

THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA  
OF  
**LATINOS AND LATINAS**  
IN THE  
**UNITED STATES**

Suzanne Oboler and Deena J. Gonzalez

*Editors in Chief*



VOLUME 1

Acequias

—  
Dual Nationality

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2005

**ART, CUBAN AMERICAN.** Throughout the twentieth century, crossing political and cultural boundaries, artists from various countries migrated to the United States seeking freedom, adventure, and fortune. Other artists became exiles escaping war, tyrannical repression, and persecution. By 1959, in opposition to the revolution, thousands of Cubans began to flee Cuba with their families. Some of these people were already painters and sculptors; others were young men and women who would later study and practice art in the United States. Arriving as individuals and in subsequent waves, generations of Cuban American artists have made significant contributions to the culture of the United States.

The exhibition catalog *Outside Cuba: Contemporary Cuban Visual Artists* presented an overview of the field in 1988. The timeline begins with the pioneer Cuban masters followed by two generations studying and working in Cuba until 1959. The fourth generation matured in exile in the 1960s, and includes some of the young artists trained in U.S. universities who would be working by the early 1980s. Other artists escaped through the Mariel boatlift or left via Mexico and Spain on the way to America, while some settled in Paris. In time, the demographics expanded with younger Cuban Americans who were beginning their careers. These generations of artists were joined by another group of mid-career artists trained in the advanced art *schools* in Havana who opted in the early 1990s for life in the United States. In the early twenty-first century, Cuban American artists worked in every possible medium, ideological territory, and conceptual approach. Many made their work independent of

*THE JUNGLE.* Gouache on paper mounted on canvas by Wilfredo Lam, 1943. (Museum of Modern Art, New YorkJArtResource)



vested theories about Cuban art, hoping to shed ethnic associations and connect to the expanding international art world.

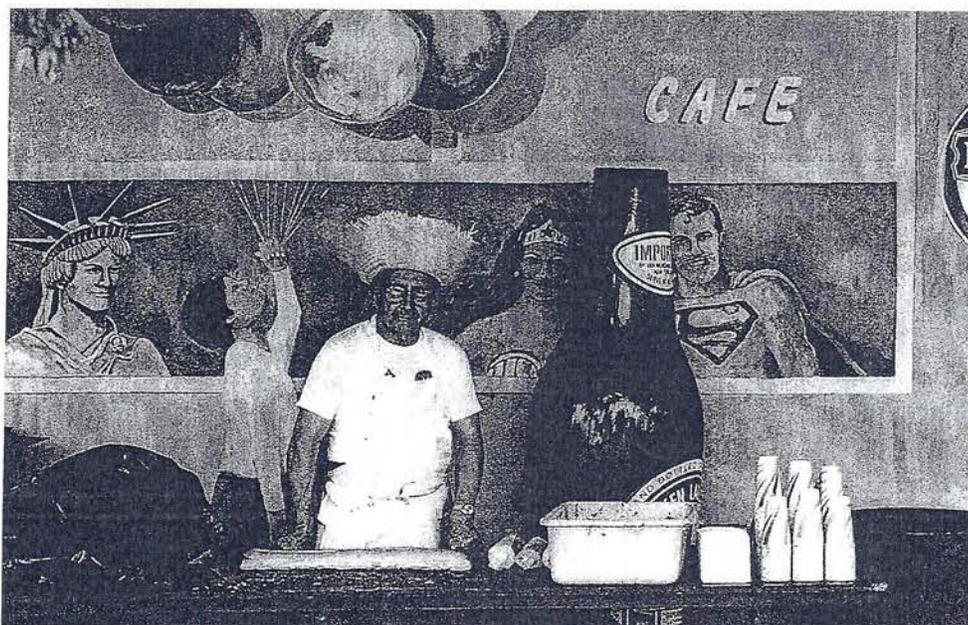
Cuban art in the United States developed beyond and apart from the art produced at home on the island. Miami museums could not show the work of artists staying on the island. Inside Cuba the work and histories of all artists who had defected were banned from publications and exhibitions. After four tough decades of cultural impasse, the "iron curtain" began to open by the late 1990s, as a larger collective cultural identity became possible. Through exhibitions and publications, some of the art produced in Cuba became both part and shadow of the larger terrain of Cuban American art in the United States.

