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Under the Spell of the Palm Tree

I

Under the Spell of the Palm Tree: The Rice Collection of Cuban Art distills an expansive art odyssey into a concise and affecting love story. In losing themselves to a journey of exploration of Cuba, the Rice family of Tampa found an abiding passion for the country's art and artists.

Their curiosity transformed into commitment. As their knowledge of Cuban culture deepened, their art collecting goals solidified. The members of the Rice family realized their passion had led them to a shared goal—to build an informed and significant collection of contemporary Cuban art.

Under the Spell of the Palm Tree is a look into the heart of their evolving collection.

Deviating from a traditional historical narrative, the work is presented as more of a compass than a timeline—a map for a journey begun in 2013 and continuing today.

As curators, we culled 87 works of art from among more than 235 in The Rice Collection. We organized the work into six broad themes: *The Language of Forms and the Forms of Language*; *The Prophet's Dream*; *The Great Journey*; *Sensory Landscapes of Memory and Desire*; *The Musings of Narcissus*; and *The Spirit of the Real, the Reality of the Spirit*. This thematic organization guides the viewer through art genres and styles—and the perspectives of two generations of collectors in the Rice family.

II

The exhibition title is borrowed from a key work in the collection: *Under the Spell of the Palm Tree / Bajo el hechizo de la palma*, by Sandra Ramos.

Few symbols resonate with Cubans as profoundly as the royal palm. Ubiquitous across the rural landscape, this “queen of Cuba’s fields” is the national tree, considered sacred in some Afro-Cuban religions, and protected by law from being felled. Standing tall, solitary, proud, and strong against winds and hurricanes, beneath scorching sun and bolts of lightning, the royal palm aptly represents the perception Cubans hold of themselves and their island nation.

Proliferate across the island and transplanted symbolically in Florida by Cuban immigrants as an allegory of their nation – divided yet connected by its roots—the tree appears as a symbol of Cuban identity and culture throughout art, literature, and propaganda. In a verse of his poetry, José Martí conjures the image of the palm to denote Cuba:

“Yo soy un hombre sincero
de donde crece la palma,
y antes de morirme quiero
echar mis versos del alma”.

*“A sincere man am I
From the land where palm trees grow,
And I want before I die
My soul's verses to bestow.”*

Many Cuban visual artists independently appropriate the royal palm as a symbol in their work; in this exhibition the palm appears in the work of Mario Carreño, Manuel Mendive, Lázaro Saavedra, and Carlos Enríquez and throughout the etchings of Sandra Ramos.

In Ramos’ 1993 titular etching, the artist's iconic child self-portrait is inverted, seemingly suspended from above. Concentric red circles overlay the figure, targeting the heart and brain. Royal palms, weaponized as arrows, pierce the space dynamically from all angles, aiming at the heart and brain. The image intimates the story of St. Sebastian tied to a tree and shot with arrows – suffering but not succumbing to the attack. The artist uses the palm imagery convincingly to represent her own experience of her country and the suffering of its people.

The title is also a curatorial nod to the Rice family's mesmerizing encounter with Cuba —a 'spell' that evolved from initial intrigue to fascination and finally capitulation to a vision that embraces and supports the art and artists of both the island and the diaspora.

III.

A distinct graphic approach expresses the curatorial concept of both the exhibition space and the catalog.

The logo's leitmotif is drawn from an abstraction of the crown of the royal palm tree as seen from a low-angle perspective. Six arrows, representing the converging feathered fronds of a palm, represent the six exhibition sections – and subtly reference the arrows in Ramos' work and the *firmas* or *anafaurnas* of the Abakuá in the works of Bedia, Ayon, and Diago Sr.

A single palm arrow is disconnected – perhaps suspended in space and time, awaiting completion. This visual analogy aligns with the curatorial narrative of the genesis and maturation of The Rice Collection – journey, flow, movement, action, expansion, and focus – as it becomes unified and centered.

Six separate icons, designed around the arrow/leaf shape, each identify one of the six thematic sections and guide the viewer or reader; the icons appear on the object labels and text panels throughout the exhibition and within the thematic sections of the book.

A calculated presentation of the artwork is undertaken in both the exhibition space and catalog. A curatorial decision to eschew organizing the exhibition as a timeline, instead presenting it as evolving and emerging, expresses the fundamental spirit of the collection. The Rice family plunged into their project ingenuously, immersing themselves in the scholarship of Cuban culture along the way. They bolstered personal connections with education. They supported insights with enlightenment. The collection thus exists as a living, expanding entity.

