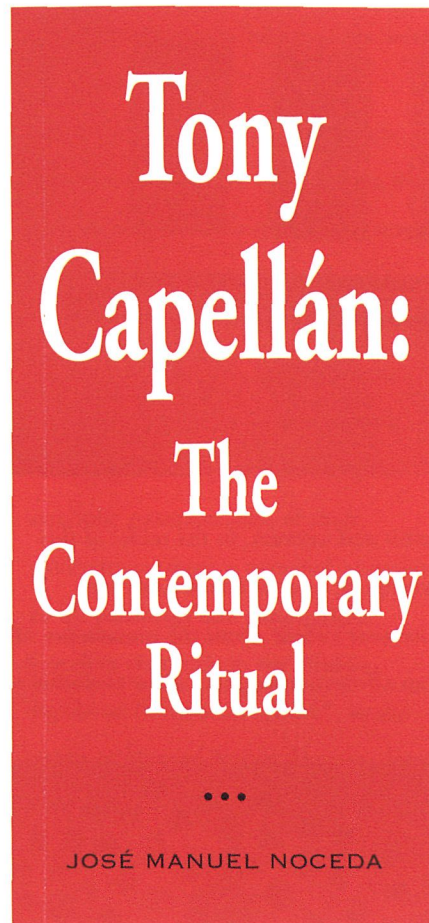


TERRITORIES

Tony Capellán (Tamboril, Dominican Republic, 1955) is one of the most versatile, provocative and controversial artists in the contemporary art scene of this small Antillean island. With his innate vocation for mixing new poetical tendencies and already-existing concepts, his work during the last 15 years has spanned a whole range of rhythmic sequences and vehement negations typical of the artist's gift for endless ingenuity and his insatiable thirst for creation.

Looking at his work we can see how Tony "militates" within the select group of artists who make up the new Caribbean avant-garde. By this I refer mainly to Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, but also to some individual artists working in other islands: Minerva Lauffer, Nelson Carrilho and Jeanne Grigori in Curaçao; Elvis López in Aruba; Mario Benjamin and Edouard Duval-Carrié in Haïti; Annalee Davis and Gayle Hermick in Barbados; Thierry Alet in Guadeloupe; and Ernest Breleur and Marc Latamie in Martinique. These artists, scattered throughout the rosary of the Antillean chain, attack the ethnocentrism still prevalent in their societies, by forming a dynamic relationship with the norms of international art which they then take on as reference points for local expression. They assert their



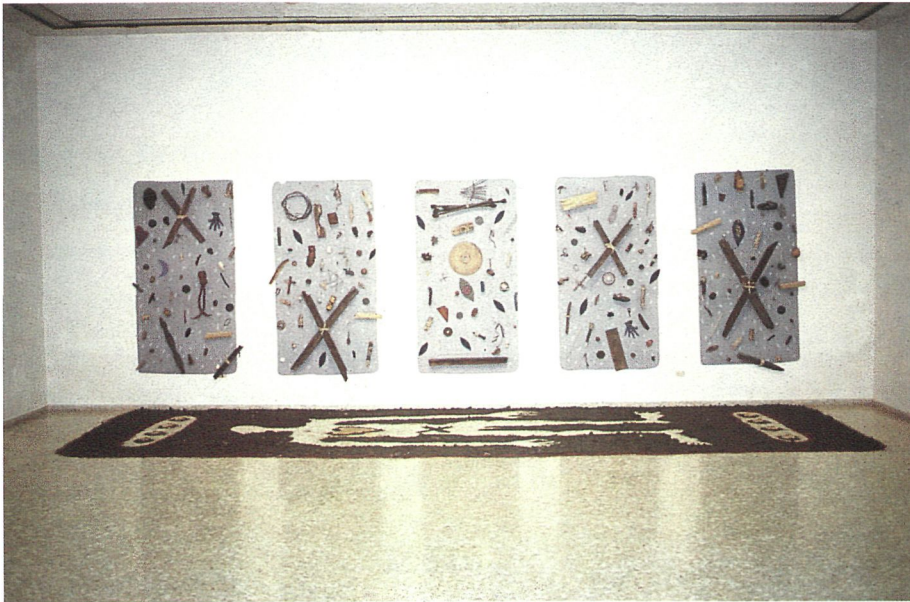
nonconformity with certain stereotypical notions of the exotic tropics, identified years ago by the artist and critic René Louise from Martinique, and appropriate new, sophisticated languages with which to develop new images. The result is an unprejudiced fusion of dominant post-modernity mixed with certain aspects of their own contemporary cultures and societies.