Who can be considered a Cuban American artist today? Only Cuban-born Americans and their descendants can apply to the prestigious Cintas Foundation for the fellowships that have bolstered the careers of hundreds of Cuban artists, architects, composers, and creative writers.

### Exhibitions

The history of Cuban American art in the United States is documented in the catalogs of important and ambitious exhibitions that presented the expanding population of expatriate artists. After the economic and identity struggles of early exile, by the mid-1970s, as Miami's Cuban community became prosperous and active, four generations of artists started to show together. An evolving new Cuban art began to gain visibility with the support of the Miami Art Center, the Miami-Dade Public Library, and the Bacardi Gallery, as well as highlighted media coverage, the formation of different artists' groups, and the opening of galleries.

In 1976, the Museo Cubano de Arte y Cultura was established, and began a series of inspiring exhibitions. An early *Retrospectiva de Pintura Cubana* provided a historical overview of Cuban painters still grouped by the pattern of colonial and republican epochs. For a few years, the *Re-Encuentro Cubano*, hosted by different institutions, included other art forms in exhibitions that presented only the works



CASABLANCA. Photograph by Mario Algaze, 1985. (Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Gift of J. D. Montgomery/Photo by Jack Abraham [1986.0992])

of artists living outside Cuba. Other institutions sponsored solo and group exhibitions of artists living in the area.

In 1978, the exhibition *Contemporary Latin American Artists of the Southeastern United States*, organized by Jose Gomez Sicre, offered the first comprehensive grouping of exiled Cuban artists of all the generations. This show was paired with an exhibition of the Esso Latin American Art Collection of the Lowe Art Museum of the University of Miami. While the selection featured most of the active professionals, some serious artists working in Miami were not invited. Through other exhibitions, a broader territory emerged.

Organized by the Museo Cuba no de Arte y Cultura in 1983, *The Miami Generation* chronicled nine emerging U.S.-trained artists: Mario Bencomo, Maria Brito-Avellana, Humberto Calzada, Pablo Cano, Emilio Falero, Fernando Garcia, Juan Gonzalez, Carlos Macia, and Cesar Trasobares. The curator, Giulio Blanc, wrote in his essay, "There remains the generation of the 'casi nillos,' those who were children or almost children when they left the island. For them, Cuba is revolution, exile, coming of age in a foreign land, myth" (*The Miami Generation*).

In 1988, *Outside Cuba* accomplished its comprehensive effort to document significant expatriate Cuban artists. The catalog includes the seminal essay, "Cuban Visual Thinking in Exile since 1959," and other texts that present the roots of Cuban art in revolutionary politics, the "inevitable" position of exile of artists, and an acknowledgement of women artists.

CUBA USA: The First Generation was organized by the Fondo del Sol Visual Arts Center in Washington, D.C., and traveled to various venues. The exhibition featured

installations, photography, and video, with performances by younger Cuban diaspora artists, uniting sensibilities with media, acknowledging the amplitude of the field, and transcending cliched ideas of "nostalgic exile art." In addition to popular and sacred music, the project celebrated the Santeria altars of Caridad Salome.

Taking a more traditional approach, *Breaking Barriers: Selections from the Museum's Permanent Contemporary Collection* presented an amazing selection of ninety artists in 1997, casting a broad net and discovering a few new talents.

In the early twenty-first century, important exhibitions and publications consolidated the comprehensive field of the art of Cubans. The stellar presentation of artists living in Cuba with a few living elsewhere, *CUBA SIGLO XX: Modemidad y Sincretismo*, produced a weighty catalog with significant critical essays providing background and perspective.