The exhibition's design reflects the collection's inherent identity – unconventional yet harmonious.

Artworks flow between sections and along the pathways of the exhibition, intertwining Cuba's history, society, and culture with personal narratives. Selected works function as bridges, seamlessly unfolding into an organic whole. Viewers can explore the space as a continuous and dynamic experience of ideas and emotions with historical context.

The layout is broadly divided into hemispheres. On one side, politically charged works delve into the Cuban psyche, revealing the impact of totalitarianism, the quest for freedom, and the challenges of migration. On the other, the work explores abstraction, sensuality, imagination, self-awareness, and transcendent artistic ideals. The two realms converge at a spiritual core, a point of synthesis that embodies the collector's emotional and intellectual journey.

The exhibition layout is echoed and reimagined in the catalog's sequence through the curator's personal notes, which serve as a relational map preceding the images in the book.

IV.

***The Language of Forms and the Forms of Language
Abstraction as Logos and Ethos, from Aesthetics to Politics***

The broad spectrum of art in *The Language of Forms and the Forms of Language* unveils the evolution of abstraction in Cuban art over more than seventy years. Divergent artistic sensibilities are connected through congruence of process, materials, points of departure, and artistic objectives. The growing affinity for abstraction among Cuban pioneers of modernism in the late 1940s is disclosed in selected early work in this section.

Abstraction was in vogue in Cuba from the early 1950s to the first years following the Cuban Revolution of 1959. But hardliners in the revolutionary cultural establishment condemned abstract art—and the artists who made it—with such epithets as “alienating,” “cold,” and “foreign,” and most especially, “bourgeois.” The disciplined and aseptic style labeled “concrete” was suppressed. The establishment ignored the spirit of innovation of Concrete Art and demanded conformity to standards of art and culture as defined by themselves.

This section discloses an interval shift between twentieth-century abstract art and the more narratively oblique, ambivalent, or openly critical abstraction that followed. The later work is infused with political innuendo and veiled references. Abstraction became the language used by artists to express ideas in conflict with the regime.

In The Rice Collection, abstraction is revealed as a salient visual and conceptual element of the continuum of Cuban cultural eras, social generations, and political frames of reference.

The Prophet's Dream

The works in *The Prophet's Dream* express political and social awareness and illustrate the communal Cuban identity of the generations that followed the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

The concept of abstract entities such as motherland, national identity and values, culture, “a people”, revolution, and shared destiny rely upon regulated thought. An exaggerated sense of political stability and social cohesion, communal well-being and aspirations, and a perception of belonging and predestination are inherent in this thinking. These paradigms are founded upon imagined realities, instilled fictions, and embraced beliefs.

Art has served throughout history as an effective tool of propaganda, amplifying fictions through repetition, aggrandizement, and emotional provocation.

But if the veracity of a story is doubted or rejected, art can become a call to reason and a tool for exposing discrepancies between reality and rhetoric, wakefulness and dreams, and utopia and disillusionment. It can reveal the inconsistencies in a narrative and the glitches in a fictional matrix. Art can bring into focus and scrutinize ideas previously blurred, omitted, or completely expunged.

In opposition to propaganda, art that employs irony, satire, double entendre, veracity in documentation, and historical honesty puts a belief system into question.

In the works of *The Prophet's Dream*, art serves to express uncertainties, anguishes, and doubts most eloquently.

The Great Journey Archives

The works in *The Great Journey: Archives* express the trauma of national exile.

Cuba is defined as an island-nation, a term that refers not only to its geographic properties—the cluster of islands, islets and keys that form the biggest archipelago in the Antilles—but also the people who inhabit it.

Spiritually and culturally speaking, Cubans consider their country to be a more capacious island-nation, one that encompasses its people wherever they may be. Displaced Cubans, scattered across the globe for more than six decades, comprise an implicit constellation of Cuban islets, defined by identity, not location. They maintain connection through memory, language, family, the experience of suffering, the longing for liberty—and their undying and unrequited love of homeland.

This section reflects the trauma of sixty years of a nation being shattered by immeasurable loss through migration.

These works summon the essence of the Cuban exodus—the sad farewell to the beloved and familiar, the tribulations of a one-way trip to an unknown land, the challenge of adapting to an unfamiliar life—and embody one of the most recurrent topics in contemporary Cuban art.