An overview of the interiorities of Capellán's personal iconography – including *Obsesiones cotidianas* (exhibited in June 1988), *Mitologías y ritos* (1990), *Mitos del Caribe* (1992)

and *Marcha Forzada* (1995) – reveals the plethora of expressive proposals and conceptual motivations. A recurring cycle of imagery is constructed; it is cyclical, born in the immediacy of reality, passed through myth and finally returns to the contingencies of overwhelming and dramatic quotidian context.

One of the key factors in Capellán's art is his apparent disinterest in creating original patterns. He seems to confirm Gianni Vattimo's thesis that "novelty is no longer an important value", and he partakes in a game of seductions and "impurities". This complex fusion of styles and disciplines shows him to be a well-established, multi-faceted artist: a man of almost cannibalistic, all-encompassing vision, successful in the fields of graphic work, drawing, painting, installations and environmental art. Klaus Steinmetz would say that this can be seen in his ability to merge the impressions of various artists and readjust them in a new ritual, thereby creating highly personal and unusually powerful work.

Capellán leads us through the vast repertory of Caribbean island reality, populated by different scales of time and space, centuries and geographies, from the archaic depths of native indigenous communities to an encounter with our so-called end-of-the-millennium modernity – or post-modernity.



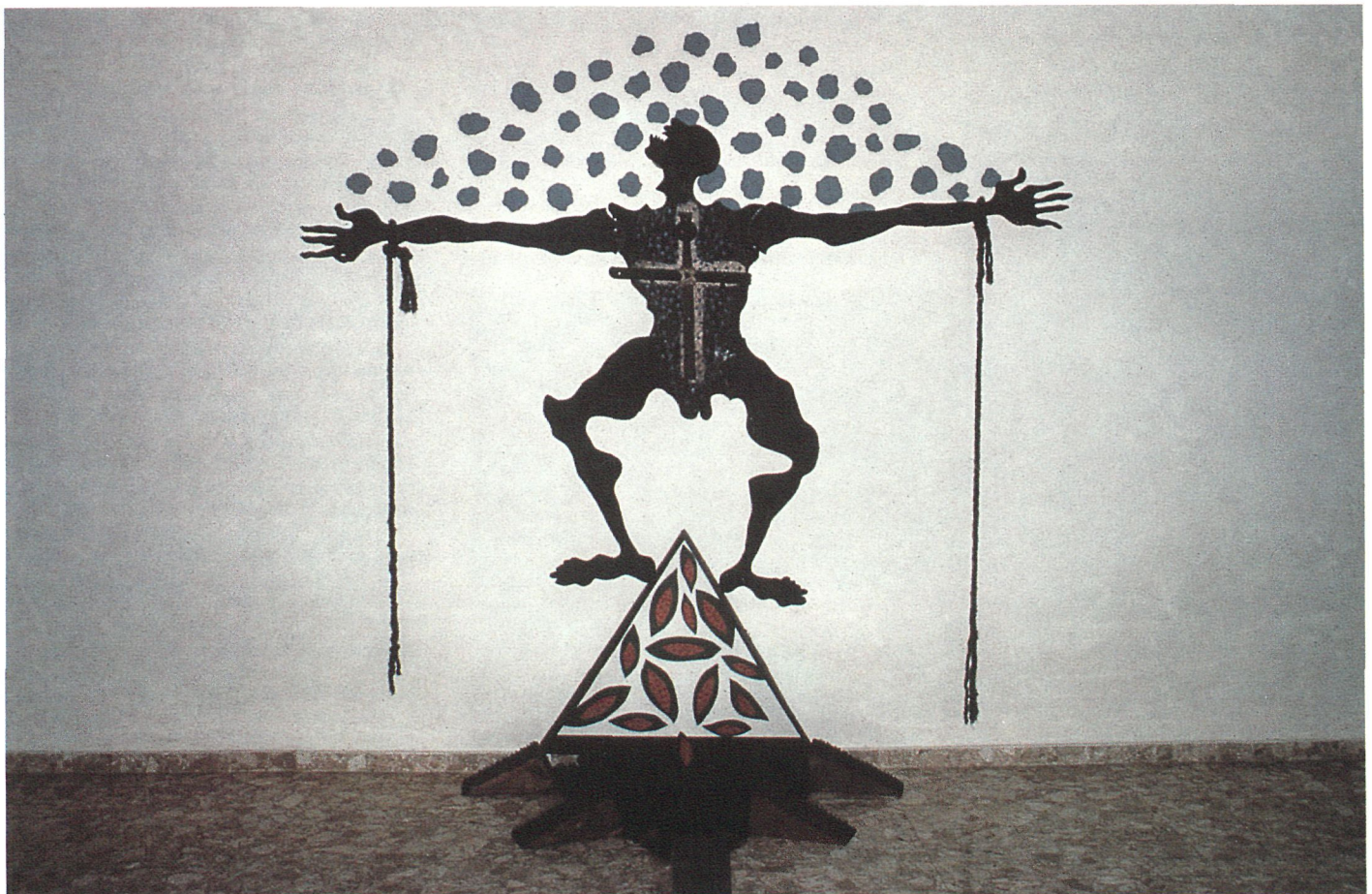
According to Néstor García Canclini, the artist carries out a representational operation in which down-trodden history and hybrid contemporary society co-

