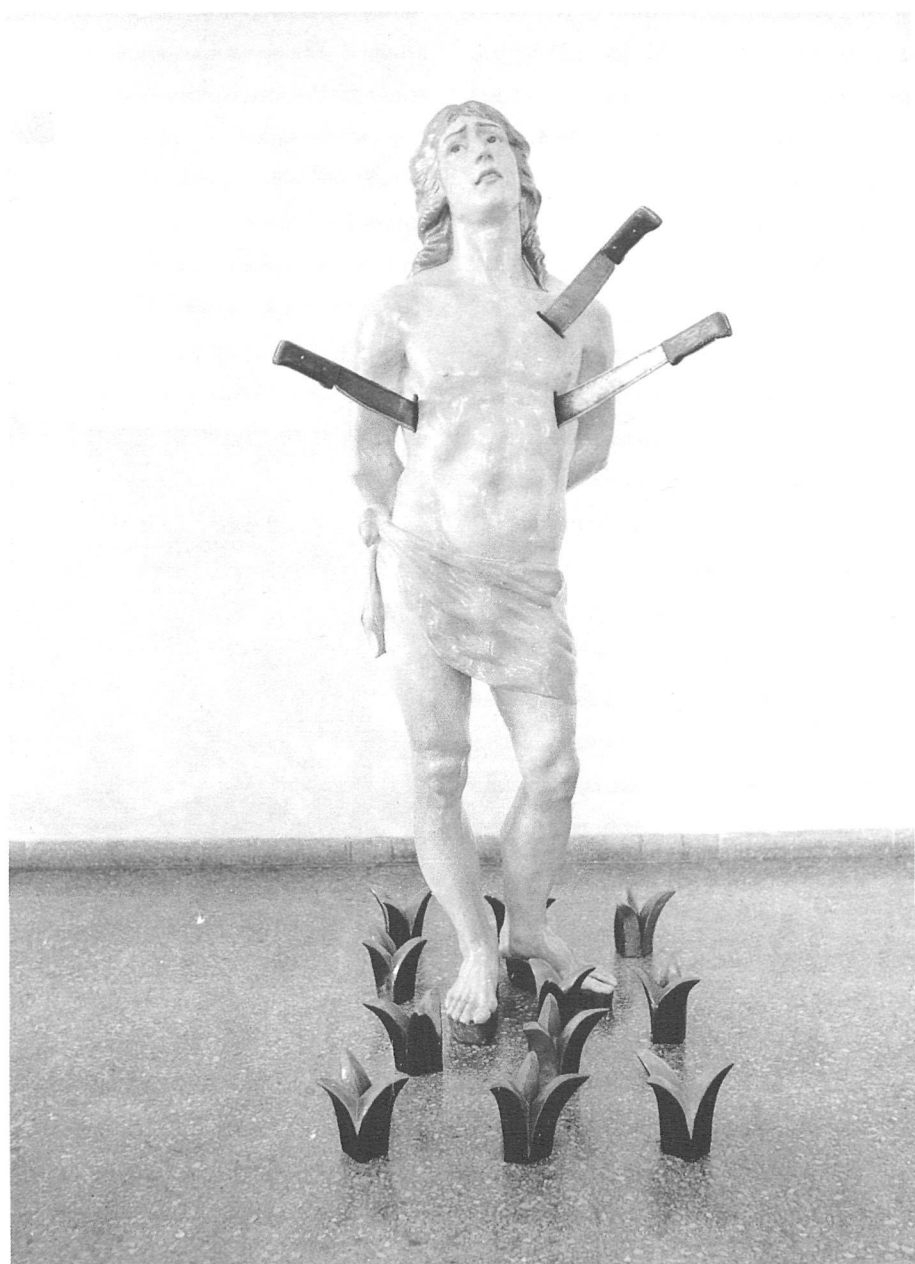
Esterio Segura works in several fields. His eloquent sculptures that owe all their splendour to the Latin American Baroque tradition, abundant in churches and cathedrals from Mexico to Brazil, alternate with drawings on paper, etching on metal and diminutive porcelain figures that one might find in a bazaar. His instinct is religious, as are his compositions on the floor or the wall: among these there is a rewarding dialogue which obliges us to listen to the different voices that reach us from the depths of the history of art. With pointed references to Western and Eastern culture, he sets forth a postmodern discourse in which he alludes to Japanese images from the 18th century, Karl Marx, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Juan Francisco Elso, St. Sebastian, the lamb of God. Sacrifices and pleasure are the two poles between which the pieces are moved in a rather carefree spirit, without hierarchical or symmetric order.

Abel Barroso is the greatest transgressor with regard to supports. His engravings on cardboard are a pretext for a disproportionate exploration of structures and formats in which no piece is like another, and yet the whole attains an indisputable coherence and solidity. It seems likely that Abel cannot stand

the supports that make the print a flat, dull, two-dimensional vehicle, fit only to receive acids or brush strokes of illumination. Instead, he constructs boats, tables, retables, and small flags, while at the same time showing the sources from which they spring: the wood block tears off its provisional mask and looks straight ahead. And he also coins circular slogans, catch-phrases of the moment, as a way of modelling humour for the expression of the Cuban reality of today and yesterday.

