

Antonia Eiriz (Havana, 1929), a painter of tragedy, as she was christened by Roberto Fernández Retamar in 1964, died yesterday in the United States, the victim of a heart attack. She leaves behind an important body of work where she captured a dramatic vision of man and his social life, marked by touches of irony and human compassion.

—Toni Piñera, *Granma*, March 10, 1995

In Miami, she returned to painting after a hiatus of 25 years. Struggling with her own life and her country's grimness, she quit painting in 1969.

—Fabiola Santiago, *Miami Herald*, March 10, 1995

Shortly after she died of a heart attack on March 9, 1995, in Miami, Florida, the Cuban painter Antonia Eiriz received countless tributes in newspapers and magazines in both Cuba and the exile. Ironically, although both sides mentioned the harshness and tragedy of her paintings, drawings, and prints, they avoided dealing directly with the critical essence of her work—perhaps her paintings mirrored reflections too brutal for either side. This “critical essence” consists of an uncompromising neofigurative visual vocabulary, one in which all subjects—particularly “sacred” ones referring to mother-

hood, leadership, and patriotism, among others—are up for an autopsy-like inspection. In this article I will discuss her life and paintings by placing them in the context of her times. Eiriz's work was not a tool of either Castro's regime or reactionary Miami; instead, her pictures interrogate the ideological obfuscation on both sides. Little known in the United States, the literature on Eiriz is scarce for an artist of her achievement—this is partly due to her being a woman within a traditionally machista culture, as well as to the political restrictions of Castro's Cuba.¹

Born in the Havana suburb of Juanelo in 1929 to a family of modest means, Eiriz suffered from polio as a child and would depend on crutches for the rest of her life. Eiriz began her interest in art by drawing dresses. Her older sisters encouraged her, paying for her to take a drawing course at a local graphic design school.² By 1953 she was registered at the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts in Havana, the island's principal art school, “My sister who was in New York told me that I should attend San Alejandro. I received a scholarship of twenty-nine pesos a month, a so-called scholarship. It was not enough to buy art supplies. The avant-garde artists thought that graduating from San Alejandro was a stigma, that all the painters that came out of San Alejandro were mediocre. Much later I learned that Amelia [Peláez] had graduated from the school.”³

Eiriz graduated from San Alejandro in 1957 after receiving an old-fashioned, if thorough training in drawing, painting, printmaking, and sculpture.⁴ Yet even before Eiriz graduated from the art academy, she became involved with the emerging avant-garde and participated in group exhibitions.⁵ Years later, already in exile in Miami, she recalled the 1950s: “For me the 1950s was one of the most Cuban moments in the culture in every sense: fashion, music, in the visual arts as an expression of a Cuban ethos. The group of *Los Once* [The Eleven] wanted a wider vision, not just to paint what was ‘Cuban.’”⁶ *Los Once* initially consisted of eleven artists, painters and two sculptors, committed to a gestural-abstraction/abstract-expressionist exploration. These artists were rejecting the art of the earlier

Alejandro Anreus

The Road to Dystopia: The Paintings of Antonia Eiriz

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All translations from the Spanish are by the author.

1. The literature on Eiriz consists of brief catalogue essays and articles in newspapers and magazines. The most significant ones are: Adelaida de Juan, “De lo tremendo en la pintura cubana,” *Cuba* (April 1964); Roberto Fernández Retamar, “Antonia,” *Gaceta de Cuba* (March 20, 1964); Antonio Eligio (Tonel), “Antonia Eiriz en la pintura cubana,” *Revolución y Cultura* (March 1987); Giulio V. Blanc, “Antonia Eiriz, una apreciación,” *Art Nexus* (July–September 1994); and Juan A. Martínez, “Antonia Eiriz in Retrospect,” in *Antonia Eiriz: Tribute to a Legend*, exh. cat. (Fort Lauderdale: Museum of Art, 1995).

2. Giulio V. Blanc, unpublished full interview with Antonia Eiriz, first draft, February 19, 1994. Giulio V. Blanc papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1. An edited version of this interview was published as part of Blanc's *Art Nexus* article.

3. *Ibid.*, 1. Amelia Peláez (1896–1968) was a leading member of the first generation of modernist painters in Cuba.

4. Vicente Báez, ed., *Pintores cubanos*, with essays by Oscar Hurtado and Edmundo Desnoes (Havana: Ediciones Revolución, 1962), 226.

5. *Ibid.* Eiriz participated in a few modest group exhibitions in the early 1950s.