*MEMORIA: Cuban Art of the Twentieth Century* is a mammoth effort that treats Cuban modern art as an evolving field with shifting boundaries. It includes articles, a chronology of exhibitions, and resumes of artists living in Cuba and in other countries. Produced by a team of curators, writers, historians, and archivists, *MEMORIA* charts the landscape of contemporary Cuban art and provides information on 474 artists.

Across the United States, other exhibitions were constructing larger definitions of Latino and Latina and Hispanic art, often including Cuban American artists. Beyond the commonality of language, Latino and Latina and Hispanic artists have radically different historical sources, diverse political tracks, and individual aesthetic interests. As

a distinct field, Cuban American art in the United States is a historical phenomenon moving toward global culture.

#### Foundation: Cuban Vanguardia

Cuban modern art emerged in Havana in the early decades of the twentieth century. Various aspiring men and women traveled to Europe to see and study art and returned home to create their versions of the "isms" and go on to invent their own forms and fusions of contemporary art. These artists found support and fame by staying and working in the motherland, decreasing the need to seek renown and recognition elsewhere. By the late 1940s, many of the Havana-based stars—Amelia Pelaez, Eduardo Abela, Carlos Enriquez, Victor Manuel, Fidelio Ponce, and others, including the reigning Cuban expatriate artist in Europe, Wifredo Lam—were celebrated and valued internationally.

The renown of these Vanguardia artists was bolstered by the acquisition of a group of their paintings by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The project was made possible by the influential Alfred Barr, who agreed to access the works into The Latin American Collection of the Museum of Modern Art. In *Pintura Cubana de Hoy*, published in 1944, the group was presented by Jose Gomez-Sicre, who became a powerful advocate for Cuban and Latin American artists as Director of the Organization of American States Museum from its founding in 1976 until his retirement. MoMA eventually acquired Lam's *La Jungla*, showing it in a place of honor in the building's lobby. The collective contribution of these artists influenced evolving perceptions about Cuban modern art.

Vanguardia art was colorful, lively, and joyful, celebrating the noble *campesino* and the beautiful *guajira*; it extolled the beauty of the island, its vegetation, flowers, and fruits; it recorded its light, color, landscapes, architecture, and baroque interiors. For some, it also extended remnants of provincialism and the lingering aesthetics of colonial days. By all accounts, the celebration of the insular beauty would be the primary model of "Cuban art" sold to tourists, exported and constructed beyond the mainland. Despite the modernist focus of the Vanguardia, with the ongoing formal training of artists at Academia San Alejandro, a separate official academic style kept alive older stylistic traditions.

Early emigrant artists like Enrique Riveron and Antonio Gattorno moved to New York in the 1930s. They traveled and studied in Europe, strongly rebelling against the academic aesthetic and nationalist iconography and embracing abstraction and the evolving art of the machine age. Mario Carreno lived in the United States for short periods and eventually moved to Chile. In New York, these artists were part of larger gatherings with fellow Latin American and Mexican artists, musicians, dancers, and

poets working in the city. Like others, Emilio Sanchez went to New York in 1944 to study at the Art Students League and stayed there for the rest of his life. Until the early years of exile, these artists traveled to Cuba freely and participated in exhibitions with the resident artists.

In Cuba, those who followed the Vanguardia generation began with the benefit of the aesthetic climate that the pioneers had established, making it possible for young artists to work within a more personal vocabulary and a broader interest of subjects. Rene Portocarrero and Mariano Rodriguez were influential mentors, even as other artists like Osvaldo Gutierrez Aleman were cultivating their own styles. The groups Los Menores de 30 and Grupo de Los Once were formed circa 1953, consolidating a new stage in Cuban modern art, separating the emerging interest in abstraction: Guido Llinas, Tomas Oliva, Hugo Consuegra, Jose Mijares, Roberto Diago, and Jose Ignacio Bermudez, among others. Sculptors were making works for public spaces: Alfredo Lozano, Roberto Estopil{m, Tomas Oliva, and Rita Longa, with the enduring presence of Sandu Darie. Others like Antonia Eiriz and Gina Pellón were creating their own expressive pictorial realms. Many of these artists would eventually escape from the island.

