1-1-2016

Unconscious Thoughts Animate The World: Selections From The Shelley And Donald Rubin Private Collection

Jill Deupi
University of Miami

Saul Ostrow

Recommended Citation
https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/lowe_art_museum_catalogs/14

This Exhibition Catalog is brought to you for free and open access by the Lowe Art Museum at Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lowe Art Museum Catalogs by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.
UNCONSCIOUS THOUGHTS ANIMATE THE WORLD:
SELECTIONS FROM THE SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN PRIVATE COLLECTION

Organized by the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami.

Support for *Unconscious Thoughts Animate the World* was generously provided by Shelley and Donald Rubin, Presenting Sponsor Fiduciary Trust International, and Pewter Sponsor Cernuda Arte. Additional support was provided by Beaux Arts; the members of the Lowe Art Museum; the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council; the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners; and the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs.

Design: Chris Rogers, Yazi

Printing: NuPress of Miami, Inc.

All works courtesy of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection, New York.

ISBN No. 978-0-9969489-3-7

©2016 Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami. No part of this publication may be reprinted or reproduced in any form, by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photography, or by any storage or retrieval system, without the written permission of the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida 33146.

**COVER:**

**CIRENAICA MOREIRA**
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)
*No soy yo, es mi cuerpo el que recuerda*, de la serie *Con el empeine al revés* (It is not I, It is My Body That Remembers, from the series, With the Instep to the Wrong Side), 2003-2006
Color Lambda print
33 x 23 inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Cirenaica Moreira

**BACK COVER:**

**SANDRA RAMOS**
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)
*La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes* (The Damned Circumstance of Water Everywhere), 1993
Etching and aquatint
28 ¼ x 39 ¾ inches
Photograph courtesy of Jean Vong
© Sandra Ramos
Contents

Foreword 6
Jill Deupi, J.D., Ph.D.
Beaux Arts Director and Chief Curator

An Expression of Identities: 7
Works by Cuban Women Artists from the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection
Saul Ostrow

Plates 10
The origins of Shelley and Donald Rubin’s notable collection of Cuban art dates back to 1995, when the couple acquired two photographs by Juan Carlos Alom (b. 1964). It was only after their first visit to the island nation in 2008, however, that their nascent interest in the art of Cuba and its diaspora became a true passion. Since that time, the Rubins have collected more than 2,000 paintings, sculptures, videos, and multi-media works by some of the 20th and 21st centuries’ most notable Cuban artists.

*Unconscious Thoughts Animate the World* brings together a representative sampling of works by female Cuban artists in the Rubins’ collection. The ten practitioners represented in this exhibition were born between 1929 and 1986, and their work charts very personal responses to the changes that occurred in Cuba after 1959. They also make manifest some of the most significant aesthetic shifts in the realm of Cuban art over the past six decades while speaking to the unique talents and very personal aims of the artists whose remarkable works are on view.

Though the spectrum of works included in this exhibition is broad, several distinctive threads are palpable. First and foremost is the notion of identity. From the early paintings of Antonia Eiriz (1929-95) to the multi-media works of Mabel Poblet (b. 1986), there is a discernible insistence on the visual expression of highly individualized notions of self. There is equally a focus on how circumstances beyond one’s control (above all, political regimes, reified power structures, societal norms, and normative expectations) inflect these same. The power of art to make sense of one’s world is equally foregrounded in these works, as is art’s unique capacity to serve as one of life’s greatest connectors. As Ana Mendieta (1948-85) noted in the context of her own practice: *My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world.*

*Unconscious Thoughts Animate the World* would not have been possible were it not for the remarkable generosity of Shelley and Donald Rubin, Presenting Sponsor Fiduciary Trust International, and Pewter Sponsor Cernuda Arte. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to them all. Thanks are also due to the wonderful women of Beaux Arts, the Members of the Lowe Art Museum, the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, and the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs. Sara Reisman, Matthew Johnson, George Bolster, and Anjuli Nanda of the Rubin Private Collection played pivotal roles in ensuring the success of this project, for which I thank them most sincerely. My final expression of appreciation is reserved for the senior administration of the University of Miami, whose firm commitment to the arts enables the Lowe to fulfill its mission, and to my talented staff: thank you for your tireless efforts.