The Sensory Landscapes of Memory and Desire

The more hedonistic, chimerical, and whimsical imagery percolating through Cuban contemporary art is found in *The Sensory Landscapes of Memory and Desire*. These works exude eroticism, playfulness,

perceptual games, intimate longings, the unconscious, and explorations into the depths of memory.

The nomadic spirits of the Cuban avant-garde—those moving between Havana, Paris and New York in the early 20th century—began distilling the elements of a fabricated Cuban identity in their art. They constructed imaginary topographies of bucolic rural scenes, visual tropes charged with vivid colors and sensuality, and thrumming city scenes—an idealized portrayal of an unrealized tropical utopia.

These artists contorted the natural beauty of Cuba into a romanticized version that persuaded natives and foreigners alike. Their idealized imagery, in which corruption is erased and ambiguity absent, insinuated itself as the stereotypical idea of the island both at home and abroad.

Through the decades following Castro's Revolution in 1959, some artists established residency abroad. Their art was imbued with the pulse of their cosmopolitan life and the aggressive rhythm, fevered consumerism, and formidable geometrical order of urban architecture. The work from this period oscillates between awe of the locale—expressed in vibrant cityscapes—and rebuff of the new environment. Rejection of the new surroundings found expression in criticism, fabricated mindscapes, and idyllic renditions of a mythical and lost island life.

For many of the artists who remained in Cuba after 1959, artistic expression became a different kind of political struggle—that of claiming a place of true individual freedom beyond the constraints and limitations of circumstances. In a country of inescapable scrutiny of one's political standing, and against the predominantly political post-revolutionary art, these artists dissent and delve into the realm of the self. Their work, at once conceptual and anecdotal, both reminisces and ruminates on the anodyne—art-making, sex, nature, and all matters of everyday life. It rises to transcendence through the lens of imagination, poetry, and deeply felt emotion. Through the lenses of imagination, poetry, and deeply felt emotion, this work transcends its origins in the commonplace and rises to distinction.

The Musings of Narcissus Through the Looking Glass and What the Artist Found There

The Musings of Narcissus: Through the Looking Glass and What the Artist Found There offers a glimpse into the process and philosophy of Cuban artists exploring self-representation.

In the 1980s Cuban artists began to center on the self, revealing intimate feelings and emotions. They explored both philosophical and material aspects of the creative process and circumvented previous intellectual and artistic confines. The self-referential movement criticized, rejected, and deconstructed traditional means of expression. Their quest for discovery of original and eloquent ways of expression ultimately transfigured the artist's role entirely.

The body of art created in this trend delineates curiosity and self-scrutiny, the narcissism of self-contemplation, playful idealizations, and allegorical renderings of autobiography. Some of the artists sublimate their personal psyche and fabricate alter egos to address the contradictions inherent in the intellectual process of art-making.

The practices and viewpoints of self-awareness and referentiality that emerged in this movement powerfully persist in contemporary Cuban art.

The Spirit of the Real, the Reality of the Spirit

The myriad of individual styles, aesthetics, and imagery in the work in *The Spirit of the Real, the Reality of the Spirit* is bound by a common genesis in the sacred.

It is within a spiritual dimension that these artists' conceptual understanding of the ultimate substance, meaning, and purpose of their art—as well as of the world around them—is primarily charted and expressed.

The art may be guided—or at times executed using the artist as a vessel or a tool—by spiritual beings such as gods, friendly or evil spirits, souls of ancestors, or other presences that inhabit the artist's life and

dreams. The artists' own understanding of the meaning unfolding in their work—and the process of delineating images they envision, however secular the subjects—is mediated by these otherworldly entities.

In most of the works in this section, mythological and symbolic elements from African-Cuban religions underlie or are dominant in both the narrative and the visual structure of the works.

Some narratives convey an assertion of identity, while others serve as allegories, as the artists question or testify to a spiritual view of personal or social issues.

V.

Under the Spell of the Palm Tree invites viewers to embark on a voyage that mirrors the Rice family's odyssey of discovery, connection, and commitment. The family's deeply held esteem for Cuban art and culture is the constant along the path of the collection.

Through the lens of the curatorial narrative, the collection emerges not as a static archive but as a reflection of Cuba's complex identity. As curators, we aspired to illuminate the entwined realities of historical and emotional resonance.

Each artist contributes a piece of the broader historical and cultural picture—a portrait of resilience, creativity, and a search for meaning that is both deeply personal and universally evocative. Selected and assembled by a family enthralled with the revelations of Cuban culture, the collection is a legacy of an extraordinary time and place.