#### Moving to the United States in the 1960s

The first wave of mature Cuban artists arrived in the United States with developed styles but devastated by an uncertain future and shocked by unavoidable circumstances. As politically defeated and economically disowned Cubans, labeled *gusanos* (worms) by their compatriots back home, some had to work in other trades but continued to paint in their free time during the difficult first decade of exile.

Cuban art in the United States was nurtured in Miami, as individuals and institutions coalesced to present and encourage the art being produced. The Miami-Dade Public Library encouraged and showed artists from all areas of the artistic continuum. The Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami developed its own collection and hosted significant exhibitions. The Art Museum at Florida International University also staged group and solo exhibitions over the years.

The painter Baruj Salinas was an enthusiastic catalyst in the early days of exile in Miami, forging artistic associations with Rafael Soriano and Enrique Riveron. In 1969, they formed GALA (Group of Latin American Artists) with Jose Mijares, Osvaldo Gutierrez Aleman, and Roxana McCallister-Kelly from Argentina. They began to invite other artists to show, like Cundo Bermudez and Alfredo Lozano, and the group became a visible presence in Miami's fledgling art community.

As more exhibitions became possible, the public saw other artists who had continued to paint: Miguel Jorge, Dionisio Perkins, and Lourdes Gomez Franca. Younger

artists, sometimes with the mentoring of the old guard, continued their work in Miami: Gabriel Sorzano, Ricardo Pedreguera, Maria Tuma, Rafael Consuegra, Vicente Dopico, Siro del Castillo, Fernando Luis, Eft-aim Oliver, Rafael Mirabal, Thorvald Sanchez, Anibal Marrero, and Susana Sori.

Other Cuban artists had settled in New York like Daniel Serra Badue, Hugo Consuegra, Carmen Herrera, Julio Girona, Oscar Magnin, Roberto Estopinan, Julio Larraz, and Hugo Consuegra. Some moved to Puerto Rico: Cundo Bermudez, Alfredo Lozano, Agustin Fernandez, Gay Garcia, Victor Piedra, and Zilia Sanchez. The work of these artists would be presented in traveling group exhibitions, collectively forming and giving identity to the larger community of artists living outside their island homeland.

Although deciding to study art did not seem like a viable option in the first decade of exile, a few first-generation emigrants enrolled in Miami-Dade Community College and continued their studies at the University of Miami and other Florida universities. Youngsters who had formed part of the Pedro Pan group, the rescue campaign led by the Catholic Church to bring Cuban children without their parents to the United States, enrolled in U.S. universities to study art and art history. Most of these artists were trained in the MFA tradition, with an emphasis on making and craft. The first were graduating in the 1970s, and began working beyond their immediate ethnic enclave in cities nationwide. Their art was initially visible in survey exhibitions and later in major solo exhibitions.

Traditional artists had also settled in Miami, including Domingo Ramos, a leading landscape painter, and the Scull Sisters, unparalleled in their populist satire, as well as society portraitists like Pedro Menocal and Felix Cossio. Numerous other painters specialized in flowers, buildings, and birds. Maria Capdevila was an octogenarian outsider artist, and Maria Luisa Rios explored the destruction of the environment. Teok Carrasco, a leading muralist, painted the interior of the Ermita de la Caridad, the community's main religious venue. This branch of Cuban aesthetics is perpetuated by the Academy of Painting and Sculpture of San Alejandro in Exile, among other organizations, and is enabled by the nostalgia art market. In parts of Miami, especially the Calle Ocho gallery district, dozens of self-proclaimed artists continue to work within the pictorial traditions of prerevolutionary Cuba. This phenomenon, known as *los congeZados* (the frozen ones), is also evident in other aspects of exile culture. Ironically, the imagery of the Cuban modern masters acquired the patina of nostalgia, tainted with the sentimentality and sense of loss of uprooted individuals.

