Endurance on the Looking Glass: an Art Exhibition of Cuban Art

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In the late 60s the noted Cuban author Gabriel Cabrera Infante squallled a most revealing pun when an interviewer asked him why all the people from the Caribbean look alike. “It is not that all the Caribbean people look alike,” he said; “it is that all the Caribbean people look like us Cubans!” Brassy as it might have sounded—as do most natives from Oriente, the eastern part of the Island, and cradle of her national joust and banter—the easy play on words points to an unassailable fact. Since the beginning of colonization Cuba was the most likely to become the cultural epicenter of influence in all the countries that make up the Caribbean basin, and beyond. For her sheer “strategic” location with respect to the emerging New World Order led by the Spanish Crown, the largest of the West Indies turned into a catalyst for the most formidable example of transculturation in the Americas.

The term transculturation is in itself a domestic invention meant to spot the resulting mix of a timely give-and-take accord among contrasting cultures. It subsumes syncretism in its classical Greek rendition of a “united front” in order to “fight a common enemy.” For a colonial outpost soon troubled by invasions, piracy, brigandage, illegal trade, misgovernment, and the internecine grudges that emanated from the long-stretched institutions of servitude, this type of unity came in handy. Foremost, it managed to mask by the mid-1800s a true outlet against foreign rule and abjection for all the parties involved. Aspiring outcasts from the metropolis along with sub-Saharan African slaves (over one third of the total population then) layered by periodic inflows of Coolies and underground subjects from the Antilles blended to form something new, combative. When the last War of Independence against Spain broke in 1895, Cubans had become especially deft at imprinting a political sense of detachment from Europe while remaining receptive to the universal values of art and culture. The genes of a national consciousness, so to speak, matured by factoring this odd challenge.

In the United States fresh descriptive miscegenation attempts to update Cuban’s fate. Rubén Rumbaut, for instance, coined those that were born in Cuba but reached adulthood as integrated members of the US
society as the “1.5 Generation” —a quantitative shortcoming of sorts recounted as the Desi Arnaz syndrome. After the Revolution the element that the “hyphenated Cuban” attaches implied collaboration with, rather than a resistance to, the historical “common enemy.” At the blameless poles of these compounds we get the acronyms ABC (American-Born-Cuban), and most recently, the CBA (Cuban-Bred-American). Just when the symmetry seemed to bamboozle even further the limbo in the selective overpowering means of others. An antecedent that sorts recounted as the Desi Arnaz syndrome. After the society as the “1.5 Generation” —a quantitative shortcoming of and most recently, the CBA (Cuban-Bred-American). This unendingly nascent and therefore often elusive virtue in Cuban art was recently at stake at the University Art Museum in Santa Barbara, California, where Contemporary Art from Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island was showing. Its promotional brochure falls into the typical ambush of scholastic criticism. “This is the first major exhibition in the United States”, it claims, “dedicated entirely to the work of a new generation of Cuban artists who explore irony as a strategy for psychological survival and oblique commentary on the realities of post-revolutionary Cuba.” Drop a “post,” focus on momentary themes and procedures, slice them into a generation, and one instantly wipes out over 500 years of a growing tradition otherwise splendidly represented in the overall quality of the same exhibition.

Suggesting afterwards that “the improvisation and creative resourcefulness so often required for everyday life in Cuba” is particularly germane to this “new generation,” one meets with a quote from the curator, Marilyn Zeitlin. “Cuba’s isolation,” she consigns, “has produced an artistic output that is fresh and independent. Nothing seems jaded or self-indulgent, but rather full of vitality and relevant to the core issues of living.” The true irony, however, lies in that the “creative resourcefulness” of Cuban art, its freshness and independence, its vitality and relevance, stems from all that is contrary to “isolation.” In order to apprehend the full dimensions of its merits one needs to trace how Cuban art has tamed and imposed itself over titanic cultural dominance, and where “generational” schemes, incidentally, have shrunk in importance. In assessing the painters that in 1927 propelled an atonement. So much so that the publication of non-fictional works by then surpassed that of fiction. “Diagnosis,” “radiography,” “biopsy,” and even “post-mortem” and “requiem” were modish metaphors in Cuba well into the 1950s.