**Jill Deupi, J.D., Ph.D.**

*Beaux Arts Director and Chief Curator*

*Lowe Art Museum*
After acquiring their first Cuban artworks in 1995, Shelley and Donald Rubin began to collect contemporary Cuban art in depth in 2008, the year they first traveled to the island. Their private collection now reflects the diversity of post-Revolutionary culture in Cuba and features works by leading artists from the island and its diaspora. Bearing this in mind, audiences should not think of *Unconscious Thoughts Animate the World* as a comprehensive survey of Cuban cultural production, but instead as a select representation of ten female artists' senses of self, artistic visions, and personal missions as these have evolved in Cuba over the last five decades.

*Unconscious Thoughts Animate the World* is not only the title of this exhibition but also a reference to the late Ana Mendieta (1948-74), who used this phrase to describe her philosophy of art and its importance in the temporal realm. It is equally an apt summation of post-Revolutionary Cuban art, which may be viewed through a number of lenses: aesthetic, socio-economic, political, cultural, and psychological. Indeed, if there is a theme that unifies the disparate works selected for this exhibition, it may be the consistent psychological focus that weaves together personal and national identity. Tellingly in this context, when "woman" is represented, "she" is not an object of desire or pleasure dependent on some male fantasy. Neither is she an icon of maternalism or any other signifier of the gendered body. "Woman" instead is used to represent a nexus of social relationships, states of mind, and occupations. The female body is employed—and deployed—in a multitude of symbolic roles, most frequently as a stand-in for the island nation itself. Yet, the vast majority of these works lack militancy or what one might consider to be signs of a feminist critique. In part this may be attributed to ideological influences.

For instance, a law passed in Cuba in 1974 granted women and men equal responsibilities for raising children, maintaining the home, and pursuing a career. Due to the constantly shifting relationship and levels of control enacted by the government, Cuban artists have developed a complex symbolic visual language in order to convey dissatisfaction or critique.

The pre-Revolution generation is singularly represented in this exhibition by the work of Antonia Eiriz (1929–1995), whose paintings were extensively exhibited throughout Latin America during her lifetime. Eiriz was associated with the all-male Cuban collective *los Once* (the Eleven), and is best known for her existentialist images of grotesquely deformed figures that peer out from abstract, purgatory-like spaces. Influenced by the European Expressionist traditions, Eiriz engaged the practices of international Modernism without specific cultural references, which was typical of artists of her generation. The post-Revolutionary generation, on the other hand, combined the tenets of contemporary Western art with aspects of Cuba's historical past, including Spanish Colonialism, African slavery, the import of Chinese labor, and US domination. Their objective was to invent and give expression to a new post-colonial Cuban national identity.

Three of the main goals of the Cuban Revolution were universal literacy, an improved standard of living, and cultural development. Specifically, the Revolution advocated education as a means to bridge divisions between socio-economic classes, genders, and races. After a short period of state-sponsored art (The Five Grey Years, 1971-76), the new constitution of 1976 declared that "artistic creation is free as long as its content does not express counter-revolutionary views." Following this proclamation, The Instituto Superior de Arte

---

1 Ana Mendieta, “A Selection of Statements and Notes,” *Sulfur*, vol. 22 (1988), 70.
(ISA) in Havana and a network of regional art schools were founded. Faculty at these institutions taught freedom of expression, content, and style to the first generation of artists born after the Revolution. What made the resulting work distinct was that, unlike art from Cuba’s Colonial era, The New Art’s content arose from the cultural-spiritual complexities of post-Revolutionary existence. It was characteristically infused with humor, subtle political ironies, as well as references to Cuba’s folkloric and Santería tradition. Stylistically, it was an eclectic mix of formalism, Pop, minimalism, and folk forms. The New Art made its debut in 1981, with the exhibition Volumen Uno, organized by the critic Gerardo Mosquera. Three years later, in keeping with its emphasis on cultural development and to counter Cuba’s isolation, the Cuban government launched the Havana Biennial. Its first edition was dedicated to artists of Latin America and the Caribbean; the second Biennial included artists from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This tradition, which has remained during each subsequent edition, turned Havana into an important international venue for the exhibition of artists from developing nations.

With the loss of Soviet economic support in 1989, Cuba entered a five-year economic crisis that came to be known as the Periodo especial (Special Period in Time of Peace). In response to the resulting dire economic and social conditions, the island nation began to promote itself as a tourist destination in an attempt to earn hard currencies and offset the effects of the U.S.’s ongoing boycott. Many Cubans chose to leave during this time, due to the hardships that they faced. Not surprisingly, the art produced during the Special Period addressed these conditions often with anti-utopian, or escapist, points of view.

