



*Under the Spell
of the Palm Tree*

THE RICE COLLECTION OF CUBAN ART

By Gabriela Azcuy and David Horta

I. THE RICE COLLECTION

Susie and Mitchell Rice have been spiritually enriched by their relationship with art and artists, ever more profoundly as their collection expands and evolves. We can trace its itinerary back to the earliest travels of these tireless wanderers, both at home and overseas. Every new trip would yield not only photographs and memories, but often a painting or a print from a local artist.

When it comes to art, the family's first visit to Cuba in 2013 was as memorable as it was pivotal to their vocation as collectors. Cuban art became a gateway to embrace the heart and mind of a fascinating culture and its people. Collecting was no longer a hobby, but a passion, and over time the Rices would fall completely "under the spell" of Cuban art.

For a decade, Susie and Mitchell's Cuban Art Collection has been growing consistently in scope and quality, now treasuring the works of more than seventy artists from different generations and aesthetics. It has become an always open, living process; a voyage of self-discovery that goes beyond the sheer pleasure of finding, acquiring, treasuring, and enjoying the contemplation and discussion of artworks in the company of relatives and friends. Sharing ideas and experiences with artists and fellow collectors has become a ritual that deeply enriches the practice of collecting, while also sparking connections with new friends and advocates. Thus, the Rice's quest has progressed from spontaneous and intuitive exploration to knowledge...from serendipity to conscious search...from enjoyment to commitment...all culminating in a strong emotional bond.

Susie and Mitchell Rice are dedicated to "expanding and enhancing the collection's ability to represent the breadth and richness of Cuban art." They wish to share their collection with the public "through thoughtfully curated exhibitions and a diverse educational arts program," as well as via loans and the publication of books, among other initiatives that will help to make Cuban art and artists more visible beyond the nation island. This is the impetus behind their creation and continuous support of the non-for-profit foundation, The Cuban Arts Group.

As a vision for the future, it is Susie and Mitchell Rice's aspiration, in their own words, "to create a permanent exhibition platform, such as a museum or cultural center. By way of such a public setting, it would be our dream to share our passion for Cuba, its complexity, rich culture and history, all as documented through the eyes of Cuban artists."

II. UNDER THE SPELL OF THE PALM TREE

The Rice Collection of Cuban Art

Under the Spell of the Palm Tree: The Rice Collection of Cuban Art traces the Rice family's decade-long path of discovering the art and artists of Cuba. This inaugural exhibition drawn from a collection of 230 works of art presents 79 paintings, drawings, photographs, prints, mixed media, art books, and sculptures by fifty-three artists selected and organized along six 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.*

The exhibition deviates from a traditional historical narrative and is presented as a compass rather than a timeline—a map for a journey through the varying themes, genres, and styles that align with the sensibilities of two generations of collectors in the Rice family.

The guide for this winding course of visual and conceptual ideas is the family's unwavering admiration of Cuban artistic culture—epitomized here by the royal palm tree, the unifying symbol of 'Cubanness.' Their esteem for the art and the people of Cuba brings meaning and bestows consistency to the collection, making a strong whole of the multiplicity of parts.

The six thematic sections in *Under the Spell of the Palm Tree* wind through the exhibition space like convolutions of the brain, articulating individual yet functionally inseparable hemispheres. The analytical and cynical coexist with the emotional, intuitive, spiritual, and fantastical.

On one side, artists express an acute engagement with Cuba's history, society, and culture. Their work centers on the utopias and dystopias found in the myths and aspirations of the Cuban psyche against a backdrop of totalitarianism, freedom fights, and migration.

But another direction along the pathway reveals an undertone of sensuality, imagination, and wit, a reconnection with nature, a search for self-awareness and transcendence, a personal ideal of art and beauty that is both abstract and concrete.

Taken together, the art within the exhibition—and in the Rice Collection as a whole—comprise a complete topography of shared imagery, symbolism, ideals, and allegories.