6. Blanc, 1.



Antonia Eiriz. *El vaso de agua* (*The Glass of Water*), 1963. Oil on canvas. 52 x 41 in. (132 x 104.1 cm). Collection of Susana Barciela and Manuel Gómez. Photograph: Juan A. Martínez.

modernists (with the exception of Wifredo Lam) as too picturesque and local, as well as politically opposing the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship. Their first exhibition took place in 1953; they disbanded as a group in 1955, but continued to exhibit together until 1963.⁷ The leading artists in this group were the painters Guido Llinás (b. 1923), Hugo Consuegra (1929–2003), Antonio Vidal (b. 1928), Raúl Martínez (1927–1995), and the sculptors Tomás Oliva (1930–1996) and Agustín Cárdenas (1927–2001).⁸ Eiriz was particularly close to Llinás, Consuegra, and Martínez, and she was briefly married to Vidal's brother Manuel. On many an occasion Eiriz would identify Llinás as her “teacher and mentor,” in the sense that he introduced her to the most contemporary ideas regarding painting in the 1950s.⁹ Throughout this period Eiriz was absorbing art beyond the art academy's offerings: “I was interested in the landscapes of Victor Manuel, Amelia [Peláez], [Raúl] Milián, [René] Portocarrero . . . for me [Ángel] Acosta León is an extraordinary painter. . . . There has been talk of the influence of Goya. I did not know Goya well at that point. Perhaps his influence is transmitted through the Spanish roots that I have. I have been catalogued as an expressionist, yet I have always wanted to be an abstract painter. I love de Kooning, Kline, Tàpies, Miró, and Dubuffet. I admired the abstract painters a great deal, but every time I painted it was little heads and creatures that emerged.”¹⁰ Years later critics would find stylistic commonalities between Eiriz's works and those of Francis Bacon and the Mexican José Luis Cuevas (b. 1932). She, however, did not encounter their work until after her own visual vocabulary had developed, and unlike their work, hers would be devoid of narcissism and always have a political edge. Even though Eiriz does not mention in any of her interviews the Cuban expressionist painters Fidelio Ponce (1895–1949) and Rafael Blanco (1885–1955) as influences, I believe that in their distortions and satirical visions of the society of their time, they are part of the same “family.”

January 1, 1959, was the beginning of a new phase in Cuba's history; after seven years in power, the Batista dictatorship was over, and the revolution led by Fidel Castro had triumphed. The majority of Cuban artists, Eiriz among them, supported the revolution, believing that culture would be integrated and supported in the new agenda of radical change.¹¹ Before the revolution Eiriz had participated in only three group exhibitions. Beginning in 1959 and for the following ten years she would participate in forty group shows both in Cuba and abroad, including the São Paulo biennial in Brazil and the Joan Miró international exhibition in Barcelona.¹² Thanks to the new revolutionary government, Eiriz would become a teacher of art, first at the School for Crafts Instructors in Havana (1962–64), later at Cubanacan Escuela Nacional de Arte (currently the Escuela Nacional de Arte or ENA, which teaches undergraduates, and the Instituto Superior de Arte or ISA, which teaches graduates, are located in adjoining buildings), where she taught painting and color theory from 1965 to 1969.¹³ In 1964 Eiriz had her first three solo exhibitions, two in Havana, one in Mexico City; a fourth one, of illustrations, would take place in Havana in 1967.¹⁴ In 1962 Eiriz's work was included in the book *Pintores cubanos*, in which the author Edmundo Desnoes wrote, “Antonia Eiriz distorts forms and figures in the manner of an expressionist: she fuses her images with her emotional state. Sadness produces sad figures, happiness, happy ones. Her pictures have a direct relation with the grotesque elements of our time. After the ovens where the Nazis mur-

7. Juan A. Martínez, “The *Los Once* Group and Cuban Art in the 1950s,” in *Guido Llinás and Los Once after Cuba* (Miami: Art Museum at Florida International University, 1997), 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 5.

9. Manuel Gómez, response to questionnaire, July 7, 2003. Gómez, a graphic designer, was Eiriz's second husband.

10. Blanc, 1.

11. Carlos Franqui, interview with the author, October 17, 1995, New York City. Franqui (b. 1921) was close to Fidel Castro during the years 1955 to 1958, first editing the underground version of the newspaper *Revolución*, later running the rebel radio station from the Sierra Maestra mountains. After the revolution's triumph, Franqui continued publishing *Revolución*. From the earliest days of 1959, Franqui pushed for an agenda of support in all the branches of culture; this agenda would be integrated into the revolutionary government. When *Revolución* started to publish the cultural supplement *Lunes*, under the editorship of novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante, artists like Eiriz and others from the *Los Once* group illustrated its pages. A democratic socialist, Franqui went into exile in Italy in 1968. He currently lives in San Juan, Puerto Rico. A study of *Lunes* was recently published by literary critic William Luis of Vanderbilt University: *Lunes de Revolución: Literatura y cultura en los primeros años de la revolución cubana* (Madrid: Verbum, 2003). It contains a well-balanced essay by Luis and interviews with Franqui, Cabrera Infante, and Pablo Armando Fernández (who remains in Cuba and is currently a writer favored by the government), as well as a complete index of the periodical.

12. See the artist's curriculum vitae in the exhibition catalogue *Antonia Eiriz se expone*, with essay by Hugo Consuegra (Coral Gables, Fla.: Weiss/Sori Fine Art, 1993), n.p.

