

Alexis Cardona: Rescuing History and Identity

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The symbolic and aesthetic reflections of our nation's social and cultural roots have generally been adversely affected by repeated omissions and disdain, especially when it comes to the presence and contribution of Africans and their ancestors. It is often the case that they must endure damaging characterizations of everything they represent. Our unbalanced coexistence has for centuries been shaped by a marginalization imposed by the hegemonic, white elite's continued ignorance. This has resulted in many African traditions and contributions being subsumed, examined and even exhibited as vainly marketable folkloric expressions that are always seen as inferior.

However, there is one artist, one deeply sensitive creator, who is searching for our real roots and traditions, and fighting—with simplicity, talent, enthusiasm and perseverance—this lengthy saga of shortcomings and misrepresentations.

Alexis Cardona Castillo erupted onto the Cuban arts scene at the beginning of this new decade. He is a self-taught artist from Santiago de Cuba (1965) who has chosen for his work to

examine and realistically represent the popular traditions, social ambiance and material culture necessary for deeply knowing and understanding who we are and from whence we came.

His deep artistic and humanistic sensibility is in keeping with his interest in our nation's true history. His focused study of historical texts, and of slave descendants' and Caribbean immigrants' testimonies, is part and parcel of the solid foundation upon which he has created his ingenious and illustrative sculpture installations. Cardona's work recreates for us multiple environments and spaces that transport us to essential enclaves of our historical, cultural and economic origins. He accomplishes this with a realism and sensitivity that inspires us to reflect upon just how important it is to search for these traditions and historical truths.

He produces an impressive degree of detail and plasticity in his sugar mills and neighboring premises (*bateys*, or rural communities associated with early sugar mills), trains, *palenques* (escaped or rebel slave encampments), and coffee plantations. Through these,



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he manages to transport his public to a faraway and practically unknown time and place. His installations are filled with figures posed in rustic and simple ways, but their expressive potential seemingly makes them to come to life. These simple figures harmoniously contrast but also complement his detailed recreation of all the material and environmental objects of the reality he presents us—even the tiniest ones.

This particular talent of his has allowed him to exploit the expressive possibilities of materials like wood, vegetable fibers (coconut, agave), dirt, stones, and a diversity of plants, in order to create a proportionate balance amongst details that reproduce the specific elements of the environment he is recreating and the gestural plasticity of his characters.

Cardona Castillo's creative talent, authenticity, sense of humor, and respect for history offer us his gallery of flexible figures and scenes to take us back to the people, animals, utilitarian objects, and natural environments of the 'costumbrist' scenes he recreates. In recent years, various exhibits and shows all

through Cuba have promoted this artist's work and talent, but their greatest achievement has been to promote interest among scholars and the public in our historical and cultural roots.

This tireless creator's work has won well-deserved prizes and recognition. Unfortunately, his sensitive focus and search for these very necessary moments and spaces from our history are still unique in our current cultural panorama. Cardona Castillo relentlessly works on, speaking about his work with a contagious and tireless enthusiasm. Above all, he talks about his effort to bring to light and validate an identity and tradition that should be solidly and definitively incorporated into our nation's symbolic and cultural imagination. Always brimming with excitement and project ideas, his simplicity and humility may actually prevent him from being able to assess the enormity of his contribution to our very necessary rescue of our traditions and identity. Alexis Cardona Castillo never ceases working and creating, dreaming, dreaming intensely...and we dream right along with him.



Installation. Alexis Cardona

Select single-artist exhibits

- “Palenque Jamaiquino” [Jamaican Palenque]. *Club Tryp Hotel* at Cayo Coco. Ciego de Ávila (December 2003).
- “Historias del azúcar” [Sugar Stories]. *Expocuba* (May 2004).
- “X Taller de Antropología y Cultura Afroamericana” [Tenth Afro-American Anthropology and Culture Workshop]. Organized by *Casa de África*. San Francisco de Asís Convent. Havana (January 2006).
- “El Quijote en sus andanzas en el tabaco” [Quixote and his Dealings with Tobacco]. *José Martí Memorial*. Havana (June-July 2006).
- “Festival Kiba Reyol” [Kiba Reyol Festival]. *Juan Marinello Cultural Center*. Havana (August 2006).
- “El Palenque de cimarrones” [The Cimarron Palenque]. International Event of Latin American Cimarronage. *Cuban Yoruba Association*. Havana (October 2006).

Select Awards

- Gran Premio en la Feria Nacional de Arte Popular [Grand Prize, National Festival of Popular Art] for his work “Palenque Jamaiquino,” a sculpture installation. Ciego de Ávila (November 2003).
- Gran Premio de la Asociación Cubana de Artesanos Artistas (ACAA) [Grand Prize, Cuban Association of Folk Artists] for his sculpture installation “Los cafetales” [Coffee Plantations]. Ciego de Ávila (October 2004).
- Gran Premio Visarte Nacional [Grand Prize, *Visarte Nacional*], organized by UNEAC with an international category, for his sculptor installation “La pesca” [Fishing]. (November 2005).
- Premio de la IV Bienal de Talla del Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales (FCBC) [Prize, IV Biennial, Cuban Fund for Culture), for his sculptor installation “El café” [Coffee]. Havana (July 2006).
- Primer Premio en la XI Bienal Domingo Ravenet de las Artes Aplicadas [First Prize, XI Domingo Ravenet Biennial for Applied Arts], for his work “Juana y sus amigas limpian el Quibú” [Juana and her friends clean the Quibú]. Havana (November 2006).