

Under the Charm of the Palm Tree¹

The Rice
Family
Collection

Gabriela García Azcuy
& David Horta



Six years ago, the Rice family's art collection was still incipient, yet interesting. This was an eclectic collection, reflecting intuition and a growing vocation, consisting of works of different aesthetic caliber and filiations—from artists as dissimilar as Rafael Carneiro, Chuck Close, Ara Peterson, Adam Pendleton, Bernard Saint-Maxent, Alan Uglow, Russell Young, and Zachary Wollard. Through this inventory, one could follow the Rices' travels to places like New York and Paris, from which invariably they would bring home works of art.

One happy day they decided their next destination would be Cuba. The name of that island had only started to resonate among those who would later be attracted to it—onlookers, enthusiasts, all kinds of nostalgic souls. The Rices had never set foot in Cuba before, so they didn't have many expectations about it. However, they live in Tampa, and their curiosity about what always looked like a remote, inaccessible, and strange place was stimulated by Tampa's community of Cubans, who are spiritually connected by an umbilical cord to their motherland and their culture.

At the same time, a new political atmosphere seemed to announce a cultural opening-up. The Rices' knowledge of Cuba did not, at this point, go much beyond deeply rooted stereotypes. Their idea of a journey, though, was anything but conventional. For them, a journey always centers on human beings: individuals, people. The Rices' interest is to integrate themselves into the cultural context—to walk, find, merge, understand, grasp, and get involved. When they arrived in Cuba, its people captivated them.

Many visitors to Cuba find more than enough in the landscapes, the intensity of light, the music, the inescapable presence of the sea, and that strange mixture of vitality and humor that allow Cubans to survive a life of scarcity. However, moments after walking into Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes the Rices were captivated by Cuban art. In a small country with an irrelevant economy, they didn't expect to find the luxury of a prolific, diverse, eloquent, and high-quality artistic production. The art they found in Cuba—and by extension, the culture they discovered—didn't seem to be that of an underdeveloped country. Through Cuban art and artists, the Rices would discover a source of joy, a new direction of spiritual learning and growth, a challenge and a purpose.

By their second trip to Cuba, the Rices had procured all available information to help them draft a wish list of candidates for their collection. This opened up the opportunity for them to explore the work of young artists like Alex Hernández, Adrián Fernández, Frank Mujica and Niels Reyes, in addition to meeting with and acquiring works from more renowned artists like Glenda León, Esterio Segura, José A. Vincench, Ernesto Leal, to name only some. In addition, the Rices sought out living masters with an established career like Roberto Fabelo, Lázaro Saavedra, Eduardo Ponjuán, Ángel Ramírez, and, in their most providential discovery, in his studio in Pinar del Río, Pedro Pablo Oliva.

The Rices would become inevitably hooked on Cuban art. After passing on their enthusiasm to the rest of their family, many trips would follow, and the work of many other artists would enter the collection, discovered not only in Cuba but also in galleries and auction sales in Europe and the U.S. And soon, enthusiasm became passion. For the Rices, their art became a vehicle for the discovery of other versions of Cuba than the stereotypical, ones much more intimate and painful, but also stronger, more universal, more profound and complex. They would also discover that Cuban art had a bright past, and acquire the work of Carlos Enríquez, René Portocarrero, Cundo Bermúdez, Roberto Diago and others from the first and second avant-gardes. They also acquire works by the growing constellation of Cuban abstracts, among them Salvador Corratge, Antonio Vidal, Enrique Riveron, Pedro de Oraa o José Rosabal. Nothing Cuban would be foreign to the Rices anymore.

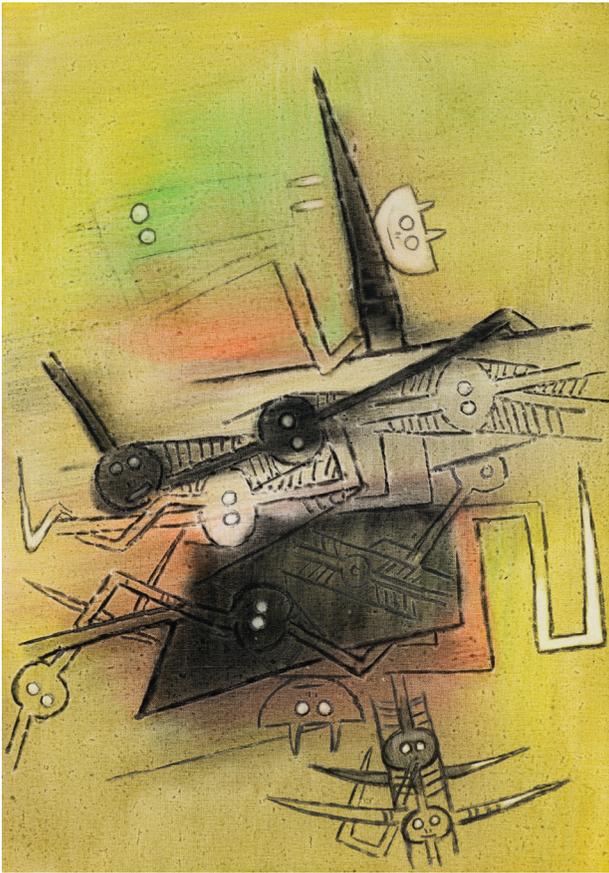
Only six years after their first visit to the island, the Rice family's Cuban Art Collection (with capital letters!) comprises 250 works by 70 artists—including many of great relevance in Cuban visual culture, such as canvases by Wifredo Lam and Mario Carreño, and works by living masters like Manuel Mendive and Pedro Pablo Oliva. Some of Oliva's most seminal and celebrated masterpieces, created during a career spanning half a century, are part of the collection.

