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At the Frost and MOAD, Cuban connections old and new

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3_Mirta Cerra Balcón 1953

The chance to make a Cuban cultural connection is never distant in Miami, but this month, a cluster of visual arts exhibits at Florida International University's Frost Art Museum and at Miami Dade College's Museum of Art + Design (MOAD) presents a cornucopia.

Collectors Darlene M. and Jorge M. Pérez have given the Frost and FIU's Cuban Research Institute 24 paintings and works on paper, dating from the late 19th to mid 20th centuries. Shown at the museum as *Eternal Cuba*, they roughly illustrate Cuba's transition from Eurocentric visual arts domination to the beginnings of a vanguard movement with an emerging national identity.

Also at the Frost, some of the vibrant power of later generations of Cuban artists is on view.

In *Eternal Cuba*, the richly textured, writhing tree *Roots* by Hipólito Canal could be scenes in France, Spain or the United States; the same for Antonio Morey's

Waterfall. But incrementally, such images as the proud royal palms of Domingo Ramos' landscape, the Cuban peasant, the sugar mill and the mulatta (a stand-in for the "exotic" gypsy of European genre paintings) became iconic national symbols, as Cuban artists — some of them after a Paris pilgrimage — fashioned a lexicon of iconography and identity that gradually included the island's non-European genetic and cultural heritage.

Political nationalism is quite explicit in Héctor Molné's painting of a young, sad-eyed flower vendor who wears pants made of an American flour sack. He stands beside a Texaco oil can, as a faceless pistol-packing "capitalist" wearing two-tone shoes, strides past.

In the shift from traditional representation, hinted at in the Cubist-influenced work of Mirta Cerra's Balcón and Rene Portocarerro's Mujer, it may be harder to detect that "Cubanness," fully ripened in the Africa-rooted symbolist and surrealist work of Wifredo Lam and Manuel Mendive. And we don't see evidence yet of the full-out abstraction that would blossom in the 1950s El Once (The Eleven) group, for example, but the Pérez donation provides a basis for both scholarship and further growth.

It is intended as a resource for scholarship, loan and exhibition for the Cuban Research Institute, part of FIU's School of International and Public Affairs.

Eternal Cuba offers more pleasures than thrills, but the hope is, as museum director Carol Damian suggests in her essay, that it will "... encourage the collecting of works that will lead to a full picture of Cuban Art at FIU in the future."

In fact, the vitality, depth and inventiveness of Cuban art resounds in two other shows at the Frost. The Pérez family donated two striking paintings that are part of the small, focused show, "From Africa to the Americas," in the adjacent room. Carlos Alfonzo's Untitled is of modest scale but delivers an explosive cornucopia of swirling symbols, rendered in a jewel-like palette. José Bedia's No Quedo Lugar Para el Zorro (No Place for the Fox) may evoke the displaced and harassed outsider and suggests both a personal and global quandary.

This show, curated by Damian, is enriched by several African sculptures. It illuminates the vital currents of Yoruba, Santeria and Palo Monte spiritual traditions that artists have explored in the decades following those represented in the Eternal Cuba show. In fact, these and other later works may reveal an even more eternal Cuba.

Where Paris was the Mecca for early and mid 20th century Latin artists, Cuban-born Humberto Castro, who has lived in Europe and the United States for many years, sought his roots in an extended cultural immersion in the Antilles (the West Indian archipelago bordered by the Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean).

Tracing Antilles, commissioned by the Frost and curated by Ana Estrada, has the epic grandeur of Zanuck's World War II movie, The Longest Day. Invasion is central to this enormous multimedia tableau. It features exploration, exploitation, extinction, extraction (blood and treasure), resistance, heroism and survival.

During his odyssey, paralleling those of centuries ago, Castro captured still photos and video of water, conversations, funeral rituals and mundane activities. Writing about Haiti and Cuba, he says, "I have encountered wonderful people, gentle and vibrant, full of love and joy despite the bad play that political policies and a history full of dictatorships and bloody events have provided."

He has combined documentary resources with loaned pre-conquest sacred objects, broken pottery, a shipwrecked canoe, voodoo flags, his own bronze sculpture and multilayered paintings. The ensemble is stunning, and individual works encompass lyrical portraits, sardonic texts and vibrant but distorted figures. History is rendered both timeless and timely.

Across town at MOAD, the annual CINTAS Fellowship finalists exhibition features artists of Cuban background whose creative expressions couldn't be more diverse. According to director and chief curator Jeremy Mikolajczak, "This group is very independent and very conceptually strong in their own individual manner. I don't think with this one [Fellowship show] there's any sort of striking visual relationship to that heritage."

This year's show eschews a strict focus on the Caribbean and on identity-based themes. Says Mikolajczak: "We all carry our heritage and our philosophies with us ... but this one is showing the changing shift, and for artists this is really a global world."

The CINTAS fellowship program provides an unrestricted cash prize to Cuban artists living outside Cuba, and an exhibition for the nine visual arts finalists is hosted by MDC MOAD.

Angela Valella, this year's CINTAS winner of the visual arts prize, has created an installation called *On Being Slightly Suspicious*. Recordings of antique and modern printing presses accompany a two-layered video that is projected through colored, translucent panes and across an array of objects. On a nearby custom-painted wall hang three prints on clear film.

Valella explains that the prints relate to the projection, rather like stills from a movie. "They're an investigation of the endless, infinite process of art that comes from a constant sequence of decisions. Metaphorically, the installation is a printing press." She performs a feat of alchemy that parallels the mixing of mediums, periods and symbols of Castro's work, but in a more abstract fashion.

Much of photographer Lisa Schaeffler's work documents family members and their intimate environments. Her CINTAS offerings, by contrast, explore the world of by-the-hour motels, a territory fraught with stories that we're invited to conjure up from her tranquil images of anonymous spaces and generic furnishings.

Cristina Lei Rodriguez's process combines careful planning with impulsive spontaneity. To create her modernist-inspired sculptural forms she assembles found and intentionally broken elements that include seashells, fabric, minerals, jewelry and even expensive handbags. They can appear, paradoxically, to have formed slowly and organically, like corals, or to result from capturing a maelstrom and binding it with resin.

Ruben Torres Llorca mines film and literary references for inspiration in creating socially critical drawings, paintings and sculpture. *Practice Will Make You Perfect* demonstrates his strong academic "chops," as he freezes one moment in the grim theatrical engagement of two realistically painted grisaille figures, wearing historical costume.

He surrounds them with a collage of multilingual text clippings and a frame of wooden rulers. Close reading of the text, with references to "Hank Goldberg," "Toxic Jock Syndrome," "Evo Morales," "Merchant Ivory films" and "gay marriage" — among hundreds of others — may, or may not, elucidate the drama.

In unique ways, but like their global colleagues, the CINTAS fellows unravel established narratives, construct and deconstruct layers of pictorial reference, find the universal in the personal, exploit materials in new ways and share compelling stories of both conviction and doubt. These artists make few direct references to the island of their heritage, instead

sharing share the quest to explore new visual territory with their compatriots of 100 years ago.

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