

blue or the rose period. but he preferred to take the risks.

CDB: Risk is always manifest in your aesthetic proposal. What other ideas or concepts remain in your work? Do you think that, other than intense, it is as calculated and intelligent as certain critics have pointed out?

JGD: No doubt when I was four years old I was much more intelligent. There is always a concept and an emotion, frequently sexual. Sexuality is a very important force. But what unites my work is a sound, a particular sound. If you pay attention you hear: "bi.bi.bi.....uh.uh.uh". It's got to be that way. As soon as I begin to hear that sound then I know the painting is finished. If it doesn't have it, if I don't get it, then I get depressed and I destroy it. All my work has got it, it's not music, it is a sound.



## A CARIBBEAN LOOK AT THE CARIBBEAN

SECOND PAINTING  
BIENNIAL  
OF SANTO DOMINGO

BY JOSÉ MIGUEL  
NOCEDA FERNÁNDEZ

Santo Domingo is a sanctuary for the extraordinary. Every day its streets are filled with people who go about their business leisurely, tinkers and salesmen who offer you peeled sugar cane lollipops, it vibrates with the infectious local rhythms of the "merengue", and through it run public buses that would daze followers of everyday magic and probably the author of "In praise of folly".

In the midst of such a singular scenario the Second Painting Biennial of Santo Domingo was inaugurated last December 1994 in the Museum of

Modern Art. This exhibition was an initiative that resulted from a decree signed by President Balaguer, as a follow-up to the celebrations of the polemical "Vth Centenary of the Discovery and Evangelization of America". Although it is early to predict the future, the event looks like being one of the most serious efforts so far made to put an end to the cultural isolation and the limited contact that still permeate relations between Caribbean nations, endowing the region with its own exhibition space and a point of encounter and artistic debate that will serve to define our "common destiny" in the field of aesthetics.

The meeting at Quisqueya was more like a family get-together, a sincere analysis of the "intimacy" of our production, unharassed by the voracious pressures of the market. Save certain exceptions, the editors of the great international art magazines didn't turn up, nor did the promoters of sanctified biennials, nor the world famous critics.

The biennial was opened till February 1995, exhibiting the work of some two hundred artists representing more than thirty three countries. A jury made up of Caribbean and Latin American intellectuals, Gerald Alexis (Haiti), Lilian Llanes, (Cuba), David Boxer (Jamaica), Alissandra Cummins, (Barbados) Dominique Brebion, (Martinique), E. de Garuz, (Panama), Ivonne Pini, (Colombia) managed to give twelve individual prizes that were objectively and fairly distributed among: Jean Claude Garoute, (Haiti), Lilian Lira, (Venezuela), Eleomar Puente, (Cuba), Raúl Recio, (Dominican Republic), Stanely Greaves, (Barbados), Carlos René Aguilera, (Cuba), Dénis Nuñez, (Nicaragua), Nora Rodríguez, (Puerto Rico), Armando Lara, (Honduras), Kamid Moulferdi, (Martinique), Néstor Otero, (Puerto Rico) and Milton George, (Jamaica). Acknowledgement plaques were awarded to Venezuela, Honduras and Cuba for the best collective exhibitions.

Biennials and their prizes have left a bitter taste in recent decades, casting doubt over their potential efficiency. Some forecast their imminent disappearance and saw them as entities on the blink in cultural terms. They are

always involved in polemics and they have steadfast critics who condemn their commercial interests, having set themselves up as branches of cultural hierarchy and dominance and for the relativity of their validity. However, biennials, triennials, and "dokumentas" multiply on the face of the earth and emphasize the transnational action of international languages on the periphery. When the promoters of these great events invite Caribbean artists they set up a "kind of cabinet of curiosities or hunting-trophy room", that perpetuates the notion of utopia or reinforces notions of the "marvellous" to define artistic practise in this part of the Western hemisphere.

We are dealing with a difficult area. The fin de siècle comes to the Caribbean as a mixed bag of things, with artists that have experienced ups and downs in their careers and countries who have gone through manifold crises, that face vast contradictions and contrasts in their educational standards, the assimilation of modernity in the postmodern era, the reception of contemporary issues and the precariousness of promotional mechanisms. In such context prizes and biennials help to better the reputation of these events and they can act as a centripetal force which stimulates creativity.

The second edition of this event stimulated dialogue between different traditions and styles, (considering all those countries that had a museum legacy as valid participants). The biennial seen in general terms resembles the typical creole "ajjaco" dish seasoned with multiple visions of the region's visual panorama. Under the same roof it grouped the Centroamerican states, with coastlines giving to the Caribbean and the "painful islands". The organizers assembled well-known artists such as Raúl Martínez (Cuba), Carlos Dávila Rinaldi (Puerto Rico), the Hondurians Aníbal Cruz and Ezequiel Padilla, Manuel Zumbado (Costa Rica), Ofelia Rodríguez (Colombia) or Radhamés Mejía (Dominican Republic) and lesser well-known young artists. They also tolerated the exhibition of certain works that transgress the concept of painting.

The biennial revealed the debt that

Caribbean artists still have with the so-called “tropical problem”, in the interpretations of the exuberant and luminous landscapes by Ludwig de L’Isle (Aruba), Alison Chapman-Andrews (Barbados), and Winston Branchi (St. Lucia), that contrast with dramatic perceptions of the natural environment in Victor Hugo Irazabal (Venezuela). Afrocaribbean spirituality emanated from the symbols and the masks by the Haitian Edner Sufal, Edward Bowen (Trinidad and Tobago), the Dominican Radhamés Mejía and in the fauvist colour of Stan Burnside (Bahamas), that is inspired by the emancipating energy of carnival in Bahamas, the *junkanoo*, and follows ad libitum procedures in painting that remind us of jazz rhythms.

Jean Claude Garoute (Haiti) and Milton George (Jamaica) are involved in one of the most fertile currents of Caribbean art. Both of them take their images from the iconography of syncretic religions of African origin. Geroute is a visionary, reducing his painting to the pristine value of the sign. His *Variaciones sobre Haití en 100 movimientos* are a signic compilation of vudu and primitivism. George, on the other hand, is devoted to the expressionist tradition, and narrates his own private mysticism.

Other notable interpretations explored issues like the menacing presence of death, research in memory and history, the popular, formalism, (with abstraction at the top), and the theme, so often mistreated, of identity. Steve Buditt and Irene Shaw (Trinidad and Tobago), Laura Quintanilla (México) and Edra Soto (Puerto Rico) reflected on existential angst. The last three artists did so by focusing on the *condition of women*, as women who live in a male dominated society. They express the misery and the repressive atmosphere that surrounds them. However the most interesting artists of the event are those that try to reintegrate art and reality in postmodern

times and force a confrontation between the Caribbean visual tradition and social priorities, insecurity with respect to the future and the ramifications of power.

Stanley Greaves (Barbados) and Carlos René Aguilera (Cuba) have common themes. Both of them are careful craftsmen when it comes to painting and they resort to metaphor when they want to “camouflage” contents. Greaves presented a triptych called: *There is a meeting here tonight*, that represented a city besieged by an army of dogs. The relation with the metaphysical school of Giorgio de Chirico, and especially with Magritte, is evident, although now they serve another reality dominated by fear and desolation. Aguilera is an exception within the new Cuban “avant-garde”. Carlos René combines an intertextual discourse that passes through local landscape and certain key archetypes, art history –French classicism or the Russian avant-garde, for example–, with direct references to Cuban 70’s painting, conjugating certain anachronisms as counterpoint to aesthetic strategies that were dominant during the 80’s.

The dominican Raúl Recio or the Cuban Eleomar Puente are less subtle. Recio is a multifaceted artist. He is skilled in drawing, painting, graphics, installation and performances. His powerful and anguishing works reveal the torment caused by the fallacies of the world we live in. Emigration and power rituals are the ingredients of his complex philosophy. *Pintura de tres horas y Homenaje a nadie*, are neo-expressionist canvases, of acid tonality, that pretend to track down the hiding place of the notorious Haitian political criminal Michel François, presumably living in the Dominican Republic. Puente is concerned with social images and the grotesque projection of the Latin American.

This young man uses iconographic devices that have been generated by trophology, he invents parables that inevitably refer to contemporary

problems, like *Fuga* and the Cuban migratory exodus.

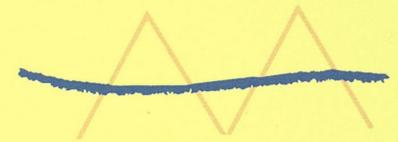
The Hondurian Arnaldo Lara bridged the gap between past and present. His paintings *Navegantes* and *Refugiados* stem from history, faith, torment and oblivion. Finally, Nora Rodríguez (Puerto Rico) has something to say about the two cultures imposed on the Puertorican. She is a captive of nostalgia; Nora returns to the age of innocence, uses baby language that is pure, mixes doll houses with infantile images and landscapes. Following the rules of the grammar book, *Domineichon* castilianizes an English text that the author jots down as it sounds and not correctly, in an innocent act of resistance to the dissolution of national values in a foreign life-style, language and behaviour.

We have to recognize the value of the Painting Biennial of the Caribbean and Central America as a project. It can help to shatter prejudices that connect artistic production of the region with the carnivalesque, the “popular” and the topic of tropical frivolity. The event presents new art that using very contemporary idioms transcribes its hostility to established values and begins to worry about the serious enigmas besetting man, threatening his environment and the future of their countries. This effort expresses the plurality of tendencies that are both poetic and universal, and which are present in contemporary culture.

The Caribbean can’t wait for others to discover it. At the gates of the twenty first century, our nations are thinking about joint economic actions that will enable them to participate in the project of a global civilization with a different power structure. In this example the *biennial emerges as an alternative to cultural integration* as it is still understood. It will bring about balance between the arts in the region, and will prepare them, in the words of Edouard Glissant, “for the unity of the diverse”.

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