13. Gómez questionnaire.

14. *Antonia Eiriz se expone*, exh. cat., n.p. The first one-person exhibition of paintings and works on paper took place at Galeria La Habana, the second one, of both paintings and installations, was at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana, and the exhibition in Mexico was held at Galeria Del Lago. Eiriz's thirty illustrations for African poems were exhibited in the Galeria Galiano.

dered millions of Jews and after the atomic bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the idealization of reality has lost all its relevance. Eiriz's grotesque faces, her pictures in white, black, and gray with light touches of intense colors, her tortured and violent forms, have their origin in the state of being of our time."¹⁵ Examples of this might be *La anunciación* (*The Annunciation*) and *Cristo saliendo de Juanelo* (*Christ Departing from Juanelo*), works discussed in detail below. Desnoes was right, in that Eiriz's paintings responded to contemporary circumstances; yet he mistakenly defined her as an expressionist, while in reality she was more of a neofigurative artist, having a great deal in common with the Argentineans of the *Otra figuración* group (Luis Felipe Noé, Romulo Macció, Jorge de la Vega, Ernesto Deira), Venezuela's Jacobo Borges, and even Leon Golub's paintings of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The painterly strategies of these various artists are definitely post-Abstract Expressionist in both their gestural and improvisational approaches; in terms of sources, film, photography, and mass-media advertising also definitely informed the neofigurative ethos. The grotesqueness of their work had more to do with a post-Auschwitz, postatomic world, a world of military dictators and corrupt democracies, and the distortions of their figures reflect the disintegration of humanist politics in post-World War II Latin America. The narcissistic emotionalism of early-twentieth-century expressionism, at times so self-absorbed, was very different from the deliberate, if emotionally charged, political statements of neofiguration.

During the first years of the revolution, Eiriz and her work received a great deal of attention and support, and she was associated with the most radical and independent group of intellectuals, those who were part of the cultural supplement *Lunes*. Edited by novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante, the magazine was the Monday supplement of the newspaper *Revolución*, which had been founded and edited by journalist and independent socialist Carlos Franqui.¹⁶ Both publications supported total experimentation and freedom in the arts, had a supportive and critical stance vis-à-vis the revolution, and rejected any form of socialist realism in aesthetics and Soviet-style communism in policies.¹⁷ Eiriz was probably brought into the circle of *Lunes* by the painter Raúl Martínez, who took over as art director of the publication in 1960.¹⁸ Her illustrations, consisting of grotesque and mocking figures, were published in several issues of the magazine (nos. 73, 74, 89, 100, 102, 104/105, 120, and 129). *Lunes* would cease to exist by order of the revolutionary government in November of 1961, following the controversy over the film *PM* (seen as decadent by the government and defended by the magazine in the name of artistic freedom) and the very tense meetings between the regime and intellectuals that took place in the National Library in June 1961. It was during the second and final meeting between intellectuals, artists, and the government's Cultural Council at the National Library that Castro pronounced his famous words: "Within the revolution everything, outside the revolution nothing." Soon after, in August, the First Congress of Cuban Writers and Artists assembled in Havana, and the Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC) was established.¹⁹ Leninist-style cultural management had arrived in the tropics; still, socialist realism would not be officially imposed. As long as artists and writers were not negative, pessimistic, or critical in any way regarding the revolutionary process, they would be left alone. By keeping to these guidelines, they were "within the revolution," not outside it. In 1965 *Revolución* would be forced to

15. Edmundo Desnoes, "1952–62 en la pintura cubana," in *Pintores cubanos*, 47.

16. See n. 11.

17. Franqui interview. Franqui broke with the Communist Party in the late 1940s, evolving into an independent and democratic socialist, who absorbed a diversity of ideas from thinkers such as Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, and Leon Trotsky. An admirer of modernism and artistic experimentation, he supported these and rejected socialist-realist positions. His memoir *Retrato de familia con Fidel* (*Family Portrait with Fidel*) (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981) is essential reading for an inside look at the early years of the revolution.

18. *Pintores cubanos*, 190.

19. Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro* (New York: Norton, 1993), 381–85. See also Franqui, *Retrato de familia con Fidel*, 261–73. *PM* was a cinema-*vérité* film that depicted nightlife in Havana.

merge with the Communist Party newspaper *Hoy* and, retitled *Granma*, became the official cultural organ of the government.²⁰

It is within this context of sociopolitical turmoil that I turn to Eiriz's paintings. For my discussion I have selected six paintings ranging chronologically from 1963 to 1995, the year of the artist's death. These works represent Eiriz at her best, depicting, questioning, or criticizing religion, the condition of women, and political power. Four works were painted in Cuba, the last two in her Miami exile. In many of these works, her titles refer to typical Cuban expressions; words or phrases humorously inform and support the images.