habit and interact. In the midst of this whirlpool, images which resemble Cortázar's ideas about the immanence of "an all-devouring past" show evolution's

Tony Capellán.

capacity for condensing history, as well as the tragic natural confluence of past and present and its link with Antillean history and civilisation.

It was the prints, drawings, paintings and installations based on mythology which initially brought Tony Capellán success in a regional context. During the 80's, investigations into an ancestral past and the questioning of cultural assumptions took on a new



Tony Capellán.

dimension, as artists began re-evaluating the role played by tradition in creation, which had always been defined theoretically by ontological limitations or anthropological research. The use of pre-Columbian and Afro-Caribbean icons, symbols and mytho-poetic or philosophical characters became more widespread.

Between 1990 and 1993 Capellán's interest in the wealth of myths in Latin American (which, as Carpentier points out, have long been buried in Europe) may have been influenced by both endogenous and "exogenous" factors. The first refers to a clear link between the history of Dominican art and a magical, syncretic religious universe, which was first seen in the 40's in the pioneering work of Darío Suro and José Gausachs and still continues in the more recent work of Antonio Guadalupe, Alonso Cuevas, Manuel Montilla, Radhamés Mejía and Alberto Ulloa, in the mythical reality of Quisqueya. The second, external factor concerns the gradual rediscovery of complex Afro-American and Afro-Cuban cultural myth-symbols in Cuban art from the first half of the 80's onwards. These myths have been reinterpreted by José Bedia, Juan Francisco Elso, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey and Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal, among others, who have employed formal lexicons and conceptual strategies taken from conceptual art, land art and arte povera, in what Gerardo Mosquera calls fragments of living mythology used to

"develop a metaphorical-philosophical reflection on man, life, nature and society, linked to ethical considerations which constitute our vision of the world 'from the outside in'" (1).

The work created during this period shows greater affinity with Bedia and Olazábal's anthropological currents which refer to the traditional concept of Latin American and Caribbean people. Thematically it finds inspiration in elements of popular culture, not by imitating it but by recuperating the symbolic paraphernalia of their environment from a personal viewpoint. In his paintings and installations, Capellán descends to the "hidden depths of Dominican nature", in the words of Manuel Nuñez. He goes deep down into an iconographic tradition which has belonged to the Antilles since pre-Hispanic times. In this sense, his visual manoeuvres reconcile anthropology with archaeology. Oil paintings and acrylics on canvas such as *Altars profanos, Símbolos rotos, Así en el cielo como en la tierra, Mitos del Caribe, Interrogatorios febriles en el dilema del Caribe*, ...all demonstrate this ancestral communication which has now been replaced in our memory thanks to an imaginary archaeology. These two-dimensional pieces are divided into small independent squares, in which Capellán inserts tiny signs, fragments and figures, just as an archaeologist processes and identifies every excavated object. The pigment's sand-like quality also contributes to this

association with archaeology. We can only understand the disconnected images by unifying all the squares, in a process which reinforces the idea of catching up with history by following the track of man and his discoveries.

Capellán's installations, on the other hand, are closer to the theatricality of rituals. These three-dimensional pieces are influenced by ancestral mythology which brings sophistication and natural archaism together, in terms of meaning and interpretation. As in arte povera, he incorporates simple materials of non-industrial origin into his art: earth, wood, cardboard, metal, seeds. Amable López evaluates the power of symmetry in his compositions as "a door to perception and aesthetic value giving rise to a discourse and series of concepts which lead us to the wondrous birth and transformation of a new ethnicity, evident in his legends, spiritual rhythms and use of colours..." (2).

