

Thoughts on “ARK”

Enrico Mario Santí

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A rafter. A menacing, prosthetic oar extends his left arm. A ragged inner-tube, floating like a makeshift raft. Five hanging cables, tips with attached pics. Upper right, the start (perhaps the end) of A-R-K, a word that maybe wouldn't fit there. Everything floats upon a cream-colored, grainy surface; white spots (cotton balls?) resemble holes (shots on the raft? On clouds?). Five thick white lines, water currents, traverse the canvas up and down, right and left, dividing it into five empty spaces, themselves split by a vertical amber splatter. In turn, the splatter echoes in the drop that hangs at the tip of the oar (dry blood? excrement?), relics of the perilous journey.

The rafter stares stunned, exhausted, begging, baggy-eyed, worn, wrinkled, haggard: Everyman's signature. His prosthesis, a waving oar, a parody of the angry raised fist; the inner-tube wrapped in tatters, worn-out from the salty voyage, adorned, trapped by, the hanging cables at the tips of which dangle the pics of a shark (the word that wouldn't fit?) and of other rafters. Those pics are memory flashes that, like luck charms, sprout at the tips like tentacles searching for support, or anchor.

Rafters rescued in a storm by an apparition happens to be, far and away, Cuba's central religious icon. *La Virgen de la Caridad*, Virgin of Charity, the island's patron saint, descends on three rafters—all three named Juan (one Indian, one White, one Black), all three stunned by the timely rescue of the Mother, to whom they pray below for protection. The mulatto Virgin is also Ochún and Atabey, its African and Taíno counterparts. Finally, in the Cuban myth the rescue is mutual: *la Virgen* rescues the

rafters; the rafters, in turn rescue the tiny wooden icon they discover floating lost, like them, at sea. Virgin and island thus become parallel, and mutual, arks sanctioned in divine covenant.

“ARK” reconfigures an essential Cuban myth. But yesteryear’s iconic objects have changed, or rather, disappeared. Instead of the Virgin, a stunned rafter appears center canvass; in place of three Juanes in a boat, we see an empty, ravaged inner-tube. “The ARK is not biblical,” observes Alejandro Anreus, “there is no covenant between God and man.” Spatially, the piece embodies not so much emptiness as disappearance: spectral traces of an icon torn out from the surface. The tear has left remains, perhaps bloody, that the amber splatter spreads. Indeed, viewed vertically, the splatter hints at not only the vanished Virgin, formerly at center stage, but at the island’s blurred silhouette, as if torn from the map it left the spectral trace of a displaced cartography, now doomed to erasure. In place of the icon, or of traditional symbols and characters, we have diaspora’s degraded residues: by now the oar has become second-nature, an outgrowth of need, to Cubans fleeing without hope of a Mother’s rescue.

Working from a simple narrative, tuning in to a bedrock though perhaps iconic unconscious, Cruz-Azaceta has captured the desperate essence of Cuban diaspora, the spectral picture of a nation lost at sea.

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