Scholars and artists alike charged national pride from the “laboratory” by reverting “theory” and “experimentation” to the roots of Cubaness. They “unearthed” on the living the long decimated aboriginal population that once roamed free in the Antilles. “Clinical studies” were conducted on the latent influences that were restricted in Europe. Perhaps the most look back at Velázquez, or as in Dali, find formulas in Leonardo or Raphael. In Cuba, there is no need to break with tradition, nor less to rescue it. In Cuba, the artist must inaugurate tradition. (Quoted from “Amelia, el logos
Likewise, Juan Marinello had observed in relation to the artist of this period:

It is not about a generation, which, as such, would raise one single flag. It is about a group united under the clear assumption of their creative function and faithful to the poignant calls of the times, with good loyalty, and better dissidence. Had they limited themselves to the sensual epidermis of Cuban matters, we would no longer remember them today, nor would they be remembered today if they had imitated only the masters with the greatest universal projection. (Comentario al arte, ed. V. López Lemus, Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1983, p. 114. Translation supplied.)

During the very first decade after the installation of a Revolutionary State in Cuba, the painters again warned succumbing to tutelary politics. Marta Traba, in a volume published in 1973 (Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas: 1950 /1970, Mexico: Siglo XXI, pp, 123-29), wondered about the extent to which this self-governing thrust of the artists could carry on. It was a conjuncture without precedents in the New World, she notes, and the Revolution was mostly receiving rather than manufacturing sympathetic painters. Most held up to this point that aesthetic ideas must necessarily live in constant struggle, and that any form of suppression to favor a given leaning would arbitrarily restrain the development of the arts. Nearly twenty years have elapsed since Marta Traba ceased to be among us, and her acute, critical eye will be forever missed. She would not be surprised to discover, however, that Cuban plastic expression continues to strive as always.

One could imagine that forty years of restraints would eventually mar the development of Cuban art. What then explains its current predominance in the Caribbean? Why does the materially less needy Cuban counterpart in the US show no remarkable difference in the overall aesthetic attribute of its production?

One of the artists whose work is on display in this exhibition, Barauj Salinas, observes that “Cuban painting, in the Island as well as abroad, is in my opinion one of great vitality. Not one single ‘school’ or direction from outside stirs us. There is a lot of diversity, and that is what makes it in part universal. It is really incredible that such a small Island has produced so many good painters.” (Translation supplied.)

Oscar Martinez, the curator of “Images and Reflections” and he himself an accomplished painter, has opted instead for a river-time sampling of Cuban art in the United States. Mastery of craft, shared sympathies with the object and immanence unleashes a continuous flow from which many streams may branch out onto other directions but prove to remain part of the same recurring source. Rather than speaking here about “influences,” one must refer instead to “active absorption” amid the disparity in the artist’s ages, and the persistence of the synecdoche—the representative part for the whole—as a deliberate point of departure.

Although Humberto Calzada’s many aesthetic solutions are very much his own in his own right, he acts in this sense on the towering legacy of Amelia Peláez (1896-1968). As a reaction against academicism, she had arrived in the late 20s at
alternative pronouncements of self by free analogy especially
to the now emblematic stain-glass fan that tops the windows
of many older urban dwellings in Cuba. “I am not interested
in copying the object,” she once remarked, tacitly referring to
the ornamental wrought-iron screens, the columns and the
laced baskets filled with local fruit stocks with which she also
became associated. “What is important is the relation of the
motif with oneself, with our personality, with the power it
carries in helping the artist organize his emotions.”

Similarly, Eladio González references through his compositions
an encounter that really predates the European, African, and
Asian nexus in Wifredo Lam. The continental elements may
seem hefty but González, more concisely, defrays river-time by
evoking the voluptuous Neo-Baroque embellishments that had
already forced themselves upon the colonial architecture of his
native land. The current work of Rafael Soriano sponges up
even hazier nuances. His fractional and nocturnal hold on
eroticism bonds nevertheless to the same strained conquest
over the provisions of the Baroque style.

In no other artist from this exhibition is the ever nascent more
emphatically genetic than in the creations of Ricardo Manuel
Díaz. His reiterated concern with the intuitive process at the
precise point of genesis overrides the poetic, late
Giacometti-like ambiance of forlorn hope that they may instill
as finished by-products. The likeness here locates the
legitimate snatching of a cultural tone secondary to the
expression that emerges out of the earthy conception of
“absoluteness,” or the pre-natal space of “darkness and
emptiness.” Whether by “force of nature” or by “choice,” the
chaotic footprints of cosmogony in his paintings and sculptures
manage to arrest the “Profound Stillness” that “permits the
object to be observed at the moment of realization.” Hence
those bearings of a spontaneous memory, of an “effort” or the
“act of existence.” Everything in Ricardo Manuel Díaz’ art is in
itself beginning—even beauty and death.