El vaso de agua (*The Glass of Water*) is an oil on canvas from 1963, in which a frontal, smirking, and grotesque head fills most of the surface of the vertical canvas. On top of the head rests a black-and-brown military-looking cap; below the grinning teeth are three microphones. The head is flanked on each side by a solitary and disheveled palm tree painted in dirty grays and yellow ochre. Strips of bright red on each side of the painting compress the head in the center of the composition, thereby pushing the big eyes, wide nose, and fierce teeth forward, toward the viewer. The head itself is painted in broad and violently applied strokes of yellow, orange, red, dark green, and black. The forms of the head have been opened and flattened, drawn and erased by the brush or rag, creating a dynamic disarticulation, expressing horror—the horror of a rabid demagogue about to speak to his public. The title makes reference to the phrase *una tormenta en un vaso de agua*—a storm in a glass of water, which ironically refers to making a big deal out of something small or insignificant. Eiriz transforms those emblems of the enchantment of the tropics, palm trees, into ragged, filthy sticks, being beaten by the wind, that serve as props to a ferocious head that screams at the viewer. Is this storm in a glass of water Cuba in 1963, when postinvasion (Bay of Pigs) intolerance hit the island? Is the head behind the microphones Fidel Castro, delivering one of his interminable speeches? The painting makes reference to a moment in Cuba known as a “dark period.” In *El vaso de agua*, as in her most powerful paintings, Eiriz does not give content priority over form, achieving instead a dialectic brew between form and content in which the visual language of the work itself is bold and provocative, never allowing the critical edge of her images to degenerate into mere propaganda.

In 1963 Eiriz responded to a questionnaire published in *La Gaceta de Cuba*, the official periodical of the then-three-year-old Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC). To the question, “How can you measure the influence of the revolutionary process on your work?” she responded: “I don’t believe that the influence of the revolutionary process can be measured by a ‘revolutionary measuring stick’ as some pretend; this leads me to another thought, such as: the attitude of the true artist should be one of sincerity and dissatisfaction, and to be honest and courageous toward others; conformity engenders mediocrity and opportunism. The measurement of what is and isn’t does not preoccupy me, I believe that thinking like this reflects the principles of bourgeois morality. When I draw and paint I do it within my limitations and possibilities. If the canvas that I paint on suffers alterations with a change in temperature, I suppose that a human being, composed of more complex substances, has to experience changes in a process as convulsive as that engendered by every revolution.”²¹ Even after the meetings at the National Library and the creation of the Writers and Artists Union as a

20. John Spicer Nichols, “The Press in Cuba,” in *The Cuba Reader: The Making of a Revolutionary Society*, ed. Philip Brenner, William LeoGrande, Donna Rich, and Daniel Siegel (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 219–27.

21. Antonia Eiriz, “Respuesta a cuestionario,” *La Gaceta de Cuba* 30 (December 4, 1963): 12.

***La anunciación (The Annunciation)*, 1964.
Oil on canvas. 76 x 97 in. (193 x 246.4 cm).
Museo Nacional, Havana, Cuba.
Photograph: Juan A. Martínez.**



controlling mechanism, Eiriz was a defiant and independent voice in the very pages of the union's periodical—and this was the year she painted *El vaso de agua*.

Without a doubt, Eiriz's best-known and most reproduced work, which now hangs prominently in Cuba's National Art Museum, is the 1964 oil *La anunciación*. Thirty years after painting it, she recalled the work's genesis: "Guido Llinás was very important for me as a teacher. He would say to me, 'You have to paint.' One day he showed me a modern annunciation by a Mexican woman painter. It had a black angel. It occurred to me that I wanted to paint one also. I looked at other annunciations, by Leonardo. Giotto's work was very helpful in matters of color, the blues, the weeping angels in the Scrovegni chapel in Padua, Fra Angelico's work in matters of texture. I wanted to paint a modern annunciation. The figure of the woman is not classical, she is a popular figure. The sewing machine? Perhaps because I was a seamstress; I would sew children's clothes. A Chilean painter, upon seeing this painting at the National Museum, told me that it was a portrait of my mother, but I did not paint it thinking of her, and in reality it looks like her."²² A pictorial tour de force, *La anunciación* depicts a skeletal angel of death accosting a pregnant woman who sits at her sewing machine. The angel lifts a hand and is about to touch the woman's shoulder; she in turn pulls back into her chair and away from the angel. The overall drawing is clear and forceful, defining each of the elements within the composition. The angel wears a crude crown; its wings seem battered. The woman is dressed modestly in light brown; the chair she sits in is heavy and worn. The sewing machine looks like a 1940s Singer model. Chromatically, the background consists of thin layers of pale blues and purples over which rougher, thicker passages of gray, tan, and white pigment have been applied. The angel of death is painted in dirty browns and grays, with red highlights on the forehead and nose. The face of the pregnant woman, who is screaming with fear and horror, is a thick mask of black, gray,

22. Blanc, 2. The word "popular" in this quote refers to the ordinary or everyday, not the ideal or traditional.

***Cristo saliendo de Juanelo (Christ Departing from Juanelo)*, 1966. Oil and collage on canvas. 76¾ x 89 in. (194.9 x 226 cm). Museo Nacional, Havana, Cuba. Photograph: Juan A. Martínez.**



and white. The overall coloristic neutrality of the painting is anchored by the red table where the sewing machine rests. Eiriz subverts the tradition of the annunciation theme; instead of grace there is death; joy is replaced by fear. But beyond this, the work is a brutal critique of the condition of women: of pregnancy, of motherhood, of back-breaking “modest” labor like sewing—all this within the context of a revolutionary society that was struggling with *machismo*. Of course, the work also contains the autobiographical component; the woman looks like the artist’s mother, and she is a seamstress like the artist herself. In this painting Eiriz rips apart the accepted notions of the blessedness of pregnancy, the future joy of motherhood, and replaces them with the reality of struggle, a struggle against the social straightjacket imposed on women, a struggle with death and nothingness, which in its dark and critical vision was questioning the expected optimism of officials in a revolutionary society.