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* discloses the changes of the seventy-year evolution of abstraction in Cuban art. The divergent artistic sensibilities of these seventeen works are connected through congruence of process, materials, points of departure, and artistic objectives.

The selection of works on display includes some early works that demonstrate an affinity for abstraction among some Cuban pioneers of modernism in the late 1940s.

Examples of a more aseptic and disciplined approach to abstraction known as concrete art appear 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,” “retrograde,” “dehumanized,” and “foreign,” and most especially, “bourgeois.” They demanded conformity to new standards of art and culture, as defined by themselves, ignoring the spirit of innovation and the universal aspirations of Concrete Art.

This section discloses an interval between twentieth-century abstract art and the more narratively oblique, ambivalent, or openly critical advances of contemporary abstraction. In some of these works, the art is infused with political innuendo and references to reality veiled by artistic devices.

Viewed through the lens of the Rice Collection, abstraction is a core visual and conceptual ingredient uniting art and artists across a continuum of cultural eras, social generations, and political frames of reference.

THE PROPHET’S DREAM

The works in *The Prophet’s Dream* delineate both political and social awareness and the critical communal identity present in Cuban art through generations subsequent to the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

The existence of abstract entities such as motherland, identity, culture, people, national values, revolution, and destiny is made possible by a regulated and encouraged sense of political stability and social cohesion, communal well-being and aspirations, and a perception of belonging and predestination. These paradigms are primarily the result of imagined realities, fictions that are instilled in us, or beliefs we have embraced.

In this sense, art has served throughout history as a sophisticated and effective tool of propaganda, amplifying those fictions through repetition, aggrandizement, and emotional provocation.

But what happens if the veracity of those stories is doubted or rejected outright? Then art can become a sobering call to reason and a tool for exposing the discrepancies

between reality and rhetoric, between dreams and wakefulness, and between utopia and disillusionment.

Art can powerfully serve to reveal the inconsistencies in the narrative and the glitches in the fictional matrix. It can bring into focus and scrutinize images and ideas previously blurred, omitted, or completely expunged. In opposition to propaganda, art might resort to irony, satire, double entendre, documentation, and historical re-enactment to put the current state-of-affairs and a belief system into question.

Art can serve 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 described as an island-nation, a term that refers not only to its physical and 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, however, Cubans consider their country to be a more expansive island-nation, one that encompasses its people wherever they may be. Displaced Cubans, scattered across the globe for more than six decades, comprise a kind of wider constellation of Cuban islets, defined not by geography but by cultural identity. They strive to maintain a connection through the ties of memory, language, family, the experience of suffering, the longing for liberty—and their undying and unrequited love of homeland.

The experience of sixty years of a nation being shattered by ongoing loss through migration is addressed in this section of the exhibition. The selected works reflect the trauma of the drifting apart of one segment of the island-nation from the other.

From the sad farewell to everything known and cherished, to the tribulations of the one-way trip to uncharted territories, to the challenges of coming to terms with an entirely new life in an unknown place, these works touch on the pulse of the Cuban exodus—one of the most recurrent topics in contemporary Cuban art.

THE SENSORY LANDSCAPES OF MEMORY AND DESIRE

The Sensory Landscapes of Memory and Desire delineates the more hedonistic, chimerical, and whimsical imagery that percolates through Cuban contemporary art. These works exude eroticism, playfulness, perceptual games, intimate longings, the unconscious, and explorations into the depths of memory.

The years between the 1930s and the late 1950s are seen as an agitated period of political and cultural consolidation of the Cuban Republic. The nomadic spirits of the Cuban avant-garde—those moving between Havana, Paris and New York—began distilling the elements of a renovated Cuban national identity in their art. They fabricated an imaginary topography of bucolic rural scenes and visual tropes charged with vivid colors and sensuality—an unblemished and idyllic portrayal of the tropical utopia Cuba was meant to become.

