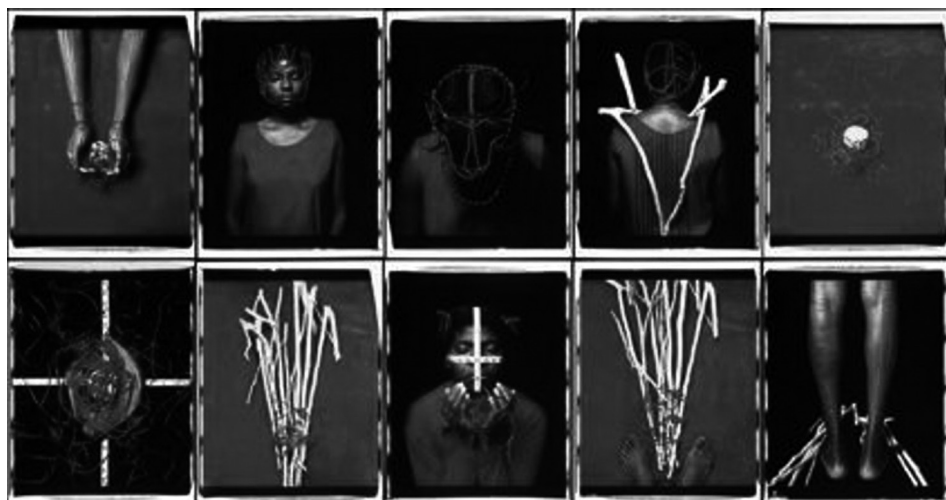


Well Thought Out Images and Texts

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María Magdalena Campos Pons, Abridor de Caminos. 1997

Texts and images in contemporary Cuba have contributed to how we visualize old and new problems concerning the subject of raciality and the black subject. Despite the political authorities and their lack of will, and the demobilization of many intellectuals who study subjects like discrimination and prejudice, there is a whole movement involving artists and intellectuals whose activism reflects their commitment to these issues.

This negotiation of sorts is growing both on the island and in the Cuban diaspora. Film, visual arts, literature and theater are some of

the outlets that contemporary Cuban art uses. These new narratives help us come to know the other half of the nation, the other citizenry historically condemned to being anchored to the bottom of the social pyramid. We also cannot discount very recent contributions that have come from historiography.

In the plastic arts, there is a healthy Afro-Cuban movement that has allowed us to see a kind of contemporary, Afro-Cuban art with its own, personal identity. This movement derives from the legacy of painters such as Wilfredo Lam and Roberto Diago, and sculp-

tors Teodoro Díaz Ramos, Agustín Cárdenas, and Agustín Larrinaga. They form part of a crop of artists who have been establishing a permanent dialog with the universe of African descendants—from their own personal perspectives. Their gaze focuses on the African components of our identity, political and social aspects of our race relations, the connection between Africa and the Caribbean, and our religious universe, particularly Regla de Ocha and Abakuá.

The work of artists like Juan Roberto Diago, Belkis Ayón, María Magdalena Campos Pons, Elio (El Macho) Rodríguez, Manuel Mendive, Marta María Pérez, Paulina Márquez, René (Pupi) Peña, Gertrudis Rivalta, Juan Carlos (Pupo) Pérez, and Ariel Ribeaux Diago sound an alarm that shows us which road to follow. They introduce warnings and danger signs, and accentuate the universe of our diversity from their own point of view.

They are part of a generation that always learned to listen with suspicion to rhetoric concerning raciality, marginality and religious universes. Through their paintings and photographs, they offer alternate discursive options that allow us to deconstruct invisible parts of Cuban history, and see the very real social rifts that cause our daily tensions. They reflect upon their nationality, the black presence in Cuban history, revisit orthodox versions of our history, and create an essential record through their poetics.

Plastic artists such as Paulina Márquez, Gertrudis Rivalta, and María Magdalena Campos Pons promote a discourse on gender and race that is constantly evolving, and gives form to their self-representation of their condition as black women. Their work communicates to us their intense pain, self-esteem, and desire for self-emancipation. María Magdalena Campos Pons's work is constantly imbued with icons from the Regla de Ocha religion,

as she finds refuge in her religious faith. Her art highlights difference, which is constant evidence of her attitude of insubordination. It always accentuates the dignity of black women, too.