Cristo saliendo de Juanelo is Eiriz’s homage to James Ensor as well as a satirical statement on salvation. This 1966 oil and collage on canvas depicts a crowd of faces interspersed within a series of metallic elements, such as boxes and turbines, which at times seem like parts of a robot. What little is visible in the background looks like a fragment of an underground sewer. The palette is severely limited: blacks, grays, browns, and the acidic yellow ochre of the faces. By the mid-1960s Eiriz was aware of the work of the Belgian expressionist Ensor through reproductions; she certainly knew the artist’s *The Entry of Christ into Brussels* in 1889, 1888.²³ The work by Ensor shows Christ entering the city and in effect being lost among the crowd of marchers (politicians, clergy, and urban bourgeoisie) who move toward the viewer under colorful banners of every persuasion. Eiriz titles her work *Christ Departing from Juanelo*, that is, leaving behind the modest Havana suburb where she was born and raised. What she chooses to depict in her canvas is not Christ in the crowd, but the crowd watching the

23. Gómez questionnaire.

departure of Christ. The faces, on scorched, painted, and scratched canvas, are crowded one on top of the other, squeezed one next to the other. Their expressions evoke looks ranging from idiocy to horror and anger, and to stupefaction, yet they are very abstracted, as if in the process of losing their individual identities. Monstrous eyes, wide noses, and open mouths fill the round areas of yellow ochre that are the faces. Christ has left the crowd behind in modest, insignificant Juanelo, taking salvation with him. Crowds in revolutionary Cuba had (and have) an explicit meaning; they are the popular expression of democracy, the source of power for the leadership, but also a power to be manipulated by the leader(ship). Castro himself told Franqui as early as 1959 that it was in the revolutionary, populist crowds that he had his power and version of democracy.²⁴ The revolution was seen as salvific, and its guerilla leaders with their long hair and beards were perceived as Christlike. In this context, Eiriz's painting can be read on at least two levels, as mocking a traditional religious narrative and as mocking the religious aura of revolution. This crowd, consisting of those left behind by a departing savior, is not heroic or dynamic or a source of populist power; rather it consists of grotesque masks representing the artist's conviction of failed salvation, spiritual or political.

The year 1968 was a very contentious one in Cuban cultural politics; it was the year poet Heberto Padilla (1932–2000) received the poetry prize from the Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC) for his manuscript *Fuera del juego* (*Out of the Game*), a collection of poems critical of life in revolutionary Cuba, written in a sparse, direct style. Although the book was published, it contained a declaration from the Writers and Artists Union attacking the book as counterrevolutionary and defeatist, even as the book's artistic merits were acknowledged.²⁵ The collection contained the following poem written about Eiriz and her work:

This woman does not paint her pictures
so that we will say: "What rare things
come out of this painter's head!"
She is a woman of enormous eyes.
With those eyes any woman
Could, if she wanted to, disfigure the world.
But those faces that appear from under a fist,
those twisted lips
which do not even cover the pity of a stain,
those traces that appear all of a sudden
like old charlatan women;
in reality would not exist
if each one of us did not daily stick them
into Antonia Eiriz's purse.
At least I have recognized myself
out of the mound that she brings me forth, still agitated,
seeing my eyes enter those balloons
that she mysteriously finds;
and finding myself, above all so near
those demagogues she paints,
who look like they are going to say so many things
and in the end do not dare to say anything at all.²⁶

24. Franqui, *Retrato de familia con Fidel*, 60–62.

25. See *El caso Padilla: Literatura y revolución en Cuba; documentos*, ed. Lourdes Casal (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1971), as well as Padilla's own memoir, *La mala memoria* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janes, 1989).

26. Heberto Padilla, *Fuera del juego* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1998), 31. This thirtieth-anniversary edition contains the full text of the poems, as well as the author's public confession of 1971.

Una tribuna para la paz democrática (A Tribune for Democratic Peace), 1968. Oil and collage on canvas. 40 x 40 in. (101.6 x 101.6 cm). Museo Nacional, Havana, Cuba. Photograph: Rochelle Feinstein.