If “exile” for Salman Rushdie in his Satanic Verses is a dream
of the glorious return,” in the pieces of Paul Sierra the
correspondence equates with tropicalismo. The concept,
despite its resonance of lush and pride, sprang from a
resentful trend in criticism that extended irregularly well into
the 40s. Eager to set the pace of Cuban culture according to
northern paradigms of progress, it denoted that readily given
exuberance of nature was in part to fault for Cuba’s supposed
dawdling attitude. Paradoxically, the false accusations led to
discover a positive undercurrent in tropicalismo. For many
artists it has been operating as a perceptive “psychic state”
that fuels the imagination with clues for novelty within the
hallucinatory beauty of the tropical landscape. It saves in
culture what may be otherwise lost with the fleeting riches of
material goods, the trivialized depiction of fondness, time and
exile. Having grown in the United States, Paul Sierra’s
figurative “glorious return” to his birthplace streams the
parole of tropical imagery.

An expressionist adaptation of the same principle applies to
Baruj Salinas. The chosen mode in his pieces subdues
tropicalismo, especially in relation to its expansive stellar
secrecy, for it is mostly a recast of nighttime bewitchment
before the picturesque. (Hitler had labeled its Nordic variant
as “degenerative” for its “clear derivation from Negro art.”)
As an artist form Cuba, he cannot escape from his dynamic
historical condition (past, life occurrences abroad, contact,
mutations and growth), but has resorted to deflect it in a
highly contained, symbolic manner. The gray tones in the
flower series shown in this exhibition, for example, signals his
subliminal rapt in the less sun-drenched regions of Europe, as
he himself observed in an interview.

Michele Touhey comes in as an exception. Perhaps because she
is the youngest, Irish on her paternal side and the only artist
in this exhibition that was not born in Cuba, her work
branches out the farthest in the river-time flow of Cuban art.
The constructs here target on the unfolding instances of the
Individual-Self and that Entity’s eerie relation to fixed
structural environments. Designs in subjectivity (in her case, as
if cutting self-portraits from photographic studies and latter
pinning them against the preconceived backgrounds) invites
quirky interpretations. Since she has expressed a willingness
to identify as partially Cuban (significantly, not by a hyphen,
but by a slash), there may lay in her approaches a connective
stratum of preoccupation with the regenerative, or the ever
nascent, as defined earlier. How far beyond will she distend
this concept without straying away from Cubaness waits to be
seen. Historically, art as an intrinsic personal tonic not always
risks sinking into oblivion if the appeal is right.

We read from her “Artist Statement” that she tries to subtract
herself or keeps a healthy distance from the only society she
has known by questioning through subterfuge “the manner
in which we are influenced to conform.” Offset variations of
inner-strength in Touhey’s creations intend a “dialogue” that
would vent the “desire for the experience of feeling alive.”
Thus, she may indeed be reinserting herself this way into a
continuum that dates as far back as the early 1600s.

As far as we can tell, it all began in Cuba with the epic poem
by Silvestre de Balboa entitled Espejo de paciencia —literally,
“the mirror of patience.” The poem tells about the exemplary
deeds that Bishop Friar Juan de la Cabezas y Altamirano
sustained while the French pirate Gilberto Girón held him
hostage during an attempt to siege a village. Perhaps
inadvertently, the poet’s allusion to a looking glass that
“reflects” the “will to endure” also reflected the first traits of
a society that was already ceasing to be Spaniard at the onset
of Spanish colonization. In the end, critics now agree, this is a
“moral story” with a “collective hero” deep within.

How much of the artists shown in “Images and Reflections: an
Exhibition of Cuban Art” triggers this “collective hero” is a
standing proposition. Meanwhile, let us appreciate the
“reflections” in this exhibition as if they were in “mirrors.”
One may be compelled to discover “images” that have long
ceased to be what they were meant to be, yet continue to
“endure” far into the realm of utmost significance to artists:
the realm of Possibility.

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