ERNESTO LEAL
Diplomacy 4, 2015
Paper stripes on fabric and wood
47½ x 23¼ x 1 in

ABEL BARROSO
Home, 2012
Sculpture, woodcut
19½ x 24 in

Courtesy of the authors





The Rice family sees their collection as the result of an open, living process, meant to foster cooperation with institutions, artists, and fellow collectors; to lend works for significant exhibitions and publications; to disseminate knowledge and stimulate the enjoyment of art...

II.

The diversity of the Rice collection corresponds to the differing sensibilities of various family members, which coexist and dialogue under the same arc, ranging widely from Pop to abstraction, from conceptual to outsider art, from painting and sculpture to installation, objects, photography, engraving, comics, caricature, and illustration. The Rices, of course, are well aware of market trends and of art that has already been validated by critics and historians. Yet, excitingly, they are also fascinated by discoveries that are not necessarily propped up by art markets or mainstream art institutions. Whether by intuition, sheer attraction, or, more and more, with every new acquisition, knowledge, the Rices are building a collection that looks not just like the multi-faceted wholeness of Cuban art, but like Cuba itself.

From the start, the collection was not conceived to be a sedentary or purely hedonistic project. The works have not been hung on the walls of a home, for the delight of only a few people. The Rice family sees their collection as the result of an open, living process, meant to foster cooperation with institutions, artists, and fellow collectors; to lend works for significant exhibitions and publications; to disseminate knowledge and stimulate the enjoyment of art; and to promote intercultural dialogue and a more profound understanding of the other.

That is the idea behind the non-for-profit foundation The Cuban Arts Group, whose purpose is “enriching and strengthening cross-cultural connections through the arts of Cuba... [by educating] Americans about Cuban arts and culture through thoughtfully curated exhibitions and a diverse educational arts programs including discussions, lectures, involving Cuban artists, art educators, curators, historians, and writers.” In only three years of existence, the Cuban Arts Group has made possible exhibitions like *Growing Up in Neverland* and *Pedro Pablo Oliva's Cuba: hiStories*, both at The University of Tampa; it has also collaborated with *Complicated Beauty: Contemporary Cuban Art*, at the Tampa Museum of Art, and *Wild Noise*, at the Bronx Museum of Arts; as well as the exhibition of the sculpture *Hybrid of Chrysler* by Esterio Segura at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (2018), and the Cade Museum for Creativity and Invention (2019).