Those demagogues or crowds of demagogues mentioned in Padilla's poem, who "in the end do not dare to say anything at all," are the subject of Eiriz's most controversial painting, the 1968 work *Una tribuna para la paz democrática* (*A Tribune for Democratic Peace*). Initially conceived as a painting with an installation component, the work was meant to be shown with a wood platform below it, on which would rest two rows of folding chairs facing the painting.²⁷ The elements within the painting are simple enough; in the center foreground is a podium, the inside facing us, five microphones on the top, several wires below. Painted in blacks, browns, and grays, the podium is a massive and sinister object. The middle ground is the collage element: a red rope on either side of the podium, holding seven small paper leaflets that each contain the following printed message: *P.C.V. por la paz democrática*—for democratic peace. The background is a crowd consisting of heads, heads and shoulders, and partial torsos, painted in white, gray, and black. They are related to the crowd in *Cristo saliendo de Juanelo*; sinister smiles, looks of idiocy, and horror abound. Throughout this work, Eiriz stains the paint, drags it, and rubs it on the surface, producing an overall look of roughness. Had the printed message read *P.C.C.* instead of *P.C.V.*, it would have meant *Partido Comunista Cubano*—Cuban Communist Party. As it is, the initials are ambiguous enough to be troublesome. The platform and the folding chairs would have transformed the viewers into the revolutionary leaders on the platform, about to speak for "a democratic peace." Eiriz's second husband, Manuel Gómez, recalled this painting and its title, "Many times I have thought how officialdom was as annoyed by her paintings as by her titles. Antonia never tried to change anything, because reality could not be changed. She would simply put in the painting what she would see. She was essentially honest in this. I remember

27. Gómez questionnaire.

bringing to her attention the title she had thought about for a painting she had just completed. I thought it could bring her problems. She thought about it for days and decided to call it *A Tribune for Democratic Peace*. The painting was really an installation that included a wooden platform with folding chairs.”²⁸ The painting was exhibited at the 1968 national salon, where it was considered for the finalist painting prize, but did not receive it. Shortly thereafter, the work was directly attacked at a public meeting at the Writers and Artists Union by the literary critic José Antonio Portuondo, the union’s vice-president. He considered the work to be grotesque and defeatist, in essence counterrevolutionary.”²⁹ In the painting the revolution’s populist crowd is transformed by the painter into a common herd, a mob of grotesqueries, to be manipulated by the speaker to do his bidding. The empty and awaiting podium makes the absence of the demagogue a powerful presence in reverse. Yet this work’s subversion lies also in that it involves the viewer as the potential demagogue, who will move from looking to stepping up to the podium and spouting the latest slogans for “a democratic peace.” With little effort, it seems, we are all potential demagogues, we are all participants in the mob, regardless which side of the podium we are on. We are all potentially guilty of group-think.

At a key point when the Cold War crippled both sides of the ideological divide, Eiriz stated, “When I received comments that my painting was ‘conflictive’ I started to believe it. *Una tribuna* was harshly criticized, it was going to receive an award and it did not. One day I saw all my pictures together for the first time in a long time. I told myself that ‘this kind of painting expresses the moment we live in,’ and if a painter expresses the moment one lives in, then it is genuine. I absolved myself.”³⁰

By the end of 1968 Eiriz stopped painting, and by 1969 she resigned from teaching at Cubanacan art school. Her mother, Esperanza, had died in 1968, and Eiriz had no one to help her take care of her fourteen-year-old son. Also, for a woman on crutches (due to childhood polio), public transportation to the art school was difficult, if not impossible. Her paintings were seen as conflictive and defeatist by the revolution’s cultural establishment, as well as by fellow faculty members at the art school. She stated, “If my painting is so problematic, I will stop painting, and it will be their loss.”³¹

On April 27, 1971, the cultural-political turmoil that began in 1968 with the publication of Padilla’s *Fuera del juego* culminated in the poet’s arrest and his public confession at the Writers and Artists Union. Padilla called himself, as well as his wife and fellow writers, defeatists and ingrates, and concluded his confession exhorting his audience to be optimistic soldiers for the revolution.³² The worldwide reaction to the poet’s public confession was negative for the regime; intellectuals such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jean-Paul Sartre, Susan Sontag, Octavio Paz, Italo Calvino, Marguerite Duras, Heinrich Böll, and others signed letters of protest.³³ The honeymoon between progressive intellectuals and the Cuban Revolution ended, even if an embrace of U.S. opposition to the revolution did not follow.

In the midst of all this turmoil, Eiriz retreated to her native Juanelo, where she began to teach papier-mâché to children and neighborhood groups. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, cultural policy in Cuba went through a rehabilitation period or period of openness. In 1986, 1987, and 1991, Eiriz would be

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid. José Antonio Portuondo (1911–1996) was a literary critic and leading defender of socialist realism in Cuba. He joined the Cuban Communist Party in 1936. In 1971 he would “run” Heberto Padilla’s public confession at the Writers and Artists Union. The late Padilla was the first to mention Portuondo’s attack on Eiriz’s painting to me, in the early 1980s, when the writer lived briefly in New Jersey. For a discussion of the Cuban revolution and artistic practices in the visual arts, see David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910–1990* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Craven’s discussion of the tensions between the old Stalinist left and a more independent New Left position, as well as the emergence of the poster as both formally innovative and politically useful, are among the issues analyzed in this book.

30. Blanc, 2.

31. Gómez questionnaire. Among the faculty members who criticized Eiriz was the printmaker Carmelo González (1920–1990), an advocate of socialist realism.

32. Heberto Padilla, “Intervención en la Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba,” *Casa de las Américas* 11, no. 65–66 (March–June 1971): 191–203.