While few male figures appear in the works included in Unconscious Thoughts Animate the World, they do put in a highly charged appearance in Belkis Ayón’s (1967-99) collagraphs (works made through a collage-like printing technique). Employing a Symbolist style reminiscent of Art Deco, Ayón’s works narrate the myth of Sikán, the woman who discovers the mysteries of Abukúa (an Afro-Cuban all-male secret society founded in Havana in the 1830s) and is sacrificed in order to prevent the further dissemination of their secrets. The symbolism of Ayón’s work contrasts sharply with the conceptualism and performative nature of Ana Mendieta’s (1948-85) photographs of herself as she presses parts of her body against a pane of glass to make body prints. Mendieta’s works are a significant example of the variations in artistic production between those living on the island and those in the diaspora. Mendieta had been sent by her father to the United States in 1962, where, in the early 1970s, she trained as a painter and performance artist. After 1981, she returned to Havana periodically to work on various projects and to participate in exhibitions.

The literalism and lack of symbolic dimension in Mendieta’s photographs differ greatly from the work of younger Cuban artists such as Cirenaica Moreira (b. 1969), Aíme García (b. 1972), and Mabel Poblet (b. 1986). Their depictions of women (clothed or nude, as symbol or sign, as self or other) are characterized by an erasure of the categorical boundaries that mark the divide between a contemporary focus on intent and objectification. Their work reflects post-Modernism’s abandonment of the work of art as communicating the artist’s intention or a clear message. This strategy is also the residual influence of Cuba’s indigenous Magical Realist literary tradition.

Magical Realism stems from the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1904-80), who in 1949 coined the term “Marvelous Realism” to refer to works
that used a disorienting array of contradictory details to construct matter-of-fact portrayals of extraordinary events. After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, "Magical Realism" came to be applied to this type of literature, which was viewed as subversive in that it undermined the dominant social reality. Though in the main a literary movement, Magical Realism has a corresponding history in the visual arts that reaches back to Symbolism. Its principles, regardless of their stylistic differences, can be found in the naturalistic dream-like situations portrayed by the Pop-Art Nouveau style of Rocio Garcia (b. 1955) in which plausible events are depicted in a manner that seems to counter their believability.

More allegorical, but no less magical, is the work of Sandra Ramos (b. 1969), whose images reference her reaction to the Special Period. Using familiar characters from literature, history, and folklore to symbolically represent her personal response to Cuba's political, economic, and social realities, Ramos expresses her feelings of loneliness and hopelessness during those challenging times. A more extreme example of the use of the exaggerated and the theatrical are the works of Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons (b. 1959), who earned her MFA from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 1988, and permanently left Cuba in 1991 for personal reasons. By combining elements of Cuba's Chinese, Spanish, and Afro-Caribbean culture and attire with religious symbolism, Campos-Pons creates—in a matter-of-fact manner—images that are both strange and mysterious. Through these composites, she gives expression to Cuba's mixed ethnicities and cultures while identifying the "ex-centric"—those marginalized individuals within Cuban society. Similarly, Clara Morera (b. 1944) depicts in her work the centrality of African and Santeria practices as a vital aspect of what it means to be Cuban. Between 1975 and 1985, Morera was one of the 16 members of Grupo Antillano (whose name references the inhabitants of the Antilles, West Indies). These artists sought to offset The New Art's European orientation by advancing an Afro-Caribbean vision of Cuban identity, expressing still another tension in Cuba's post-Revolutionary period.

As the above makes clear, the art produced by female Cuban artists over the past fifty years is marked by generational differences and thematic continuities that bring into focus those conflicting aspects—both personal and public—of Cuban society and identity. These complexities were made clear to me when in 2010, I traveled to Cuba as a guest of the Ludwig Foundation. In visiting the studios of the next generation of artists, I quickly understood that they were not interested in sustaining the tradition and aesthetics of The New Art. Rather, they intend to build upon the legacy of that generation while foregrounding through art their personal responses to the evolving terms of Cuba's national identity and social reality.