In his work, Capellán exploits the similarities between mythical structures and the foundations of harmony. In this way, he perpetuates myths by means of an allegorical, "frozen" projection of ritual, which he manipulates and conjugates within a specific time-space context. The striking symmetry of his installations puts into order not only the signs and icons of pluralist evolution which was open to Western influences, but also the rituals and mythologies they disregarded. Hence the importance of constant references from the indigenous



Tony Capellán. *La sabiduría*, 1993. Installation.

Afro-Caribbean world to life cycles of earthly existence, to cosmic energy, life and death, fertility and infertility.

Capellán therefore makes new myths by invoking the creative spirit, the image of myths in our memory. He turns to mythologies in the process of construction, as Carpentier would say: incomplete histories that confirm the man-nature relationship which breathes life into an unnamed universe.

However, Tony Capellán's artistic production has not been limited to these ideas. Over the last 3 years he has gradually abandoned his previous path. In 1993 Capellán presented various mythological pieces in the Voluntariado of the Museo de las Casas Reales, in Santo Domingo, as well as installations whose titles obviously stem from the great daily dilemmas of Caribbean people: *Ojalá que llueva café* and *El bocado cotidiano*. This work uses forms

which reflect the existential alienation suffered by post-war, post-colonial

society, and aims to recuperate the risks which surround the artist and affect life.

One of the artist's main themes has been that of migration. The historic flux of people populating the Caribbean islands has recently turned into an unprecedented migratory trend, identified by Capellán using suitcases and airplanes as visual icons. But, unlike other artists such as the Cuban Sandra Ramos who has also used the suitcase as a personal symbol for travelling and mobility, Capellán makes this poetry a sociological discourse about the reasons people abandon their homeland in notoriously precarious conditions. Art becomes a participatory game with the spectator, sucking him gradually into the



Tony Capellán. Installation.

depths of collective experience. Marianne de Toledo clarifies the meaning of this work: "Tony's installations expand in real and virtual space. For example, the way he distributes his suitcases, his 'toy airplanes' and wire screens in a horizontal and vertical, criss-crossing composition, forces us to move our

economic, social, mythological, personal interpretations..." (3).

In this way, art allows Capellán to explain and interpret life. He always does this by exploring uncertain, shaky ground. His latest explorations have involved the themes of defenceless child victims in the profitable international

called atmospheres. In these, topological backgrounds and allegorical references are replaced by literalness and narrative accounts. His repetition of symbols aims to uncover converging mythologies, and his hallucinatory visions are metaphors for hope and dismay, "irony and pain", in the words of the artist.

Tony Capellán delves wholeheartedly into contemporary rituals. The inter-textual grammar of his installations and atmospheres seduces us with the power of its various *interpretations*. We can see them as the result of local cultural situations or as intermediaries for universal, inter-cultural experiences. Capellán exploits the empathy between mythical and social discourse; his myth, be it real or imaginary, is brought to life by an *Antillean humanism* nourished by mythology's hypothetical ability to restore a utopian society.



Tony Capellán. Installation.

vision, our head, our whole body. It is just the beginning of his intense perspective. Then, after observing Tony's ever-present aesthetic proportions and the richness of the poor materials, our eye drifts towards each 'piece of luggage'...and far-off places awaiting us... Finally come the political,

market of human organs, the lack of basic nutrition, health and education for millions of children in the South, and the endless harassment suffered by the "guests" at a detention centre for young offenders in his country. Capellán's skill as a creator of installations is increased by using huge spaces, perhaps better

Notes

- 1 Gerardo Mosquera. "Juan Francisco Elso. Essay on America". Havana, s.p., 1986. Mosquera concentrates his discussion on the use of cosmogonical, philosophical and iconographic elements from Afro-American magical religious systems in the work of contemporary Caribbean artists. With reference to this, see his text "Africa dentro de la plástica caribeña", in *Plástica del Caribe*, Havana, Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1989, p.137-164.
- 2 Amable López. "Las instalaciones de Tony Capellán: mitologías de un ser polisintético". Capellán. *Mitologías y ritos*, Santo Domingo, 1990.
- 3 Marianne de Tolentino. "Las instalaciones polivalentes de Tony Capellán: otra forma de exportar el alma". Tony Capellán. *Exportadores de almas*, Santo Domingo, Museo de Arte Moderno, 1994.