

THE HISTORICAL PORTRAITS OF
Alexis Esquivel

HERITAGE AND RUPTURE: BAD LYRICISM



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“... the force of the theme and the force of the painting have the same intensity. However, it’s possible that this description is only useful to define a good painter.” Luis Camnitzer. (Black Art in New York)

The artistic object of Alexis Esquivel historical portraiture, makes him the heir of a long and multistylistic tradition of national portraiture, which began, at least solidly, during the eighteenth century with the work of the freed mulato slave Vicente Escobar. It was continued by the students of the “San Alejandro” Academy, founded by the french painter Jean Baptiste Vermay, who had been a pupil of Jacques Louis David and who brought with him the legacy of European neoclassicism. The tradition was revived during the nineteenth and at the start of

the twentieth century by Juan Jorge Peoli, José Arburu Morell, Armando Menocal and other academic painters. After this came the era of official appointments, which depended on one being the painter to successive republican presidents. Oligarchic clans shared the luxury of commissioning fortunate painters, (fortunate because the material rewards were attractive), the painting of a Portrait, (which was scrupulous and realist), of a Character belonging to their hermetic bourgeois circles. Some time later, if we insist on doing some History of Art in Cuba, we’ll see the Cuban modernists burdened with expressionist, cubist, suprematist, dadaist or surrealist constructions which came from far away Europe across the Seas. At that time almost all the atmosphere of insular art had a certain modern

Western taste about it. We can exclude some cases who, though not being academic in the strict sense of the term, weren’t really modern, and still practised portraiture, like Jorge Arche, if we are to give a name. The invasion of Abstract Expressionism from North America somewhat demeaned the tradition of the portrait during the 50’s. Then the Cuban Revolution arrived in January 1959, and like in all social revolutions, the politicization of daily life was greatly intensified. Art was instituted “inside the Revolution”. Exceptional was the work of the master Raúl Martínez, who made a series of pop portraits. (José Martí, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro), as an after-thought on exacerbated political propaganda of the 60’s. The rest of the Cuban portraitists offered their services to the propagation of our leaders our political directors’ and our martyrs’ appearances, through the media of printed colour reproductions.

It wasn’t until the 80’s that the portrait, (accepting its historical topicality, and having become a genuine “other” interpretation of reality), conquered laudable relevance and marked the end of the postcard decade that the 70’s eventually ended up as.

After marching in all the parades and after memorizing all the hymns, “The children of utopia” found it very unstimulating to become the “docile employees of the establishment’s

thought". Already, by the beginning of the 80's, the critical acidity and the political mistrust of that young intelligentsia started to be uncomfortable for Power. The obsession of these young people to make Cuban social reality a liberating process, exploded all the moral assumptions and the ideological incongruencies of a system whose crisis infested the practise of simulation, manipulation and inefficiency.

Evidently, the act of portraiture was equally transformed from simple contemplative image into a simulacrum of conceptual communication. Alexis was among the young who, between 1985 and 1990, delivered their first critical blows, from the most fresh and relaxed post-vanguard or postmodern attitude.

From his most contemporary precursors, Alexis inherits in turn not only the *concept of understanding art as spiritual, practical and rational justification, as creative imaginativeness towards artistic toil, but also the conception of creativity without the immaturity and neatness of the modernists, as an exercise of visual memory, and its discursive renewal that directs its strategies towards the theory of a new textuality of the mythical, (the mythical in terms of postmodernist limits that comprises the ancient myth, the consumerist, and politico-historical myth)*. He therefore accords prime



Alexis Esquivel. *Portrait of Che Guevara*, 1990. Mixed media on carton. 50 x 70 cm.

importance to the protagonism of juxtaposed erudition that is juxtaposed and discontinuous. From his predecessors as well he has gleaned certain constructive formulas that can be exemplified in the art-object.



Alexis Esquivel. *Hitler, Stalin and the Big Social Project*, 1990. Mixed media on carton. 50 x 70 cm.

The 80's was an era of thawing political and socio-cultural tensions, both for the Cuban and the international scene, it was a time of economic boom and institutional splendour. However, as far the problems of confronting the scandalous themes of the historical portrait went, there was still no equanimity, despite the brave efforts of artists like Leandro Soto, Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas, Alexis Novoa, Joel Rojas and José Angel Toirac; or to be more precise, incomprehension is still prevalent, because as Néstor García Canclini correctly points out in his article, "Culture and Power, where has investigation gone?", "the crisis of hegemonies and the loss of a practical epistemology that legitimates Power forces it to reformulate its coercing mechanisms towards a repressive state at the beginning of the present decade".

However, where can we find the longed for slogan of the authentic?. Simple. In the edifying subtleties of the art works, in the historicist atmosphere that deformatizes their new recreated *technology, their testimonial or unedited character, their tricks beguiling offence, the respect shown for historical personalities in ridiculous, laughable, absurd, atemporal and metaphorical situations, circumstantial contexts, in which they are never shown to us; the mass of superimposed interpretations, the stylistic combinations that determine innovative, strange and interesting figuration. Implied scandal.*

The political context of Joseph Beuys, Fujiyama's philosophical speculation, chromatic contrasts and harmonies that recall Warhol and Bacon, the representational conspiracy between Mexican muralism, comic or pop, the compositional exactitude that Pollock never did want in his "informal drippings", and the eminently ludic, telluric and humanizing sense of each painting.

Certain paintings clearly corroborate this. For example, "Retrato de Gorbachov en pose romántica", (Portrait of Gorbachov in a romantic pose), where irony nearly turns to sarcasm commenting on the bad times

that the "political snob" is experiencing. Mijail Gorbachov posing as a batter. (a baseball player, a national Cuban sport, a game practised in the US, Japan, Mexico and Taiwan), who is batting the wrong way round; in this sport to bat is one thing, and that means gripping the bat correctly with your hands. If you are left-handed, your right hand must grip the handle part, and the left is top, so that when you swing, the hand and wrist of your strongest arm directs the strike; if you are right handed, then it's the other way round. Mijail, clumsily, is batting to the left, yet his pose is as if he were batting right-handedly. Closer analysis of the conceptual content leads us to the dichotomy and ambiguity that

is a consequence of mixing the codes that govern the left and the right, terms that are essential for party politics. (This is the second version of the work, the first is done with mixed media and the batsman is completely confused, he is posing to strike to the right, but as if he were left-handed.). The result is as intended, paradox.

Another example of this disturbing, paradoxical, historical tale, that is his pictorial foundation, is the painting *Céspedes y la libertad de los esclavos* (*Céspedes and the freedom of the slaves*), a work where the burlesque treatment of blacks shares common and explicit content with Robert Colescott, where the abolitionist and liberating ideals of the "Nation's Father" and the actual consequences of that racial emancipation face each other.

The positive and negative consequences of the suppression of social racism in our country, a process that culminated in the Revolution. At this point, I would like to clarify that I use the categorical term of "social racism", because if in theory in social, government and state spheres the total abolition of slavery has been legislated, at levels of popular sociology or psychology this phenomenon has not been eradicated. The vast majority of the black population continues to subexist in social marginality that to a certain extent is perpetuated by their consciousness of repressed citizens.



Alexis Esquivel.
Portrait of Gorbachov in Romantic Position (II version), 1992.
Oil on carton.
42 x 58 cm.