Saul Ostrow
NYC, August 2016

Saul Ostrow is an independent critic and curator, and the Art Editor at Large for Bomb Magazine. In 2010, he founded the not-for-profit Critical Practices Inc. (criticalpractices.org) as a platform for critical discourse and practices. He has also served as Co-Editor of Lusitania Press (1996-2004) and as the Editor of the book series "Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture" (1996-2006) published by Routledge, London. As a curator he has organized more than 70 exhibitions in the US and abroad. His writings have appeared in art magazines, journals, catalogues, and books in the USA and Europe.
Antonia Eiriz, who came of age during the Cuban Revolution, graduated from San Alejandro National School of Fine Arts in 1958, shortly before former President Fulgencio Batista was ousted from power in Cuba. As a young artist, Eiriz was associated with los Once (the Eleven), an influential art collective active in Cuba between 1953 and 1955. Like other painters in los Once, she embraced Abstract Expressionism. Eiriz, however, also relied on figuration to communicate her artistic vision. The late art critic and writer Helen Kohen captured the essence of Eiriz’s aesthetic when she noted: “The human condition holds its breath, one scream away from death. Even the surfaces of Eiriz’s paintings are eroded and scarred, the perfect match of message and medium. These paintings of disembodied masks, like the huddled souls they represent, are the ghostly leavings of a gentler time.” (The Miami Herald, Dec. 10, 1993). Kohen’s comments resonate in Eiriz’s paintings from the 1960s, which examine demagogy and universal human suffering. In Mis vecinas (My Neighbors), the distorted figures can be interpreted as the existential angst she and others experienced in the face of Communist rhetoric promoting an ideal society. When Eiriz stopped producing paintings in the late 1960s, many believed it was a direct result of growing criticism that her work did not reflect the Revolution’s utopian ideals, epitomized by the slogan “Art: An Arm of the Revolution.” Eiriz only began painting again in 1993, shortly before her death.
ANTONIA EIRIZ
(1929, Havana, Cuba - 1995, Miami, FL)
*Mis vecinas* (My Neighbors), 1960
Mixed media on paper on canvas
17 ¾ x 24 ¾ inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Estate of Antonia Eiriz
ANTONIA EIRIZ
(1929, Havana, Cuba - 1995, Miami, FL)
Untitled, (Sin título), 1967
Ink on paper laid down on canvas
29 x 23 inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Estate of Antonia Eiriz
ANTONIA EIRIZ
(1929, Havana, Cuba - 1995, Miami, FL)
Vigilia (Vigil), 1967
Ink and oil pastel on heavy paper on board
28 3/4 x 22 1/2 inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Estate of Antonia Eiriz
ANTONIA EIRIZ
(1929, Havana, Cuba - 1995, Miami, FL)
Aparicione (Apparitions), 1995
Mixed media on paper
Paper: 28 ¾ x 23 inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Estate of Antonia Eiriz
CLARA MORERA
(b. 1944, Camagüey, Cuba)

Clara Morera studied painting at the National School of Visual Arts in Havana and graduated from San Alejandro Academy of Arts. Morera was a member of Grupo Antillano, a group of artists active in the 1970s and 80s who examined Cuban identity through the lens of Afro-Caribbean culture. Morera’s mixed media works and assemblages highlight the rich syncretism of Santería, a pantheistic Afro-Cuban cult that fuses the rituals and beliefs of the Yoruba people with elements of Catholicism. This complex merging of myth, faith, and magic is matched by Morera’s equally rich visual lexicon. El ángel de la anunciación (The Angel of the Annunciation) depicts the Gospel story of the Angel Gabriel announcing to the Virgin Mary that, through an immaculate conception, she is pregnant with Jesus (portrayed in the center of the piece). Morera’s works are comprised of an array of materials, including sequins and canvas combined with the artist’s naively rendered drawings, paintings, and writings.
CLARA MORERA
(b. 1944, Camaguey, Cuba)
El ángel de la anunciación (The Angel of the Annunciation), 2006
Mixed media on canvas and wood
Open: 48 ½ x 22 ¾ x 11 inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Clara Morera
CLARA MORERA
(b. 1944, Camaguey, Cuba)
La gran flor (The Big Flower), 2013
Mixed media on Kraft paper
47 ¾ x 31 ¾ inches
Photograph courtesy of Jean Yong
© Clara Morera
ANA MENDIETA
(1948, Havana, Cuba -1985, New York, NY)

“My art is grounded in the belief of one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world.”