Eventually, some of the younger artists questioned political alignments while diminishing the centrality of the exile experience. With new perspectives and options, they stressed their situation as bicultural artists, impacted by

mass media and consumerism. In 1990, the exhibition Post-Miami Generation presented yet another wave of young graduates sharing an "identity crisis" with others in Miami's art scene of the early 1990s.

#### **Mariel Generation and Balseros**

Through the years, there were smaller waves of departure from Cuba. Images emerged in Cuban art as exodus archetypes. The *balsa*, a floating raft made of various materials, became a potent icon.

The Mariel boatlift of 1980 brought a number of artists who had trained at San Alejandro Academy and the emerging art schools, infusing the ongoing culture of the gusanos with renewed connections to Cuba's artistic threads. Carlos Alfonzo, the star of the Mariel generation, produced a profound body of work in a decade. Like Alfonzo, Juan Boza worked with the iconography of Santeria. Others, like Juan Abreu, Gilberto Ruiz, and Humberto Dionisio, focused on their existential condition of displacement. Victor Gomez, Agustin Gainza, Laura Luna, and others worked with printmaking, ceramics, and traditional materials. Moving to San Francisco, Eduardo Michaelsen is a singular visionary outsider artist. Having a committed identity, the group had its own publication, *Mariel Magazine*, dedicated to a broader sense of art, including contributions by Reinaldo Arenas.

#### **Cmnpafieros Artists**

In the late 1980s, another wave of artists fled Cuba. Unlike the initial gusanos or those in the Mariel group, these younger artists had trained in the most advanced art schools in Havana, embracing conceptual approaches to art. Because many of the artists were in transition, Mexico City became a convenient and energizing point of convergence. There was also the support of cultural leader Nina Menocal, who organized a historic exhibition, *15 Artistas Cubanos*, that brought together for the first time in thirty years some of the young artists who had studied in Cuba with others who had formed in the United States. One of the texts in the catalog acknowledges that the exhibition "has gained the irony, imperfect and incomplete, of upsetting both sides, knowing how to escape the control of each" (*15 Artistas Cubanos*). With work by Luis Cruz-Azaca, Felix Gonzalez Torres, and Trasobares, the exhibiting artists were willing to take "small risks" together.

This opening was the conduit for most of these artists into the United States. The stellar contribution of Jose Bedia transcends any definition of native versus imported or insular versus universal. Glexis Novoa and Ruben Torres-Llorca set up studios in Miami to continue active careers. Alejandro Aguilera, Nestor Arenas, Adriano Buergo, and Ana Albertina Delgado also moved to Florida, while Carlos Cardenas and Arturo Cuenca continued their work in New York. Consuelo Castaneda and

Quisqueya Henriquez collaborated for a few years and went on to pursue individual careers. Also of this generation, Juan Si, Carlos Perez Vidal, Tomas Esson, Flonencio Gelabert, and others eventually settled in the United States. This group could be considered *gusaneros*, half gusanos and half compafieros.

### Twenty-first Century

After decades of separation and distance, the climate of the relationships among the split peoples of Cuba shifted, infused by the initial efforts to establish a constructive dialogue among academics and artists to reconnect, like *el dialogo*, and the visits from *mariposas* (butterflies, the returning gusanos) carrying dollars and hope. Maintaining a strict distance between Castro and the population in exile was crucial in the early decades of the separation. Artists, thinkers, writers, and curators in the twenty-first century welcomed the integration of Cuban culture to include those on the island and *la comunidad*. Art served as a major bridge among Cubans, connecting and healing individuals as they faced the issues of reintegration and the option to return to the homeland.