René Francisco and Eduardo Ponjuan have worked in partnership for some time, and have become a singular phenomenon in Cuban art. From the initial idea to the final rendering the work belongs to both, equally. After a period during which they adopted critically the principles of Soviet social realism to point out its vacuity *in strictu senso*, they have channelled their work towards an unlimited reflection on art and the market in Cuba today. The adventures and misadventures these artists lived through only a few years ago, and those they are involved in today, amidst confusion and uncertainty over the role of galleries, patrons, state trading companies, promoters, dealers, and other marketing types, are targeted by Ponjuan and René Francisco.

No longer fulfilled by painting, they use all sorts of elements that may serve to bring more data to their central discourse: from a man's business suit to a candle, a mock parabolic antenna, a painter's palette, whatever. For them, the art market and Cuba itself are not sufficiently clear and well-defined: hence the superposition, the enjambement, the orchestrality, the noise they introduce like a sort of a Caribbean John



Esterio Segura (Cuba). *Santo de paseo en el trópico*, 1993.

Cage. Squeaking paraphernalia mixing together the collector Peter Ludwig with the magazine *Art in America*, a can of Coca Cola, the flags of Germany, Spain, and the United States, maps, a lamppost, a castle, all helping to add to the unique confusion we inhabit. Rather than humour, this should be called teasing, because of its wide range: these assemblies, both subtle and crude, both straightforward and elliptical, take on both a light and grave tone.

A very curious case is that of Carlos René Aguilera, an artist who lives at the Western end of the island and who defends the traditional canvas with its two-dimensional range as sufficient to express everything or almost everything. A combination of painting and drawing, Aguilera's works bring utopia to subjects addressed by 20th century painters, Cubans and non-Cubans alike. It is a utopia that wants to reach the meeting place of cold and

heat, Greek temples and the Cuban peasant hut, the polar bear and the hummingbird, the Tatlin spire and the sugar mill.

His medium and large works allude to the Cuban avant-garde and make us smile at our own ingenuousness, without passion or ferocious criticism, without morbidity or intolerance, but sweetly, tenderly, as when we stand before a Chagall.

Still more curious is the case of Carlos Garaicoa, an artist not easily classified, although his early dedication to photography identified him to many as a photographer. A deep delver in time and collective memory, he employs an archaeological approach to the recovery from oblivion of fragments of a past reality, mutilated by successive processes of deterioration. Old shop advertisements, signs on crumbling walls, broken city corners, and incomplete Havana interiors are among the themes that obsess Garaicoa as obvious signs of a life that is no more, that passed before us and that we no longer remember or refuse to remember.

The artists turns to pieces of furniture, plants, drawings, stone, photography, to fuel the fires of memory: a call to a consciousness now preoccupied with urgent business and meeting the needs of daily life. Thus he stand us in front of ourselves. Photography is certainly only a pretext, the knot through which the various conceptual planes of each installation are made to cross.

Garaicoa belongs to the youngest generation of Cuban photographers who have embarked on a serious research and reflection on the human condition under the most severe existential



Carlos René Aguilera.

conditions. It is not a matter of reaffirming traditional social values, but rather, individual ones, those that wait in the shadows for an opportunity to show their faces and say "I am, I am here, I exist beyond all contingencies and circumstances, with my gods and beliefs, my fears and anxieties, my hopes and my dreams". A photography that looks inside houses, inside bodies, inside the history of mankind.

This group of young artists represents the most defiant and provocative trends in Cuban visual arts. Along with other Cuban artist who live abroad they are upholding a living tradition: that of critically weaving art and history together, man and his context, the human condition and its epoch. Those who are still in the classrooms of the Art School and Art Institute also seem unlikely to abandon this tradition, as if a manifest destiny were pushing them to the streets every day to see, see, and see.

Whether by touching a nerve, by showing dramatic moments of Cuba's contemporary reality or by using humour as an instrument for distancing ourselves to some extent from that which populates and disturbs our dreams, Cuban artists do not flag in their efforts to contribute to the creation of a critical

conscience that goes beyond the merely anecdotal or descriptive.

In this is to be found their strength and the interest they have awakened in other contexts. When many of these works are shown outside Cuba, it is true that they lose some of their meaning and many of their allusions are lost, but their overall spirit does come across to a public that is able to perceive flashes of an agitated, passionate, vehement, provocative culture that is capable of conveying human and social sensations with great resonance. This is an art that throbs, that bleeds, that mobilizes very different moods.

This is not unique to Cuban art, but is common to much of the art that is made in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, where the market has not yet fully corrupted the origin and social function of art in these still pre-industrial cultures. That is the difference to be noted in the macro-exhibits of these regions of the world: in sum, life is felt to flow between canvases, papers, wood, objects, and textiles, because art is always linked to life, and pursuing, exalting and condemning it. This manner of constructing our own culture stems from the very interior of complex processes of self-recognition and identification of man and his environment, and this link appears to be infinite, because man is infinite in his being and doing. This connection must not exhaust itself as long as there remain to be solved some of the major problems that consume energy and time in this part of the world. I don't know what will happen to art when these problems disappear. Before that day comes, too much life remains to be lived. And in Cuba, we are just beginning.