– ANA MENDIETA

Ana Mendieta was born into a prominent political family who initially supported the Revolution. Her father’s subsequent involvement in counter-Revolutionary activities meant that Mendieta had to flee to America at the age of 12; she did so through Operation Peter Pan, a U.S. government-sponsored, Catholic charities-assisted program that relocated approximately 14,000 children from Cuba to the U.S. between 1960 and 1962. In all, Mendieta spent six years in foster care before being reunited with her mother. This experience of exile profoundly impacted her life and practice as an artist. She later noted: “I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence.”

Throughout her short life, Mendieta continually used her body and its relationship to external forces in her work. Her expansive practice encompassed performance, sculpture, film, and land art, often to describe her feelings of exile and disconnection from nature. Mendieta’s Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints) was produced while working with photography and 35mm slides in the early 1970s. In these photographs, she pressed herself against a man-made glass pane to distort the natural shape of her body. Functioning like a slide, it captures the tension between the expression and repression of femininity.
Ana Mendieta
(1948, Havana, Cuba - 1985, New York, NY)
*Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints) (Sin título), 1972*
Estate Printed 1997
Color photographs
Each print: 16 x 20 inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich.
© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, and Galerie Lelong, New York.
Known for their bright, aggressive coloring and the stylized draftsmanship, Rocío García’s paintings operate on a theatrical level; each canvas in a specific series works as a frame in a storyboard for an overarching narrative. Often, her work expresses societal or cultural taboos, such as homosexuality, combined with an element of mystery, as if the key to the entire narrative is just out of view. By highlighting culturally charged subjects, García conveys the larger trends of frustration on the island, be they social, psychological, or political.

A graduate of the San Alejandro School of Fine Arts, García received her MFA from the Repin Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg, in the former Soviet Union in 1983. Many of her works were influenced by the rise of prostitution during Cuba’s “Special Period.” Though caused by economic necessity, this increase in sex trafficking caused widespread misogyny and sexism. For her series *A Policeman with Alzheimer’s* she created a character who “is at once oriented and disoriented, who enters into and participates in events that can be considered improper or foreign to an agent of order.” García uses the concepts of mental illness or incapacitation as metaphors for the consequences of repression and projections of a false self-image, which can be understood as a commentary on the Cuban government. She chromatically separated this series into two sections, an allusion to the title, *Belleza infiel, de la serie Very, very light, and very oscuro. Un policía con Alzheimer,* (Unfaithful Beauty, from the series, Very, Very Light, and Very Dark. A Policeman with Alzheimer’s). Half of the series is rendered in rose, blue, or violet tones, while the other half is dark and obscure. *Unfaithful Beauty* falls into the former, its bright pink palette contrasting with the questionable activity.
ROCÍO GARCÍA
(b. 1955, Las Villas, Cuba)
*Sin título, de la serie Museos* (Untitled, from the series Museums), 1989
Tempera, ink and colored pencil on paper
23 ⅜ x 29 ⅝ inches
Photograph courtesy of Bill Orcutt
© Rocío García
ROCÍO GARCÍA  
(b. 1955, Las Villas, Cuba)  
_Belleza infiel, de la serie Very, very light, and very oscuro. Un policía con Alzheimer_ (Unfaithful Beauty, from the series, Very, very Light, and Very Dark. A Policeman with Alzheimer’s), 2009  
Oil on canvas  
79 x 87 inches  
Photograph courtesy of Bill Orcutt  
© Rocío García
MARÍA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS
(b. 1955, Mantazas, Cuba)

“My work renders elements of personal history and persona that have universal relevance. I exploit a variety of photographic means, portraiture, landscape, and documentary photography in an effort to create historical narratives that illuminate the spirit of people and places, past and present. My subjects are often my Afro-Cuban relatives as well as myself. My themes are cross-cultural, and cross-generational; race and gender expressed in symbols of matriarchy and maternity are thematic ideas.”