33. Letters of protest sponsored by the PEN Club and signed by leading intellectuals appeared in leading newspapers in Mexico, Madrid, Buenos Aires, Paris, Rome, and London, among others, in April and May 1971.

rehabilitated with three exhibitions in and near Havana; the work exhibited would range from the late 1950s to 1968, when she stopped painting.³⁴ In 1993 Eiriz suffered from acute depression, which hospitalized her for almost two months. Her doctor suggested a change in scenery. Eiriz and her second husband applied for visas to visit the artist's family in Miami. They left Cuba that year and stayed in Miami permanently.³⁵ "Within three months of being in Miami," her husband, Gómez, would recall, "Antonia returned to being the same optimistic and humorous person that she always was. And she began to paint. With the help of Tomás Sánchez [Eiriz's former student] we found a gallery in Miami that mounted an exhibition: *Antonia Eiriz se expone* [*Antonia Eiriz Exposes Herself*], which was successful. Later she received a Guggenheim Fellowship."³⁶

The Miami exile that Eiriz arrived at in 1993 could be a difficult and intolerant place, where anti-Castro hardliners attacked moderates for being soft on communism, where the U.S. embargo against Cuba was never questioned, and where the right-wing Cuban American National Foundation reigned supreme in its power and influence. In this environment, the goodwill and patriotism of Cuban-Americans who were not conservative or registered Republicans was always suspect.³⁷ Beyond this closed political environment, the Miami Cuban-American community culturally maintains a nostalgic connection with Cuba's past, with pre-1959 Cuba. Within this construct, the island is recalled as a tropical paradise where, before Castro, inequality and exploitation existed minimally. Music, cuisine, and even fashion help sustain the myth of Cuba before 1959 as a tropical paradise.³⁸ Once in Miami, Eiriz kept her political opinions to herself; she stayed away from polemics and even made clear to journalists who came to interview her that she would not discuss politics of the past, of Cuba, of the present, and of Miami.³⁹ Her new paintings reflected and critiqued what she would not speak about.

After twenty-five years of not painting (partly as a deliberate withholding for survival), Eiriz took up the brush with great intensity; between 1993 and her death in 1995 she painted over twenty-five large-format oils on canvas (the smallest being 50 x 40 inches, the largest 80 x 66 inches), and some fifty works on paper.⁴⁰ Eiriz did not rehash past ideas or pictorial strategies; stylistically, these works display a great boldness of forms and a deeper, more dramatic understanding of color, bringing to mind the coloristic range of late Velázquez and late Goya. Crucifixions, maternities, and descents are among her subjects, and in many the figures have severed limbs—for Eiriz these "bonsai" (a title she used) represented the individual trimmed, pruned, repressed by society.⁴¹ Among this last batch of paintings, two stand out that can be easily interpreted as reflecting and criticizing Cuban-American Miami, and even a particularly ahistorical reading of Cuban history; they are the 1993 *Esta gente* (*These People*) and *Vereda tropical* (*Tropical Path*).

Esta gente is a horizontal composition consisting of areas of a curtain-covered platform, the colors of which are red, white, and blue—colors of the Cuban and U.S. flags and therefore symbolic of patriotism. In the foreground six black-and-gray figures, amorphous and similar, seem to be laughing, talking, or even screaming at the same time. The upper-right corner of the picture contains a large head with an expression of displeasure, painted in browns and black. It looks down on the six figures, as if "Big Brother is watching." Inserted into the

34. The three exhibitions were: ink drawings at the Cultural Patrimony Gallery in 1986, prints at the Guanabacoa Municipal Museum in 1987, and *A Re-encounter* at the Galiano Gallery in 1991. This last exhibition included paintings, drawings, and prints; it was accompanied by a catalogue that reprinted the 1964 article by Roberto Fernández Retamar. The 1991 exhibition was organized by a student (Ana Margarita García) who wrote her graduate thesis on Eiriz's work.

35. Gómez questionnaire.

36. Ibid.

37. Two recent sources on the politics of the Cuban-American exile are María de los Ángeles Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), and Álvaro Vargas Llosa, *El exilio indomable: Historia de la disidencia cubana en el destierro* (Madrid: Espasa, 1998). Founded in 1981 by Jorge Mas Canosa (1941–1997), the Cuban American National Foundation was the most powerful lobbying group in the Cuban exile during the 1980s and into the late 1990s. Although at times it worked with Democrats, most of its support went to Republicans. In 1992 and 1994 the Washington, D.C.-based human-rights organization Americas Watch (now Human Rights Watch) published reports on political intolerance and harassment in Miami's Cuban-American community.

38. See David Rieff's two books, *The Exile* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) and *Going to Miami* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), as well as the anthology of testimonials edited by Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, *Remembering Cuba* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001). Although all three works are generally positive on the Cuban-American exile experience (although they deal honestly with the pain and trauma of exile), the nostalgic and escapist elements of the culture are prevalent in many of the narratives.

39. Gómez questionnaire.

40. Manuel Gómez, e-mail response to the author, October 9, 2003.

41. Gómez questionnaire. Also see Juan Martínez's essay in *Antonia Eiriz: Tribute to a Legend*, n. p.

***Esta gente (These People)*, 1993. Oil on canvas. 60 x 80 in. (152.4 x 203.2 cm). Collection of Susana Barciela and Manuel Gómez. Photograph: Alejandro Anreus.**



“patriotic” colors of the flag, these grotesqueries are the patriarchs, the “professional” politicians, and the masses of the Cuban exile all rolled into one. Paranoia and horror converge, subverting a possible image of civic affirmation into a hideous face of unalloyed negation.

