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HOW MANY CUBAN LIVES WILL IT TAKE TO BUILD AN ISLAND? (NOTES ON *AN ISLAND APART: CUBAN ARTISTS IN EXILE*)

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Streszczenie:

Autor prowadzi rozważania na temat sztuki współczesnych twórców amerykańskich kubańskiego pochodzenia, zainspirowany wystawą *An Island Apart: Cuban Artists in Exile*. Celem tej wystawy było zaprezentowanie dokonań w zakresie sztuk plastycznych i kultury zamieszkałych w Stanach Zjednoczonych Kubańczyków, których zainteresowania twórcze koncentrują się na zagadnieniach tożsamości, procesie kształtowania przestrzeni publicznej i sposobach poznawania rzeczywistości. Na wystawie zgromadzono dzieła znanych i cenionych na arenie międzynarodowej artystów młodego i średniego pokolenia, takich jak: Pavel Acosta, Alejandro Aguilera, Jairo Alfonso, Angel Delgado, Coco Fusco, Frank Guiller (Rank), Armando Marino, Maritza Molina, Carlos Martiel, Fabian Pena i Juan Si Gonzalez.

Słowa kluczowe: Kuba, Stany Zjednoczone, kubańska sztuka współczesna, artyści amerykańscy kubańskiego pochodzenia, Rewolucja Kubańska, diaspora kubańska, sztuka współczesna, teoria sztuki, imigracja.

Abstract

This article is an approximation to the narratives of the contemporary Cuban-American art while reviewing critically the exhibition *An Island Apart: Cuban Artists in Exile*, that explore contemporary Cuban art and culture inside the United States, focusing on issues of identity, place-making, and ways of knowing. The exhibitions feature works by prominent and internationally recognized emergent and mid-career Cuban artists: Pavel Acosta, Alejandro Aguilera, Jairo Alfonso, Angel Delgado, Coco Fusco, Frank Guiller (Rank), Armando Marino, Maritza Molina, Carlos Martiel, Fabian Pena and Juan Si Gonzalez.

Keywords: Cuba, The United States, Cuban contemporary art, Cuban American artists, Cuban Revolution, Cuban diaspora, contemporary art, art theory, immigration.

In that fiction known as Cuba²—Dr. Moreau’s Island meets land of Cockaigne, Utopia turned into dystopia—, there is another province called Exile, whose cartographic epicenter falls in America³. It is this deterritorialized Cuba, globa-

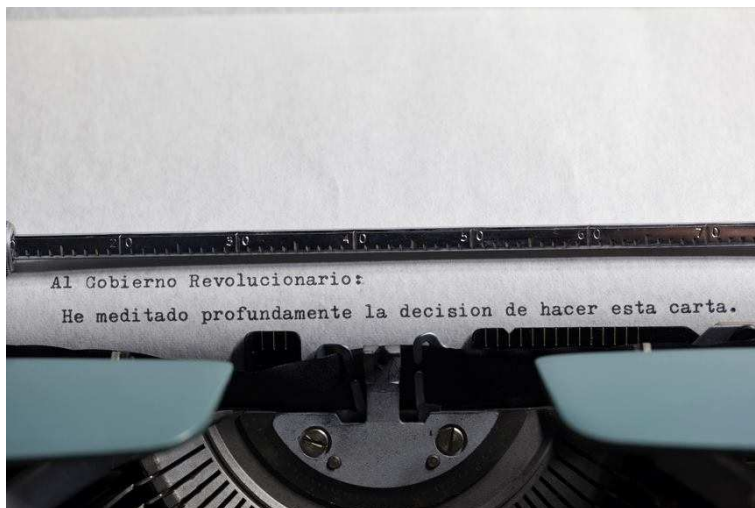
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² Cuba is metaphorically compared with other well-known fictional countries such as land of Cockaigne (Bruegel, Ellis) and Utopia (More).

³ Land of Cockaigne and Utopia are proper nouns. The first one is a medieval mythical place and the second one is a fictional island from the book homonymous by Thomas More. I am also using Exile as a fictional territory, an ultramarine province.



lized by (out)brakes and exile, materialized as an island of otherness, the center of the exhibition *An Island Apart: Cuban Artists in Exile*, at Otterbein University, Ohio, United States.



Coco Fusco. *La confesión*, 2015. 30 minutes digital film. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2016 Coco Fusco / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

During the last six decades, after two dictatorships in a row, following a coup d'état and a nationalist revolution turned into a communist totalitarian autocracy; the Cuban geography has disassembled in a sort of human plate-tectonic displacement, creating a new cartography of interconnected expatriates. Since the beginning, the artists have been a vital part of this exodus, suffering the same fate and facing thrice the difficulties to be accepted in the free world institutions. Not all artists walk over the same soil, but they share some fundamental common ground; they have stepped over values, traditions, ways of being that in most cases affect the foundation of their aesthetics, consciously or not, for several generations. They have also nurtured themselves from their new condition, facing the dilemma of keeping “pure breed” Cubans or becoming a progressively new hybrid; the embodiment of this Cuban-American culture that is “defined by collusion rather than collision” (Perez-Firmat, 1994).

The result is not just a Nation-in-exile that has reproduced itself into a virtual replica or reverse of the island 90 miles in the distance, as it used to be seen⁴, but a complex cultural mixture in which the most important bond is not the American

⁴ “The exile community featured a monolithic political outlook, sustained both by conviction and the silencing of dissidents and by a rapidly improving economic situation” (Portes, Stepick, 1993: 146).

citizenship, but the Cuban origin. Therefore, to become an anthropological condition that not only affects individual identity but also fulfills one of the most important human needs: the necessity of belonging. Whether it is a family, a gang, a tribe, or a nation (no matter if it's a nation in disband).

The island has suffered more than a half-century of constant demographic bleeding, an also of punctual *ethnorrhages* (Valdes, 1997) manifested in four waves (1959-1960, 1965-1973, 1980, 1994) of almost biblical proportions. As an example, just last year, due to external migration, the Cuban population declined by 40,000, almost one-third of live births. Paradoxically in this same year, 56,406 Cubans entered the US via a port of entry (Krogstad, 2017), which explained in numbers highlight the bizarre dynamic of this phenomenon. Cubans do not multiply overnight, they plan away their entire lives how to escape from the communist paradise to anywhere on the planet, looking for a temporary second country, a sojourn that might become a permanent home, or a waiting room, until they arrive at their symbolic destination, which is usually the U.S.: the capitalist hell.



Maritza Molina. *The Text of Purity (and the Discarded Women)*, 2005. Photograph, C-Print, Fuji Crystal Archive 20" x 77", Limited Edition 1 of 6.

The magnitude of this mass displacement to two or more “peripheral” or foreign regions, and the presence of certain criteria, as well as the preexistence of a collective set of values that shape directly, or vicariously, the identity, allow us to think about the Cuban emigration as a diaspora, after the Jewish paradigm (Safran, 1991). Among the several characteristics shared by both communities alongside the collective memory, myth or vision about the original homeland,

which is extremely important in symbolic terms, as an intrinsic source of meta-communication, is the belief that “they are not —and perhaps cannot be— fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it” (Safran, 1991). That sentiment persists even in artists that have achieved a noticeable recognition, or are assimilated by the mainstream: the necessity to be recognized by their fellow compatriots.



Carlos Martiel. *El tanque*. Performance during the opening night reception *An Island Apart* Exhibition. Miller Gallery, Otterbein University, 2016.



Armando Mariño. *The Revolutionary*, 2010. Oil on canvas.

This is the story behind Otterbein University exhibition in a nutshell. The eleven artists gathered on *An Island Apart* are living in the United States after crossing (them or their parents) our porous and liquid frontier. They are all U.S. citizens by birth or naturalization, born from 1959 to 1989, from the triumph of the Cuban Revolution to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Some of them achieved prominence on the Island, while others have completely flourished in the USA. Aside from their origin, they share common broad narratives, from traditional painting to mixed media, supported by a solid conceptual framework. People do not usually think of Cuban art as conceptual, but they should; for the Contemporary Cuban art is consistently conceptual and one of the best in the world for that matter.

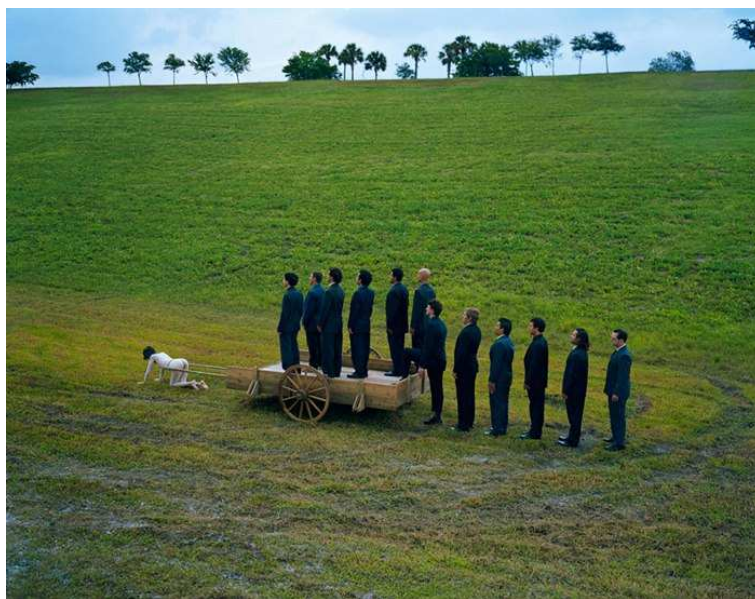
This is probably not, for that reason, what an audience unfamiliar with the contemporary development of Cuban art would expect of this exhibition. The minimal, conceptual, monochromatic and interdisciplinary artworks exhibited expand and shake the colorful stereotyped Cuban art that persists in the American vision. Despite the subtitle, *An Island Apart: Cuban Artists in Exile* is bluntly an ode to art beyond exile, regardless of ethnicity. An art savvy in using universal codes to mask any flamboyant cultural mark: the art of Cuban in disguise or, at best, of artists too concerned about the necessity to be incisive, and express in

universal codes that ethnicity does not play a prominent role after all. In fact, every artist included defies John Donne's poem to become an island itself. Not in isolation, but in typicity, for their objective seems to be to maneuver a very personal degree of separation from their origin. The presence of Cuba, if any, is merely derivative. None of them *cubanize* the art or exploit that factor; they establish a powerful horizontal dialog with the universal cannon that, perforce, needs to be construed as an artistic statement.



Jairo Alfonso. 340. Watercolor pencil on paper, 55.1" x 78.7".

The pertinence of this exhibition resides in its ability to expose the artwork of this specific segment of the American art, sometimes invisible and underrated, to the American fellows under the avalanche of Cuban art that has been exhibited after the re-establishing of diplomatic relations with Cuba. It is not minority art, nor ethnic or world art, it is just part of the American contemporary art. In fact, none of these artists will fit into the patterns for ethnic artistry early described by scholar Eliana Rivero in her seminal essay *(Re)Writing Sugarcane Memories: Cuban Americans and Literature* (1990). In their works there are no traces of full-time worshipers or part-time practitioners, of the discourse(s) of nostalgia, nor are they (a)critical observers of, rather than participants in North American realities. And they are not establishing any obvious or direct dialogue with the Cuban insular, past or present (Rivero, 1990: 169), as an operative or unavoidable backbone of their artwork. To find out any trace of *cubanismo* it is necessary to look into the "history within the fiction" (Álvarez Borland, 1998).



Maritza Molina. *Carrying Tradition #1*, 2005. Photograph, C-Print, Fuji Crystal Archive 20" x 77", Limited Edition.

Might these artists be considered Cuban American after all? The parameters for the analysis of art nowadays are more flexible, especially in visual arts, because artist identity is frequently confirmed by a certain aesthetic of belonging rather than national origin, a condition that due to the intense universal symbolic traffic has delocalized and does not build up strictly, like a mere century ago, around a local tradition —although it dialogues with it— in a hierarchical structure like the Arbor Porphyriana. Its current off-centered and rhizomatic model manifests itself as an image of thought built from multiplicity and interchange and organized in groups of affinities (Badajoz, 2011: 201). This kinship or bond by aesthetic rapport creates a genuine identity system, based on the sense of belonging, apart from their culture, ethnicity or geographic coordinates, attending exclusively to their aesthetic route.



Frank Guiller. *Big Eye*, NY, 2014. Digital print on Fuji Paper 30" x 44".

On the other hand, the process of creation of art depends on, what I call, the dynamic paradigms, a process in which the artists start copying external models or referents, but as they find and reproduces this personal discourse, they are creating at the same time an inner paradigm —their own identifiable discourse— in such a way that it becomes the main metanarrative of his symbolic production. It is also worth mentioning that refugee artists are usually involved in their host country's social, political and artistic life at a higher degree than their fellow writers, since visual art is a global language, and its social impact more immediate and volatile than literature. But it is fair to say that Rivero's patterns for literates can be easily applied to many other Cuban artists in Exile of different generations whose artworks dialogue in a more explicit way with the Cuban tradition, namely visual, religious or iconographic such as Gustavo Acosta, José Bedia, Humberto Calzada, Humberto Castro, Luis Cruz Azaceta, Carlos Luna, Leonel Matheu, Ciro Quintana, Rubén Torres-Llorca, or Tomás Sánchez.



Angel Delgado. *Inside/Outside, #1*, 2009. Digital print, dry pastel and wax pencil on handkerchief 59" x 59".

What I observe, following the general lines of the Cuban American narrative in the visual arts, is that Pavel Acosta, Alejandro Aguilera, Jairo Alfonso, Ángel Delgado, Coco Fusco, Juan Si González, Frank Guiller, Armando Mariño, Maritza Molina, Carlos Martiel and Fabian Peña, have integrated to the new environment as contemporary artists playing with the same “materials” and codes like other American artists, while their main dialog is not intra-ethnic but inter-ethnic. Of course, there are differences in their processes of acculturation —part of the work of Juan Si, Delgado, Aguilera, and Mariño, especially if it was produced in the 80’s or 90’s is embedded with all the symbolism of this period and references to Cuba politics—, but the art gathered here, show a critical, proactive and incisive attitude toward their host environment, to the point that the Cuban winks, if any, are so subtle that they do not affect the meaning of the message to any degree. Their work is closer in sentiment and execution to the narratives of other fellow Cuban American artists such as Carlos Estévez, Teresita Fernández,

Félix González-Torres, Armando Guiller, Julio Larraz, Enrique Martínez Celaya, Ana Mendieta, Jorge Pardo, or Arturo Rodríguez, to name a few, who produce far from any obvious mark of identity.



Coco Fusco. *La confesión*, 2015. 30 minute digital film. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2016 Coco Fusco/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

If Cuba is a source of inspiration for some of these artists it is well buried in the process, like pinned concepts such as the “thievery” leitmotif in the work of Acosta or the “scrum” in Alfonso’s drawings. Some of them are more American than Cuban, and vice versa, like the prominent scholar, writer and interdisciplinary artist Coco Fusco (New York, 1960), who in her anthropological expeditions launched reverse trips in search for the cultural clash or elusive hyphenated identity. In Fusco’s work (distorted) perception and parallel narratives are very powerful themes, either between apparent different cultural stages, or center-peripheral debates than between ideology and power within the same society. Her art activism or videos are visual archives, testimonies of the voiceless fight against the hegemonic discourses of submission. She belongs to a generation whose work has been more political on both sides of the spectrum than the subsequent: Children of exile, theoretically equivalent to *Generation of the 80’s* in Cuba, the first that achieve maturity under the communist regime, also the first that consistently dissent to the political regime. Her medium-length films *La Confesión* (2015) and *Botella al mar de Maria Elena* (2015) connect two episodes that illustrate the fascist nature of the cultural policy of the Revolution in a span of 20 years. The self-incrimination, in 1971, of poet Heberto Padilla —the Padilla

Affair marked the beginning of the grey quinquennial, a period of radical censorship and *parametrage* (the discriminatory setting of revolutionary moral parameters that became de facto authorization for the witch hunts against homosexuality and “other deviant behaviors”)—, and the acts of repudiation against poet Maria Elena Cruz Varela, leader of the anti-Castro group *Criterio Alternativo* and signatory of the manifesto *Carta de los Diez*, along with other intellectuals and artists, in a demand for democracy and political reforms, in 1991.



Juan-Si González. *Re-construction Human Displacement*, 2016. Multimedia Installation at Fisher Gallery (Video piece, sound, photographs, measuring tape, pedestals, constructed objects, concrete blocks, camping lanterns and packages of clothes donated to refugees in Columbus, Ohio) 108" x 298" x 63".

Juan Si Gonzalez, artist in residence and coordinator of this project —along with Janice Glowski—, Alejandro Aguilera, and Angel Delgado, represent three iconic moments in the closure of the mythic art of the late 80’s. Juan Si, one of the pioneers of activism, happenings and political performance in Cuba, is in part responsible for radicalizing the aesthetic of the irreverent but also naïve (and revolutionary) generation to the border of denounce and dissidence, what has been frequently considered one of the most aggressive and representative traits of the Generation of the 80’s. Aguilera, following the influential steps of Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, brought down José Martí, the apostle, and national hero, from the altars, but going a step further, mixing him in his mundane falling with the iconic martyrs of the communist Revolution, in a very dangerous ideological process of desecration. While Angel Delgado’s revered performance in *El objeto esculturado* closed in a very dramatic way a decade of *aggiornamento* in Cuban art. He is the unfortunate protagonist of one of the most infamous chapters of Cuban art. His uninvited action *Hope* is the last thing that we’re losing, consisting in defecating over a *Granma* newspaper (the organ of the Cuban Communist Party) in the

gallery, makes him subject of undue retaliation and an unexpected expiatory goat. His crime was to bring a private act (due to the scarcity people use official newspapers as toilet paper) into the public realm, the *res* (thing) *publica* as thingification or reification of the *spes* (hope), transforming a physiological daily act into an exceptional political manifesto, which he achieved with an impressive economy of resources, and producing at the same time with antisthenesque cynicism an object *biologically sculptured*. The “performance” continues during the six months the young artist was in prison for ‘public scandal’ as a result of his defiance to the ideological repressive apparatus. This episode marked the end of the gayest eighties.



Juan-Si Gonzalez. *Victory*. From the series *Vestiges of the Cold War*, 2011/2016. Constructed photography with chicken bones, poison, ants and text, 30”x 40”.

Their works have evolved, from the rebellious decade, taking a very distinct personal path and a discrete distance to all the hackneyed symbols of the 80’s, but is still very incisive. Juan Si has been one of the most compulsive interdisciplinary artists in Cuba and in the U.S. Following the principle that the media depends on the idea, his work includes artifacts, site-specific installations, happenings, videos, sculptures, collages, traditional and experimental digital photography, and paintings. Along with the interactive installation *Be patient*, consisting of a cushion with a wooden pestle, that the artist calls ‘healing object’, to liberate political and financial anger, he is showing three constructed photographs from *Vestiges of the Cold War* series that point to the pyrrhic victories and mass manipulation. The human gradually annihilated by ambition, brutality, and control, tempted to death like an ants’ colony.



Alejandro Aguilera. *Mapquesting Mandala*, 2014. Tempera, ink, and acrylic on paper, 95½” x 79¾”.

In the ink and acrylic on paper *Mapquesting Mandala* and *City Monument*, Aguilera plots a labyrinthine and symbolic cartography entangling technology and spirituality in the mapping of personal freedom. As one of the most important sculptors and printmakers of his generation, a work that I particularly admire, Aguilera’s work has the flair of the woodcut with strong lines and gestural strokes, and a sense of three-dimensionality, that reproduces the urban velocity; the city as a mirror of ourselves.

After being incarcerated for six months in 1990, Delgado’s identity changed to that of Inmate 1242900, and thus so found the precarious resources for his splendid prison art: soap sculptures, pen on remnants of cloth, everything at hand. “The day of his arrest marked the beginning of his artistic career”, said art critic Orlando Hernández, alluding to this powerful turning point, a painful Eureka moment. Delgado stayed in jail for six months, but the jail never left him. In his mosaics of handkerchiefs, digital printed and intervened with pen and wax pencil, he ponders about life as a universal fight in the pursuit of freedom. The unusual media in its soft squared format become a series of photograms of a documentary about men struggling in prisons around the world, in contrast with the fragility of freedom, the vulnerability of roles. In watching his art, one has no choice but to think, paraphrasing John Donne: “Any man’s prison diminishes me”.



Angel Delgado. *Contained Words*, 2014. Soap bars and clamp. 37" x 7" x 2".

The man in extreme situations is the backbone of Carlos Martiel radical performances that include flesh piercing, sewing of objects and other forms of chirurgical or self-inflicted wounds. Martiel appropriation of this traditionally feminist practice is also a symbolic statement of his fight against human thingification. Exposing himself to perilous situations, as a form of protest, he creates sentiments of empathy or rejection in his audience, transferring to the collective body concepts in a more sensorial way, as if a sacrifice of one was enough to evangelize the rest, in a sort of martyrologies like Gina Paine or Jesus Christ. His action *El Tanque* (The Tank), slang for the penitentiary system or prison in solitary confinement, is a raw denouncement of politics, bringing to the public eye the infrahuman life in a cell of punishment. Its impact is rotund, due in part to what Martha Rosler said: “the forces of domination and oppression as played out in the private sphere are inseparable from our more conventional understanding of their impact in the public sphere” (Wark, 2006: 115).

The *Not Walked NY* series by Frank Guiller is a savvy gaze upon the city he has lived in for most of his adult life. Guiller brings to the camera lens, and to the profuse tradition of the New York street photographer, sensuality, and serendipity. He is a catcher and a hunter. He flirts with subjects, frames the perfect crop and waits. He has his own aesthetic, color saturation, light, but overall, like every authentic artist he has his own quote of obsessions. The same way Elliot Erwitt

captures people with their pets, Guiller has a fixation with legs —seated and in movement. He is a modern *flâneur*, an urbanite, and is bringing with his captures a fresh, warm, bold look to the photogenic city. There is also a detail of absurdity in depicting the urban life through dismembered subjects and parts of old advertising, half-emptying the frame and emphasizing in another visual contradiction he takes advantage of in the city of skyscrapers, where the lens and eyes tend to go up at a low angle, just the seasoned street photographers discover the fascinating life under their belts.



Frank Guiller. *Not Walked*, NY, 2014. Digital print on Fuji Paper, 30" x 44".

Maritza Molina was born in Cuba but emigrated as a political refugee at an early age. Together with Fusco, they are the only artists in this exhibition that have developed their full career in the U.S. Notwithstanding, her conceptual approach fits very well in the roster. Her staged photography, in which she plays the main character, has a kind of cinematic flow that makes them look like graphic documentation of a live performance. Molina builds playful worlds, plenty of erotic tension, that later she uses as exhibits or incriminatory evidence, to put traditions and society on trial. In *Left to Dry*, a woman is used, washed and hanged to dry like a piece of cloth; a la Atget, it also looks like the scene of a crime. *The Test of Purity (And the Discarded Women)* revisits this same theme. In a society of mass consumption and objectification of values, ruled by obsolete patriarchal concepts, women are valued under hypocrite and cruel double standards as an object of desire whom one might be (ab)used and discarded. The artist rides in a place of the horse pulling a rustic carriage as a metaphor of the old values hard to carry on within *Carrying Tradition #1*. Molina's C-Prints are a solid work of

contrasts in the right proportion: the naked woman versus the row of dark-suited men, resembling the line of trees on the horizon. Is she hauling them or just waiting in doggy style? The expectation is the most vital key in the plot of Maritza Molina's open works.



Maritza Molina. *Carrying Tradition #1*, 2005. Photograph, C-Print, Fuji Crystal Archive 20" x 77", Limited Edition 1 of 6.

Armando Mariño's current work also creates thick atmospheres of suspense and expectation. Operatively distant from his iconic, but also more Cuban-centric, previous works like *La patera* (The Raft, 2002) – a pre-revolutionary era Plymouth automobile supported by dozens of naked brown legs instead of wheels, or *From Koons to Duchamp* (1999), Marino has evolved from the use of the pastiche and parody typical of Cuban postmodern art as a conceptual tool, deriving in a more expressionist art, in some cases almost bordering the abstraction, moving away also from topics like race, emigration and individual freedom, to address

other universal issues like violence, power, human trafficking or isolation. Technically and formally in the works exhibited here, the artist has moved to a more Eurocentric tradition, winter landscapes, with a warm but glazed palette and involving the viewer by silhouettes and *rückenfigur*.



Armando Mariño. *The Young Artist*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 82" x 96".

More storage than dump, taxonomic inventory than waste, accumulation, and inaction are subversive concepts in Jairo Alfonso's still lifes, in the search of a social ontology of the being. The relation between essence and existence, spiritual and material legacy, are the topics of a silent discussion in his work. Agonic, in the Greek sense, he builds up a portrait of our age from fragments. When he collects and reproduces in detail the clashing remains of the man-made products is making a holistic survey of our culture. We are what we produce, as *homo faber*, it seems to be on about. When he created his watercolor-pen-on-paper versions of massed produced goods, like Warhol, he is making the artist part of the chain of serial reproduction, with the trick that at depicting them in his large-format drawings he is returning to the art its quality of labor-intense uniqueness.



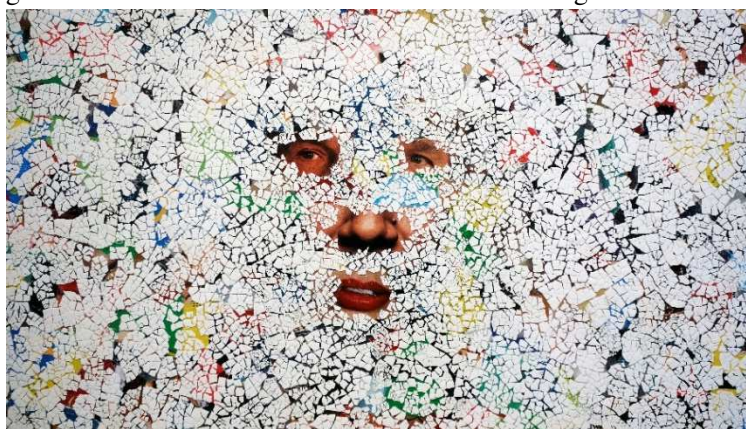
Jairo Alfonso. 340. Watercolor pencil on paper 55.1" x 78.7".



Pavel Acosta. *The Woman in the Waves by Gustave Courbet*. From the *Stolen from the Met* series, 2015. Collage of dry paint on sheetrock 48" x 48".

A great share of contemporary art is all about the use of new materials, previously considered non-artistic, and while there are a lot of failed attempts with poor results, the masterly way Pavel Acosta and Fabian Peña returns them is fascinating and mesmerizing. In his *Stolen from the Met* series, Acosta recycles a concept that has been key in his artwork: thievery or stealing. In a kind of Beltracchi forgery scheme, Acosta's copies are also very original, with the spirit of *arte povera*, Acosta reproduces major works of art using dry paint on panels of sheetrock. *The Woman in the Waves* by Gustave Courbet and *Portrait of a Woman* by Rembrandt van Rijn are part of this impressive concept that update and quote art history reframing it, a formal operation hard to achieve with originality, because appropriation has been a played-out device for easily creating narratives in contemporary art.

Halfway between matter painting and organic collages, in the world of the rarest materials, Fabian Peña's artwork shines in its own weirdness. Famous for using cockroach wings and fragments of different shades to "paint" his monochromatic sepia works, ironically one of the rarest media is made from the most common plagues or products at hand, Peña's diptych *Black on White & White on Black* use crushed eggshells and flies on canvas to bury a human face, leaving exposed only an eye. In what looks more like an apocalyptic fiction than a dystopian ever-vigilant eye: the man as part and parcel of the universal eschatological trip, part of the death that feeds life. In a more traditional use of media is his installation is *Untitled (Gray Matter)*, which consists of different art publications made pulp and casting inside of glass bottles of different shapes. With the papier-mâché bottles of grey matter, the artist gives the art industry a taste of their own medicine, polemicizing about a disturbing reality: the lack of independent critical thinking inside the Institution Art and its derivative intelligentsia.



Fabian Peña. *Horizontal Portrait*, 2015. Collage, eggshells on canvas 36" x 48".

One of his epic organic mosaics of cockroaches, titled *Fifty-one cockroaches were sacrificed to make this piece*, made me think about another lucid passage of Cuban American writer and scholar Gustavo Perez-Firmat's novel *Next Year in Havana*, in which he reflects about death, cemeteries, and identity, arriving at the conclusion that, in my recollection, the homeland is not the place where you were born but the one where you bury your dead. Living in exile, in the island hologram, surviving like cockroaches, bringing to America the richest multicolor skin palette, raises the question, how many Cubans do we need to sacrifice to build an island?

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