– MARÍA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS

María Magdalena Campos-Pons is a multidisciplinary artist who frequently uses herself as the subject of her photographs and performances. Born in 1959 in the Matanzas province, which is known for sugarcane production, Campos-Pons traces her familial history back to those enslaved and traded by Spanish colonists from what is now Nigeria. Her works, which frequently explore alternate versions of history and narrative, are often intimate, rejecting the stereotypical representations of marginalized figures in literature, advertising, and other forms of popular entertainment. The feeling of voyage and entrapment are clear in Songs of Freedom, The Flag. Color Code Venice 13, and Freedom Trap, which convey the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the projection of black women as either victims or sexual icons. The ideals of exile, nomadic life, and migration are evident in The Flag. Color Code Venice 13, a self-portrait that features the artist dressed as the imagined composite character, FeFa. A play on the word Fe (Faith), “FeFa” combines the Spanish “familiares en el extranjero” (Fe) with the English translation “family abroad” (Fa). The antique silk robe she wears alludes to her Chinese heritage; her skin, covered with cracked chalk paint, recalls her Yoruban ancestors’ rites of spiritual cleansing and ascension. FeFa carries and wears birdcages on her head, employing imagery of containment and freedom, while Campos-Pons utilizes the grid to visualize the unification of the scattered fragments of her avatar’s exilic identity.
MARÍA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS  
(b. 1955, Mantazas, Cuba)  
The Flag. Color Code Venice 13  
(La bandera. Código color Venezia 13), 2013  
Polaroid photographs  
Nine panels, each: 29 ¾ x 22 ¾ inches  
Photograph courtesy of Maris Hutchinson  
© María Magdalena Campos-Pons
MARÍA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS
(b. 1955, Mantazas, Cuba)
Freedom Trap (Trampa de la libertad), 2013
Chromogenic color print
Ed. 2/5
27 ⅜ x 21 ⅝ inches
Photograph courtesy of Jean Vong
© María Magdalena Campos-Pons
MARÍA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS  
(b. 1955, Mantazas, Cuba)  
*Songs of Freedom* (*Canciones de libertad*), 2013  
Polaroid photograph  
Three panels, each: 28 ⅜ x 21 ⅜ inches  
Photograph courtesy of Bill Orcutt  
© María Magdalena Campos-Pons
Belkis Ayón  
(1967 - 1999, Havana, Cuba)

Syncretism, or the fusion of different cultures, religions, or belief systems, is visualized in a number of works in this exhibition that blend West African and Catholic signs and symbols. This amalgamation is particularly evident in the œuvre of Belkis Ayón, whose images of the African princess, Sikán, have clear parallels with Biblical tales, including the story of Eve as recounted in the Book of Genesis. According to legend, Sikán was entrusted with powerful knowledge by an enchanted fish who swore her to secrecy. The princess, however, disclosed the secret publicly to bring peace between warring African tribes. She paid for her indiscretion with her life. From Sikán’s demise emerged the cult of the Abakuá, a clandestine all-male cult introduced in Cuba by Nigerian and Cameroonian slaves. In Sin título (Sikán, Nasakó y Espíritu Santo), (Untitled [Sikán, Nasakó and Holy Ghost]), the princess, rendered without a mouth, stands silent, like most of the figures in Ayón’s work. Sikán reappears in ¡Déjame salir!! (Let me Out!!), with the mythological fish, trapped by the knowledge of her secret. Due to her interest in Abakuá’s activities, there has been speculation as to whether the group was somehow involved in Ayón’s death at the age of thirty-two.

Ayón’s improvised collagraphic practice is a direct result of the lack of art materials available in Cuba during the Special Period, which began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989 and lasted until 1994. To create these works, she built a series of layers from waste paper and other media, resulting in a rich and detailed three-dimensional effect.
BELKIS AYÓN
(1967 - 1999, Havana, Cuba)
Aunque vayamos al cielo, siempre se acordarán de nosotros
(Although We Go to Heaven, They Will Always Remember Us), 1990
Collagraph
39 x 27 ¼ inches
Photograph courtesy of Bill Orcutt
© Belkis Ayón Estate
BELKIS AYÓN
(1967 - 1999, Havana, Cuba)
Sin título (Sikán, Nasakó y Espíritu Santo),
Untitled (Sikán, Nasakó and Holy Ghost), 1993
Collagraph
34 ½ x 28 inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Belkis Ayón Estate
BELKIS AYÓN
(1967 - 1999, Havana, Cuba)
Sin título (Figura negra que carga una blanca)
Untitled (Black Figure Carrying a White One), 1996
Collagraph
26 ⅜ x 36 ¼ inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Belkis Ayón Estate
BELKIS AYÓN
(1967 - 1999, Havana, Cuba)
¡¡Déjame salir!! (Let me Out!!), 1997
Collagraph
37 x 29 ½ inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Belkis Ayón Estate
BELKIS AYÓN
(1967 - 1999, Havana, Cuba)
Sin título, del portafolio Contemporary Prints from Cuba
(Untitled, from the portfolio, Contemporary Prints from Cuba), 1998
Collagraph printed intaglio on etching press with one color, one hand applied white on Rives BFK
Ed. 18/45
30 x 22 inches
Photograph courtesy of Jean Vong
© Belkis Ayón Estate
CIRENAICA MOREIRA  
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)  

