

Trampling the Silence

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A group of Cuba's newest, contemporary artists has been holding forth openly on topics in which race, history and Cubanness take center stage. Of course, this couldn't be further from Cuban art's official history. They are making visual contributions to our sociology, constructing highly intense communicative functions. These artists feel an urgent need to immerse themselves in 'otherness,' and freely expose all the multilayered manifestations of social inequality that secretly exist in Cuba.

Few artists have filled their creations with the discrimination, marginality and exclusion that still afflict black Cubans. From a very personal point view, Elio Rodríguez (alias El Macho), Alexis Esquivel, María Magdalena Campos Pons, René Peña, Armando Mariño, Belkis Ayón, Juan Roberto Diago, José A. Toirac, and others, are attempting to visualize the physical scars of the conflict (being *mestizo*, black, poor and Cuban). Teodoro Ramos Blanco, an unjustly forgotten sculptor, comes to mind at this very moment.

Racism continues being the subtlest of all ills in Cuban society. It is a dangerous explosive that keeps being reproduced in mysterious

ways. It disguises itself in many ways, and is the most pressing concern about which those in power remain totally silent. Racism, prejudice and discrimination weigh heavily upon Cuban society. They feel as though they were anchored firmly in place.

These artists are daringly delving into a subverted reality; they are treading on an unfathomable and volcanic world. Questioning official discourse, they reveal our bodies, our tormented consciousness. They enter a world in which blacks and *mestizos* continue being excluded from a whole horizontal system of opportunities. These artists have managed to cross bridges filled with difficulties, and interrogate the nation from an aesthetic of difference and identity.

The work of Juan Roberto Diago, René Peña, and Belkis Ayón deserves particular attention. These fellow creators are part of an artistic brotherhood that has sacrificed a great deal in its attempt to restore to black people their lineage, and shed light on their existence. Be they paintings or photographs, Diago and René's works reveal black people who are both subjects and objects of their obsessions. They trace the anthropological incursions through



When I am Not Here. Estoy allá. María Magdalena Campos

which blacks have gone from being the accused to the accuser, and the protagonists of their own history. Their message is loud and clear: no more secondary roles, no more second-class citizens. Disclosing a world marred by inequal-

ity, they openly rebel against a secular canon that has been imposed by *criollo* hegemony. Their focus on identities makes these works very nationalistic; a cry out against silence. Their politics of difference does not allow for

raciality—as a discursive zone—to disguise silence. They penetrate shared secrets, and weave and sketch a part of contemporary Cuba's history that is still denied us. Diago legitimizes the aesthetic beauty of the black race in our complex, ecologically social map. Yet, it also serves as a legitimate discourse that honestly approaches—against all odds—the ghetto's own, crude aesthetic. It unearths prejudices regarding the social devaluation of blacks, and constructs freedom in the subalterns' skin, by means of their racial, religious and sociological discourse. His legacy is to have been the intellectual author of a very particular aesthetic, one that has its own identity and strengthens the self-esteem and pride of blacks—despite their horrible economic realities, and the fact they still live in places like Pogolotti City, La Isla del Polvo, or El Palenque—where porno-poverty is constantly eating away at them.

As an artist and person, Belkis Ayón contributed to an amelioration of generational differences found in Cuban engraving, and defended the freedom of diversity in different ways. As a humanist, her commitment to art

will give her a place in history. She established a relationship between Russian Byzantine icons and Abakuá Secret Society mythology, and restores behavioral patterns to the latter, imposing an alternative agency on it. What she has created is a work of art unique to Cuba. Her fables are filled with miscegenation and syncretism: they break rules and construct their own world, whose protagonist is the female *Sikan*. She has penetrated the myth's nature but encourages respect for Abakuá, and promotes it in a broader cultural context.

Many of us are disquieted by the fact that these creative people, with their enormous anthropological worth, are absent from the pages of principal cultural publications like *La Gaceta de Cuba*, *Revolución y Cultura*, and *La Siempre Viva*. Their absence from the very specialized *Arte Cubano* is truly noteworthy.

Cuban society today needs to break down these containment barriers. It needs to hear a countercultural rhetoric and shatter the silence. We must visualize narratives that allow us to get inside the 'other'—from a critical and reflexive point of view—and feel the troubling sound of our nation's heartbeat.