Beyond the complex political reality of their time, these artists delved into dreams and mindscapes to a realm of personal bliss and ecstatic contemplation. They expressed an idealized version of reality, devoid of moral and political corruption.

Others established residency abroad between the beginning of Fulgencio Batista's regime in the 1950s and the decades following Castro's Revolution in 1959. In these unfamiliar settings, the aggressive dynamic, fevered consumerism, and formidable structures of continental urban life confronted these artists with rhythmic, geometrical patterns and the pulse of solitary existence.

Their works oscillated between awe of their novel surroundings—seen in vibrant cityscapes—and reminiscence and longing for the warmth, luminosity, and serenity of their lost island life.

For many of the artists who remained in Cuba after 1959, artistic expression was a different kind of political struggle—that of claiming a place of true freedom beyond the constraints, limitations, and deceptions imposed by political circumstances.

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 examines a range of self-referential works of art and offers a glimpse into the process and philosophy of Cuban artists exploring self-representation.

This body of art encompasses a panoply of perspectives, encompassing curiosity and self-scrutiny, the narcissism of self-contemplation, playful idealizations, and allegorical renderings of meaningful autobiographical events. Some artists fabricate alter egos through which they can best express and question the contradictions inherent in the intellectual process of art-making, where their personal psyche or sense of self remain latent.

In the 1980s Cuban artists began experimenting with ideas that center on the self through revelations of intimate personal feelings and emotions. They explored both the philosophical and material aspects of the creative process and began to break free of the confines of previous intellectual and artistic traditions. The movement embarked upon a quest for discovery of original and eloquent ways of expression. They criticized,

rebelled against, and deconstructed their traditional place within the traditional art world, upending the status quo and ultimately transfiguring the artist's role entirely.

Artists brought to the fore a reshaped perspective on how art is made, instigating novel practices and viewpoints of self-awareness and referentiality that powerfully persist in contemporary Cuban art.

THE SPIRIT OF THE REAL, THE REALITY OF THE SPIRIT

The Spirit of the Real, the Reality of the Spirit presents work born of the artists' spiritual experiences. The myriad of works in this genre within the Rice Collection is represented by diverse individual styles, aesthetics, and imagery, but 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.

For the artists, their own understanding of the reality unfolding in their work and the process of delineating the images they envision, however factual and secular the subjects may be, are mediated by otherworldly entities. The art is 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.

In most of the works in this section, mythological and symbolic elements from African-Cuban religions underlie or are at the foreground of 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 current personal or social issues.

Under the Spell of the Palm Tree: The Rice Collection of Cuban Art

Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida

July 11, 2023 - January 10, 2024

Curators: Gabriela Azcuy and David Horta

Artists: Belkis Ayón, Abel Barroso, José Bedia, Cundo Bermúdez, Tania Bruguera, Iván Capote, Mario Carreño, Liset Castillo, Salvador Corratgé, Pedro de Oraá, Juan Roberto Diago, Roberto Diago Durruthy, Carlos Enríquez, Roberto Fabelo, Ernesto Javier Fernández, Adrián Fernández, José A. Figueroa, Carlos Garaicoa, Inti Hernández, Alex Hernández, Ricardo Miguel Hernández, Jesús Hdez-Güero, Alberto Lago, Wifredo Lam, Jorge Lavoy, Ernesto Leal, Glenda León, Reynier Leyva (Chino Novo), Kadir López, Jacqueline Maggi, Manuel Mendive, Frank Mujica, Mabel Poblet, Eduardo Ponjuán, René Portocarrero, Pedro Pablo Oliva, Ángel Ramírez, Sandra Ramos, Enrique Riverón, René Francisco Rodríguez, José Rosabal, Lázaro Saavedra, Emilio Sánchez, Tomás Sánchez, Esterio Segura, Rafael Soriano, Alfredo Sosabravo, Stainless (Alejandro Piñeiro, José Capaz and Roberto Fabelo Hung), José A. Toirac, Alexi Torres, Antonio Vidal, José Angel Vincench.