Cirenaica Moreira originally trained as a dancer and performance artist at the Instituto Superior de Artes (ISA). After graduating in 1992, she turned to photography, with a practice focused solely on self-portraiture. Moreira, whose work has much in common with that of Mabel Poblet (also included in this exhibition), depicts herself in various guises, often celebrating the sensuality of the female form. The confessional nature of some of her titles, such as Vive en Cincinnati y ni siquiera me escribe, (He Lives in Cincinnati and Does Not Even Write to Me), allows the viewer into her personal narrative and her feelings of loss and longing. In Untitled, she appropriates a photograph, Desnudo (Nude), from circa 1920 by Joaquin Blez Marcé (1886-1974), who was known for his bourgeois portraits of Cuban high society but fell out of fashion in the post-Revolution era, when women wanted to be depicted as engineers or doctors. While Blez Marcé’s image depicted a nude woman draped with a fashionable shawl, here Moreira has substituted a Cuban flag, ratcheting up the political tension in this work. Viewing the body from a female gaze, she reclaims the subject of the female nude in Cuban Art.
CIRENAICA MOREIRA
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)

Sin título de la serie Ojos que te vieron ir…
(Untitled, from the series, Eyes That Saw You Go…), 1994

Silver gelatin print
14 x 9 ¾ inches

Photograph courtesy of Bill Orcutt
© Cirenaica Moreira
CIRENAICA MOREIRA
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)
Vive en Cincinnati y ni siquiera me escribe, de la serie Cartas desde el inxilio
(He Lives in Cincinnati and Does Not Even Write to Me, from the series,
Letters from Inxile [sic]), 1999-2002
Black-and-white Lambda print
23 ¼ x 33 ¾ inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Cirenaica Moreira
CIRENAICA MOREIRA
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)
No soy yo, es mi cuerpo el que recuerda, de la serie Con el empeine al revés
(It Is not I, It Is My Body That Remembers, from the series, With the Instep to the Wrong Side), 2003-2006
Color Lambda print
33 x 23 inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Cirenaica Moreira
CIRENAICA MOREIRA
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)
Déjà vu, de la serie Piel de vaca
(Déjà vu, from the series, Cowhide), 2006-2009
Color Lambda print
23 ¼ x 33 ¼ inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Cirenaica Moreira
“My work is a reflection of the specific reality of my country. Usually, I use the self-portrait as a way to meditate on the fact of having been born on an island where the collective history and the personal have become closely related. The fundamental motivation of my work is the recovery of social memory, closely related to the struggle against the difficulties of daily life.”

