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Cuban artist Antonia Eiriz's work on display at MDC

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'Una tribuna para la paz democrática' (A Tribune for Democratic Peace), 1968

The sweeping canvases of the late Cuban painter Antonia Eiriz are not always easy to view. That is not to say they are harsh and hard — very little overt violence is expressed in these works; but the blurred faces and figures are contorted, silently shouting out in pain, or they are just silently suffering.

Many of her works — thought to walk the line between expressionism and abstraction — are covering the walls of MDC Museum of Art + Design at the Freedom Tower, a huge space well-suited to this retrospective of an artist under-appreciated in the United States, and Miami (although not by many within the art community). In fact, this is the biggest exhibit of her work, called Antonia

Eiriz: A Painter and Her Audience.

Eiriz would become known for her steadfast pursuit of her own style and voice despite powerful pressures from a new Communist regime, and she would influence many artists who would follow her. Some of them now make Miami home.

Eiriz came of artistic age in 1950s Havana, a place and time where movements of the 20th century such as Modernism and abstraction were being fervently explored and expanded by local artists. It was also a time of tumult, eventually resulting in Castro's revolution. Eiriz painted in both pre- and post-revolutionary eras. Artists strive to leave an individual imprint on their creations, and Eiriz's particular mark was to depict figures losing their imprints — their individuality, their voices, their dignity. It's easy to see why critics have compared some of her angst expressions on canvas to Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.

As the 1960s wore on, "Western" styles in art were discouraged in Cuba in favor of more social realist forms, meant to underplay the individual and glorify the group. Eiriz continued to paint in what she called an "expressionist figurative" style, sometimes using lots of color, other times in a monotone. Some of the paintings are undeniably political: A group waits before an empty podium, some members with evil, ghoulish looks, others with faces erased. Some of the figures appear limbless, and in several cases the open-mouthed creatures could be babies crying or fledglings waiting for mother to drop in worms.

There is a feminine undercurrent to much of Eiriz's work. The suffering could be caused by domestic violence, or the pain of childbirth, as much as by authoritarian or military oppression. And the muted desperation created by her brilliant brush strokes do not feel as muscular as the content might suggest.

While Eiriz was acclaimed around the globe in the 1960s with various shows, by 1970 she quit the active art world — likely due to unrelenting official interference — and concentrated on teaching.

But the perception that she had not caved, that she remained dedicated to her own creative style and voice despite pressure, had made her an icon of sorts to the next generation in Cuba, artists whom she taught and mentored as well.

In an interesting addition, curator and artist Michele Weinberg has included a number of contemporary artists who have been influenced by Eiriz. The variety of works highlighted in this section — from Luisa Basnuevo and Nereida Garcia-Ferraz to Ana Mendieta, Glaxis Novoa and Tomas Sanchez — underscore that Eiriz's influence was far broader than simply imparting the tricks of the trade to a new group of emerging artists.

In 1993 Eiriz moved to Miami, and in 1995 she died of a heart attack at age 65. Some of her works have been seen in galleries (such as Cernuda and Maxoly) but this is the first to bring this volume together. Weinberg gathered them from galleries and institutions alike.

Sharing part of the second floor of the Freedom Tower are two contemporary female painters, Miamian Sara Stites and Kansas City-based Anne Austin Pearce, in an exhibit titled *Elaborate Webs/Striking Exploits*. With the inclusion of the contemporary works in the Eiriz show, and the subtle acknowledgement that these paintings come from female hands, the transition from one show to the other isn't jarring. Stites in particular has a series of well-done recent works that may surprise those familiar with what she has done in the past, although a common thread is still there.

The two-toned works, acrylics and oils on something called yupo paper (it feels very smooth and plastic-like, rather than rough like canvas or wood), have some distinct characters and story development in them. While in the past Stites suggested figurative elements — parts of the female anatomy, sometimes with twists and ties that could imply some bondage or entrapment — here a young girl stares pensively, she's "Watching the Storm," as the piece is titled. There's an arm with black glove in a cage, another young girl gazing into an indistinct place in the background — a dream, a future?

While the colors are muted, these are not somber pieces, more contemplative of a certain space.

What's most impressive is the suspicion that part of the narrative has been smudged away in the process of Stites' art-making, the idea that elements of the spaces we are looking at have been somewhat erased. It's no surprise that Stites says she is constantly sketching in a notebook — these are indeed sketches. One piece is made up of pieces of gray notebook paper tacked onto the walls.

As she explains, she puts that yupo paper on the floor and pours "tinted water onto the paper and drops ink sparingly into the water, wiping and re-pouring continually until what

remains are echoes of stain, forming a mysterious, dreamy and grisaille space." Most of the works are set against a light gray wall — the absence of color makes it all become more defined in its quiet way.

Eiriz's paintings are dramatic, instantly, from a distance. Stites' work needs closer contact. But in an interesting if even unintentional continuum, both artists deal with the sense of erasure, of elimination, of what it means to lose place and voice — and then refind it.

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