Gertrudis Rivalta attempts to see herself through the eyes of the other, and reflects upon her nationality and her condition as a mulatto woman on an island overrun by identities. Paulina Márquez sketches and draws, engraves, curates, and is a passionate promoter of culture. The subject of black women is always present in her work: she recovers their aesthetic beauty without betraying their very specific, identifying features. Her spirituality creates a space for and establishes an intimate relationship with nature and the urban environment.

We must mention the impact of plastic artist Belkis Ayón Manso (1967-1999), an artist who really focused on difference. As a teacher, she did the impossible—defend freedom of diversity from her lectern. This humanistic woman has a permanent place in our history because of her commitment to art. In the area of film, on the other hand, no one has been able to surpass inveterate sociologist Sara Gómez (1942-1974). Through her lens, she documented the heartbeat of an entire nation, and never ceased searching for the truth. Gloria Rolando Casamayor has carried on her work in film. Her work is filmmaking with a capital 'F,' an observational cinema that manages to pierce the flesh of memory, and allows us to discover our Caribbean universe. Her films are educational; her gaze precise. Both contribute to them teaching us to 'see' critically. Her work shatters the silence surrounding issues like racism and racial discrimination.

Elena Palacios, a young filmmaker who also specializes in radio and television (she is a graduate of the School of Audiovisual Media at the Superior Institute of Art), has begun to

offer new perspectives on the representation of the female body, women's eroticism, and couple relationships. She has managed to expose the prejudice found in even the simplest of histories. A non-conformist, she firmly believes we need to train and awaken gender consciousness in Cuba. Palacios has the privilege of having included in her television series "an affirmative presence" of black actors and actresses promoting a dignified view of their race and sexes.

Belkis, Ayón, Gertrudis Rivalta, María Magdalena Campos Pons, Paulina Márquea, Gloria Rolando, Fátima Paterson, Inés María Martiatu, Elena Palacios, Odette Casamayor Cisneros, Teresa Cárdenas Angulo, María Ileana Faguaga Iglesias, Georgina Herrera, Julia Mirabal, Sandra del Valle, Sandra Álvarez and Daisy Rubiera are part of a legion of women who do not hide their faces when they reveal their fears. They reject the limits imposed on them by the other's perspective, and are all writing part of Cuban history. They assault spaces denied them, delve into shared secrets, and feel proud of their identities.

Another area of mobilization is theater. Some of the people who have made their mark on this art form are Eugenio Hernández Espinosa and Alberto Pedro Torriente (1954-2005). Both playwrights are contributing to a broadening of our multi-voiced, national 'choir.' Alberto Pedro examines ethical, political, social, cultural and aesthetic values. He created his theater aloud, activating sentiments through the art of provocation. He made his audience re-think reality, and sketched out our identities. His legacy is that of Abelardo Estorino and Eugenio Hernández Espinosa. His is a theater of ideas, which filled Havana's stages during the 1980s and 1990s. It was political and focused on difference.

Eugenio Hernández Espinosa, who won the National Theater Award in 2005, deals

directly with the black subject. His extensive production is connected to that of Aimé Césaire (Martinique), Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia), and Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe). It dialogues and argues with the past and present from a very personal point of view. It dialogues intimately with the Regla de Ocha, or Santería, religious universe, prejudices, racism, and discrimination. This man has won applause for characters such as María Antonia, Lagarto Pisa Bonito, La Simona, worker Emelina Cundeamor, and emigrant Niurka in *Chita no come mani* [Chita does not Eat peanuts]. His theater serves as a stage for integration and racial inclusion. His protagonists are the poor blacks, mulattoes, and whites of Cuba. He is convinced that the emancipation of the black subject must come through political emancipation.

His monumental work raises the voice of the other. He is one of the few playwrights who bravely and honestly takes on the debate on racism and prejudices, corruption, opportunism, dogmatism, and the dual morality of today's Cuba. As essayist Alberto Curbelo says: "Eugenio has not avoided accepting his high risks with courage."

Through their images and texts, all these men and women use their art to show us another side of reality. They have lost battles, but not the war: they do not surrender. They are always ready to stand up after a fall. They have been able to narrate the other half of our nation and deconstruct the double sword of nationalism, thus revealing the violent scars and chains of colonialism. They are protagonists of well thought out texts and images—texts and images that are supported by what has been written about difference—a complete poetics that documents the symphony of our diversity.



*Second Race and Cabanness Forum. Juan de Dios Mosquera (center) with CIR activists and leaders Juan A. Madrazo, Leonardo Calvo, Eleanor Calvo
Martinez and Manuel Cuesta Morúa. (November, 2011)*