— SANDRA RAMOS

Sandra Ramos, who graduated from Havana’s Instituto Superior de Artes (ISA) in 1993, developed as a mature artist towards the end of the Special Period, a time of severe economic hardship in Cuba after the fall of the former Soviet Union. In her work, Ramos embodies a post-utopian attitude towards the government, using the individual to highlight the isolated nature of the island. Singular to her work is the figure of *la Pionerita* (“the little pioneer girl”), who serves both as an avatar for the artist and as the embodiment of Cuban youth. She symbolizes the end of innocence as well as the hope that youth can bring. The two images of *La Pionerita* included in this exhibition were completed in 1993 and convey a narrative of unfulfilled ideals. Reinforcing this sense of disillusionment are the two statements Ramos has included: *Con mi cruz a cuestas*, or “Carrying my Cross,” and *Seremos como el Che*, or “We will be like Che [Guevara],” a statement all school children recite as Pioneers for Communism. Through this young girl, Ramos demonstrates the effects of Revolutionary indoctrination, education, and extreme rationing on the population. Ramos’ *La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes* (The Damned Circumstance of Water Everywhere), one of her best-known works, symbolically fuses the body of La Pionerita with the island, barely staying above the surrounding water, defying the concept of the “infinite” or utopian island as proposed by Revolutionary ideals.
SANDRA RAMOS  
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)  
La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes  
(The Damned Circumstance of Water Everywhere), 1993  
Etching and aquatint  
28 ¾ x 39 ¼ inches  
Photograph courtesy of Jean Vong  
© Sandra Ramos
SANDRA RAMOS
(l. 1969, Havana, Cuba)
*Con mi cruz a cuestas* (Carrying My Cross Around), 1993
Chalcography
Ed. 1/10
19 ¾ x 26 inches
Photograph courtesy of Bill Orcutt
© Sandra Ramos
SANDRA RAMOS
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)
*Seremos como el Che (We Will Be Like Che)*, 1993
Chalcography
Ed. 6/10
19 ¾ x 25 ¾ inches
Photograph courtesy of Bill Orcutt
© Sandra Ramos
SANDRA RAMOS
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)
Caída de Icaro, de la serie Inmersiones y enterramientos
(Fall of Icarus, from the series, Immersions and Burials), 1999
“Japan” paper, charcoal, feathers, cut-and-pasted
printed paper on paper
36 ¾ x 25 inches
Photograph courtesy of Jean Vong
© Sandra Ramos
SANDRA RAMOS  
(b. 1969, Havana, Cuba)  
*Embarazo (Pregnancy)*, 2000  
Pencil, mirror, porcupine quills, cut-and-pasted printed paper, paper collage on paper  
28 3/4 x 36 inches  
Photograph courtesy of Bill Orcutt  
© Sandra Ramos
AIMÉE GARCÍA  
(b. 1972, Matanzas, Cuba)

Aimée García, who graduated from the Instituto Superior de Artes (ISA) in 1996, was initially known for her incorporation of Renaissance and Mannerist techniques and compositions in her work. Recently, García’s practice has moved away from echoing art historical references and expanded to include painting and photography embellished with thread, crochet, and embroidery. In Ventana (Window), the artist has stitched a complex geometric pattern across the surface; some stitches have been pulled out, leaving a distinctive series of holes over the artist’s face. Her recent self-portraits, like Alternativa (Alternative), are more psychological and introspective, and delve into the unconscious. Although they comment on work that has been traditionally classified as “feminine,” García does not identify her art as feminist, but rather as a gendered experience. Collectively, her oeuvre reflects the intimate methodical work of both painting and craft as studio practice.
AIMÉE GARCÍA
(b. 1972, Matanzas, Cuba)
Alternativa (Alternative), 2013-2014
Digital print on canvas with embroidery applique and sewn thread
19 ¾ x 15 ¾ inches each
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Aimée García
AIMÉE GARCÍA
(b. 1972, Matanzas, Cuba)
Ventana (Window), 2014
Acrylic, oil and thread on canvas
23 ¾ x 19 ¾ inches
Photograph courtesy of Adam Reich
© Aimée García
MABEL POBLET  
(b. 1986, Cienfuegos, Cuba)

Known for her self-portraits, Mabel Poblet’s oeuvre draws on kinetic art and installation, combined with photography, watercolor, drawing, and sculpture. A graduate of the San Alejandro National Academy of Fine Arts, Poblet furthered her studies at the Instituto Superior de Artes (ISA) and later attended the workshop *El comportamiento del arte* (The Behavior of Art), facilitated by Tania Bruguera. Her artwork provides a voice that undermines stereotypical aspects of female beauty. Much of her early work is self-referential—dealing with her own body, memories, and personal history. In *7300 días* (7300 days) from her *Abacos* (Abacus) series, a frontal portrait of the artist is covered by small acetate bubbles, which are attached to the work by tiny pins. This transparency, Poblet believes, assists in expressing her ideas and feelings, conveying the idea of being transparent to others, adding another layer of dimension and light to the photograph. The distortion created by the acetate bubbles, prompts reconsideration of the nude. Although her self-referential works may seem intimate and personal, the artist’s open-ended narratives allow viewers to collectively relate to her experiences.
MABEL POBLET
(b. 1986, Cienfuegos, Cuba)
Sentimiento (Feeling), 2005
Watercolor and pencil on paper
27 x 39 inches
Photograph courtesy of Bill Orcutt
© Mabel Poblet
MABEL POBLET
(b. 1986, Cienfuegos, Cuba)
7300 días, del proyecto Abacos
(7300 Days, from the project, Abacus), 2005
Plexiglass, serigraph
61 ¾ x 33 x ¾ inches
Photograph courtesy of Jean Vong
© Mabel Poblet
La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes