

materials and its objects, for the search stems from matter in the first place, together with an open symbolic expression that alludes to aggression, defense and its exchanges. This oeuvre constitutes a unique chapter within Cuban art, that bears the signature of the artist's personality foremostly, rather than of artistic and cultural processes. Though he took part very early in the 80's in the movement of renovation, Gelabert has kept away, at a distance, choosing his own Cuban sculpture. A stranger within sculpture, and a stranger everywhere.



## THE BODY AND THE COSMOS

BY GERARDO MOSQUERA

Variety is a hallmark of new Cuban art. We can identify several different parts of it that can be seen as conceptual groups, into which, depending on their spontaneous development, certain artists can be fitted. Prearranged agendas are out (in Cuba art has never been very Manifesto oriented). One of these areas could be called "Elso's zone". It is the result of the territory that Juan Francisco Elso, (1956-1988) has discovered both as artist and as teacher, or rather that he has taken from the global process of his work as a mystical-pedagogic aesthetic experience. This territory has been explored by some of his closest friends, like Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, and to a certain extent, by Rubén Torres Llorca, and his disciples: Tania Bruguera, Carlos Estévez and Luis Gómez. Two other renown names could be cited in this group, not as Elso followers but due to the initial rapport between their work. I mean, of course, José Bedia and Ana Mendieta, whose work exhibits definite characteristics, in particular the latter's.

Elso's zone is a milestone in our art

history. Hegemonism, eurocentrism and the condescending attitude expressed by power centres (all of these being traits that mark international processes of evaluation and legitimation), has signified that proper recognition is still forthcoming. Only Mendieta and Bedia are well-known, yet the real dimensions of the territory they have discovered aren't for the moment understood. Elso was generally praised during the itinerancy of the "Ante America" exhibition in Colombia, Venezuela, USA and Costa Rica, although it only afforded a glimpse of the power that underlies his art.

What strikes as transcendent about his art and the work of his followers is that it has introduced a new dimension to the religious and the philosophical. Not to any religion in particular, nor to the illustration of religion, but to a transcendent interpretation of the world, and to the assimilation of religious methodologies by art.

These methodologies are related to mechanisms of ritual, with interaction of the symbolic and the sacred and the cosmogonic, with non-Western intuitions of the world, –especially African and Indoamerican, with mysticism, with the logics of myth, with the effort to understand reality in terms of the symbolic, and with art applied to existential significance.

If for centuries art was a medium of religion, in "Elso's zone" it is reconnected once again with religion to act as a medium for the independent practise of art. Religious art is something impossible; what happens is that the religious is inserted in the very structure of art.

The work of these young artists continues to be postmodern, it is art conceived for the gallery and the museum. They take as starting point the conceptual, processes, the symbolic dimension of the materials, and they concentrate foremostly on installations. From another angle, they could be seen as a peculiar –and transformative– conceptualist manifestation in Cuba. The revolution that they bring doesn't really exceed the boundaries of the artistic; rather, it transforms the interior, and opens up a new perspective. The excessive element is associated with the

personal experience of the artists, they "create" works in the traditional sense, codifying through a carefully arranged symbolism. However the process of creating them is undissociable from the intrinsic inner experience, the learning and initiation into the universal, in psychological and existential terms. There is an extraordinary similarity between the practise of art and of religion: they are both personal cults with transcendent projection. These works that reveal great visual metaphors imply reflection from a cosmogonic to a domestic scale, although they always represent a personal mystical process via art.

This occult aspect can be intuited in the works. A North American critic said of Elso's work, "these objects have a power that transcends technique, that even transcends aesthetic means". If an aura has been established for the art work, in cases like these, it operates on a level beyond the artistic, that resembles true sacralization.

While Brey approaches the unconscious, Torres Llorca tends to the social, Bruguera emphasizes process and Gómez existence, perhaps it is Carlos Estévez who has continued Elso's perspective in the most orthodox way. As in the latter's and in Bedia's case too, his work has a cosmogonic vocation. Every installation, painting or drawing by Estévez is a fragment of a philosophical-transcendent interpretation of the universe or of one of its aspects, and simultaneously an effort to conjure them both. Yet his symbolism is more indirect and at the same time extremely dense, like Gómez. His poetics is more philosophical, in the manner of transcendentalism addressing the great cosmogonic and anthropological themes.

Estévez uses visual metaphors in order to build a cosmovision in mosaic, which does not establish totality as it is infinitely open. This cosmogony is an area where fragments of cosmovisions interact, as well as myths and images of many cultures, anthropological interpretations, philosophical ideas, personal experience and visions. Such a diverse constellation of elements is systematized symbolically through the visual talent of the artist, through his

treatment of source materiales and his imagination. The works, above all the drawings, are like integrated circuits that condense a multitude of diverse components in synthetic images. *conceptual images that structure ideas* symbolically, and which are equally endowed with power of suggestion. We could speak of poetic conceptualism. His work reinterprets the birth of poetry as a synthesis and categorical interpretation of the universe, that engenders a cosmogonic aesthetic sensation.

To have a clearer idea of how this works, let us take a look at *No sólo somos cuerpos*. In this work of singular simplicity the silhouette of an animal penetrated by the cosmos is drawn. We know that the constellations are imaginary compositions of stars that are drawn by us according to how we perceive their position. These figures in turn relate to myths and cosmogonies. It is a cosmos based representation, using the tropological resource of the visual simile, that enables one to “speak in bodies”, as Vico said of tropi. These drawings of the firmament integrate a structure of myths that generates a cosmic logic, with a discourse attached. The artist assumes this complex organization, and develops its meaning through a poetic inversion: not only does he see bodies in the cosmos, he also sees the cosmos in the body.

The strength of this image, stems from its logical simplicity and naturalness. It is part of a discourse that aesthetically expresses, in a contemporary language, a conscience of the universe as non-stratified continuum, derived from a non-Western *Weltanschauung*. The active presence of non-Western components in Cuban culture generates familiarity with these intuitions that represent the opposite end of exoticism, and different to the kind of alterity that surrealism, the “enlightened primitivism” of Joseph Beuys and other post-modern artists proposed. Such familiarity renders possible the creation of modern art with an interiorized manipulation of these intuitions, using them rather than borrowing them.

New Cuban art has contributed considerably to the introduction of non-Western concepts into postmodernity.

Frederic Jameson was stunned at the extraordinary force emanating from the work of the artists, that surpassed the superficial effects of similar elements that are currently found in international art. *It represents a notable step forward* in overcoming Western monism in artistic practise, that has become more democratic after the greater pluralist tolerance of postmodernism. An art of such status implies much more than mere projection from postmodernist pseudocentralism, it endorses a real decentralization, that can bring about transformations in culture. They would propitiate the creation of modernity from an active and fertile plurality.



## NO SENSE OF PLACE

BY BERTA SICHEL

The disengaged “historical” and “temporal” experiences of immigrant artists in the United States was the theme of two New York exhibitions last spring: “Joseph Stella,” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and “Beyond the Borders: Art of Recent Immigrants,” at the Bronx Museum. Yet, their similarities and differences went unnoticed by the public, by the critics, and even by the institutions themselves. In a broad sense, these exhibitions expose the trajectory of major transformations taking place in a contemporary political and cultural sphere where new forces promise autonomy to the aesthetic and artistic practices and experiences of specific groups. The question, however, is how this promise is fulfilled.

“Joseph Stella” is a retrospective of an artist who has lived and worked under the spell of modernism and the melting pot mentality. Its backdrop encompasses political and cultural processes, which cancelled out all possibilities for cultural diversity, as well as the formalism of the classic aesthetic

of modernism revolving against realism in art and literature. In contrast. “Beyond the Borders” is a group show comprised of more than 50 works, by 30 artists of 27 nationalities who are currently living in New York City. The works and the conceptual platform of “Beyond the Borders,” were grounded on current multidisciplinary theories that explain cultural identity not as a “fixed essence” that lies unchanged outside history and culture “but as a mobile nature capable of producing its own narratives and representations.” [1]

Although Stella lived under the social pressure that directed immigrants to assimilate “America,” he was a rebel. Arriving by boat from Naples in 1896, he was one of the “new immigrants” –those who came not from western and northern Europe but from eastern and southern Europe and who more frequently settled not in rural areas but rather in cities to work in mills and factories. Stella’s early works reflect this situation, and the exhibition begins with a series of individual portraits of his fellows Italians comrades who, like him, lived in poor settlements on New York’s Lower East Side. Reflecting Stella’s command of Old Master drawings –specifically Van Eyck, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Holbein and Durer– these portraits reveal his strong ties with his own culture and people. At the time, Italians made up 75 percent of New York City’s construction workers.

The catalog essay by curator Barbara Haskell tells us that Stella struggled to find his place in a changing society and to keep his own identity – a determination that alienated him from the New York art scene, especially from 1923 until his death in 1946. When the subject of his drawings and paintings was no longer the icons of the American Industrial Revolution, the same critics and collectors who had supported him since his return in 1912 from a lengthy trip to Europe deserted him, – a situation that went unchanged until recently. The monolithic cultural views of that time could not accept Stella’s allegorical fantasies depicting with vibrancy, sensuality, and glowing colors disparate subject matter: from utopian landscapes and flora of the tropical