WIFREDO LAM - Untitled, 1973 / Oil on canvas / 27½ x 19½ in

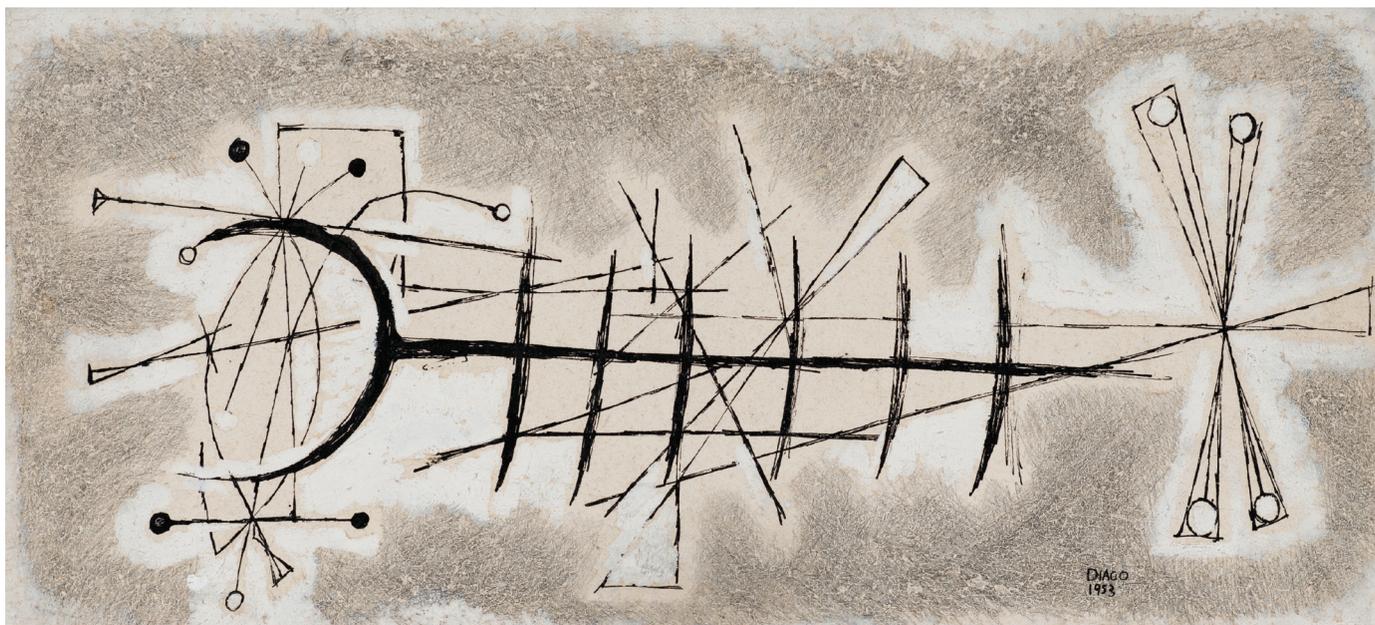
LÁZARO SAAVEDRA - **Cuando yo sea grande**, 1988 / Mixed media / 20 x 28¾ in

JOSÉ BEDÍA - **Más de lo mismo y uno de necio**, 2000 / Ink, conte crayon, white chalk and pastel on amate paper / 47 x 94¼ in

Courtesy of the authors



Our collection has been a collaborative family effort entailing a continuous process of search, discussion, and selection. In the end, the number of artists and works considered for potential acquisition has far exceeded the number of those that have ultimately become part of the collection.



EMILIO SÁNCHEZ - *Casita verde y blanca*, ca. 1990s / Oil on canvas / 48 x 48 in / Courtesy of the authors

JUAN ROBERTO DIAGO - *Directrices*, 1953 / Oil and graphite on fiber board / 11 x 24 in / Courtesy of the authors

III.

About the collection, the process of searching for artworks and their future plans, Susie Rice comments:

How have you approached the process of building a collection?

Our collection has been a collaborative family effort entailing a continuous process of search, discussion, and selection. In the end, the number of artists and works considered for potential acquisition has far exceeded the number of those that have ultimately become part of the collection.

As a rule, we are more inclined to purchase works that gain our attention and amaze us—works that, because of their imagery, or technique, or any number of other qualities, we feel connected to visually, emotionally, and spiritually, regardless of the prestige of the artist. Our collection is not monolithic. The varied tastes, interests, and aesthetic views of each of our family members have been extremely influential in every aspect of collecting. The potential importance of a work, from both a cultural and market value point of view, is not always clear at first, and it's sometimes a challenge for all of us to find common ground. We also value the personal relationships we have with many artists, which have allowed us to see deeper inside their thinking and artistic aims, increasing our understanding and appreciation of their work. Fortunately, through discussion and careful selection, we have been able to find the right balance. Regardless of the behavior of the market, we don't compromise what is important to us: excellence in execution, distinctive poetics, conceptual coherence, and cultural significance.

What is the particular phase the collection is undergoing right now?

There is a growing interest among our family in exploring the art between the early 1950s and the late 1960s. These two transitional decades spark intense curiosity for us, and reveal many insights about the nature of post-revolutionary Cuban art.

More recently, we've begun researching and collecting the work of artists of the Cuban diaspora. Our attention is focused mainly on those artists and works embodying the spiritual legacy of Cuba. Of course, there is so much great art yet to be discovered in Cuba, and we will continue to enrich the collection with new works that both inspire us and engender our passionate interest.

What is the future of the collection and your other projects related to Cuban art?

We want to achieve a more significant presence for the works and artists represented in our collection, and we are looking for greater coherence in the thematic and conceptual currents that are already discernable in the collection. We believe these types of works will enhance the collection's ability to represent a comprehensive standard for the richness of Cuban art.

We are dedicated to sharing our collection with the public through exhibitions and loans. Sometime in the future, we aspire to create a permanent exhibition platform, such as a museum or cultural center. It would be our dream to share, in a public setting, our passion about Cuba, its complexity, rich culture and history, as documented through the eyes of sensational Cuban artists. ◀

1. From the title of a work by Sandra Ramos. *Bajo el hechizo de la palma* (Under the Charm of the Palm Tree), Etching, 20 x 26 in., 1993.