The square canvas *Vereda tropical* was among the last Eiriz worked on. The title is derived from a popular song of the 1950s, in which a man remembers kissing a woman in the evening while walking on a tropical path toward the sea. It is a romantic and sugary song meant to evoke the happy, carefree life of a tropical evening.⁴² In the Cuban-American exile a song like this one is a part of the narrative of nostalgia, in which the past is re-created as a lost utopia. In her painting Eiriz shows a gray and worn path moving toward the horizon line; on the left is some dark green shrubbery, but what fills most of the composition is a mound of shapes on the right of the path. On a closer look, the mound of shapes is a series of severed heads painted in ochres, whites, purples, grays, and yellows. The sky is a cold Prussian blue with a light touch of orange at the horizon line—meant perhaps to evoke the glimmer of the sea or a disappearing sunset. The entire work is painted thickly, creating a rough, skinlike surface at once beautiful and repulsive. Eiriz transforms the idyllic tropical path of the song into a bleak road on a desolate night, loaded with human remains. A work like this shatters the nostalgic baggage of the Cuban exile. Beyond this, it evokes contemporary Cuban history as a series of horrors and betrayals in which the human toll, both physical and spiritual, has been terrible—on both sides of the Gulf Stream.

In conclusion, it is important to restate the context of Eiriz and her work within the neofigurative trends prevalent throughout Latin America in the late 1950s and 1960s. Her work, in its visual vocabulary of distorting the human

42. The author’s mother and aunt, Margarita and Gladys, sang the song in its entirety. They both informed me that it was written in the 1930s by Mexican composer Gonzalo Curiel and popularized in Cuba in the 1950s by singer Tito Gómez, who transformed it into a cha-cha.

Vereda tropical (Tropical Path), 1995. Oil on canvas. 60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm). Collection of Susana Barciela and Manuel Gómez. Photograph: Alejandro Anreus.



figure, its “action painting” brushwork, and its biting and bleak observations on society, is a sibling to works by the Argentineans of *Otra figuración* and Antonio Berni, to the Venezuelan Jacobo Borges’s oils of 1960–65, and the drawings of Carlos Alonso, Marcelo Grassman, and Pedro Alcántara.⁴³ According to the critic Marta Traba, all of these artists were part of “a culture of resistance” against both the aesthetic of internationalism and the Americanization (U.S.) of Latin American cultures.⁴⁴ They were also local resisters of the status quo, their works being question marks critical of official power. Eiriz and her artistic project must be seen in this light. Yet unlike the above-mentioned artists, she was not living in a right-wing military dictatorship or a corrupt democracy, but under a revolutionary and socialist regime (Cuba) that was meant to change life for the better. Once in exile, Eiriz found herself in a more open society where she could paint again, but one where other, more subtle forms of repression and group-think existed. She would always paint “reality as she saw it. In this she was always honest. She would not make things pretty. She would paint them as they were.”⁴⁵

In July 2001 a refurbished National Museum reopened its doors in Havana. In its beautiful galleries can be seen several of Eiriz’s controversial works, such as *La anunciación*, *Cristo saliendo de Juanelo*, and *Una tribuna para la paz democrática*. The wall text surrounding these works is minimal, emphasizing her importance as an art teacher and her expressionistic style. No mention is made of the political contexts and controversies surrounding her work in the 1960s.⁴⁶ Still, the works are out of storage and installed for all to see, signs of a cultural openness or, perhaps, a

43. See Marta Traba, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas 1950–1970* (México: Siglo XXI, 1973).

44. *Ibid.*, 72–86.

45. Gómez questionnaire.

46. This has been confirmed by recent visitors to the museum, such as the sculptor Melvin Edwards and the artist’s widower, Manuel Gómez.

simulation of it. In the exile, her work is generally perceived as a reflection of the political situation of the island, ignoring the fact that her last body of work was created in exile and therefore is also a reflection of imperfect conditions in *el Norte*.

The philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote of alienation, group-think, and political numbness as “the stigmata of capitalism.”⁴⁷ Antonia Eiriz’s paintings are stigmata of a sort, not of capitalism, but of life under different kinds of repression, blunt or subtle—be it Castro’s Cuba or corporate, capitalist Miami. Her paintings and drawings are charged with a dissonance that is the same as expression, letting in what Adorno calls the “beguiling moment of sensuousness by transfiguring it into its antithesis . . . pain.”⁴⁸ Eiriz’s works resist the world and maintain a critical space apart from the propaganda of the world in a way profoundly akin to Adorno’s formulation;⁴⁹ they stand as powerful and moving signposts on the road to Dystopia.

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47. Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) was a leading figure of the Frankfurt school of critical theory; variations of the phrase “the stigmata of capitalism” are found in both *Negative Dialectics* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Max Horkheimer).

48. Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1995), 301.

49. *Ibid.*, 304.