Focusing on artists living in Cuba, important publication~ document the art being produced on the island. Some of the credit for the high profile of Cuban art is due to dedicated curators and collectors who support different sectors of the stylistic spectrum. Numerous museums include Cuban American artists in their collections. Important galleries present their work.

Reflecting on the impact of AIDS, the immense loss of talent was chronicled by the exhibition *Touched by AIDS* in 1997. The catalog included an essay, "Lost and Found: Saving the Legacy of Miami Artists," presenting promising artists whose careers ended prematurely.

Other exhibitions acknowledged Cuban American artists with immense talent, many dying young, their potential curtailed by fate: Felix Gonzalez-Torres at the Guggenheim, Ana Mendieta: *Earth Body* organized by the Hirshhorn Museum and debuting at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the retrospective of Carlos Alfonzo initiated by the Miami Art Museum. Across the United States, Cuban American artists continue to create and show the wondrous products of their talent everywhere.

See also *Balseros*; *Cuban Americans*; *Exilio*; *Marielitos*; *Painters*; and *Sculptors*.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 15 *Artistas Cubanos*. Curated by Nina Menocal with essays by Osvaldo Sanchez and Ivan de la Nuez. Ninart. Mexico: Centro de Cultura, 1991.
- Block, Holly. *Art Cuba: The New Generation*. New York: Abrams, 2001.
- Borras, Maria Lluisa, and Antonio Zaya, eds. *CUBA SIGLO XX: Modernidad y Sincretismo*. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno; Barcelona: Fundació "La Caixa": Centre d'Art Santa Monica, 1995.
- Camnitzer, Luis. *New Art Of Cuba*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.
- Castro. Manha de. *El Arte en Cuba*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1970.
- CUBA USA: *The First Generation: Exhibition Tour, 1991-1992*. Essays by Zuver, Wayne S. Smith, Leslie Judd Ahlander, Giulio Blanc, Carlos Alfonzo, Ileana Fuentes-Perez, Robert Farris Thompson, Ricardo Viera, and Jane Addams Allen. Washington, D.C.: Fondo del Sol Visual Arts Center, 1991.
- Fuentes-Perez, Ileana, et al., eds. *Outside Cuba: Contemporary Cuban Visual Artists*. New Brunswick, N.J. Office of Hispanic Arts, and Miami: Research Institute for Cuban Studies, 1989.
- Latin American Art in Miami Collections*. Catalog with essay by Giulio Blanc. Miami: The Lowe Art Museum, 1995.
- Martinez, Juan. *Cuban Art and National Identity: The Vanguard Painters 1927-1950*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994.
- McCabe, Cynthia Jaffee, guest curator. *The American Experience: Contemporary Immigrant Artists*. Exhibition catalog. Miami: Bass Museum of Art, 1985.
- McCabe, Cynthia Jaffee. *The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876-1976*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1985.
- The Miami Generation: Nine Cuban-American Artists*. Exhibition catalog. Miami: Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture, 1983.
- Santis, Jorge H., ed. *Breaking Barriers: Selections from the Museum of Art's Permanent Contemporary Collection*. Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Museum of Art, 1997.
- Spector, Nancy. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995.
- Trasobares, Cesar, curator. *RIVERON, 1925-1950: Paris, La Habana, New York*. Exhibition catalog. Coral Gables, Fla.: Lowe Art Museum, 1980.
- Veigas, Jose, et al. *MEMORIA: Cuban Art of the Twentieth Century*. Los Angeles: California International Art Foundation, 2001.
- Viso, Olga M. *Ana Mendieta, Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985*. Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum, 2004.
- Viso, Olga M., guest curator. *Triumph of the Spirit: Carlos Alfonzo, A Survey*. Exhibition catalog. Miami: Miami Art Museum, 1997.

CESAR TRASOBARES