

# **RAD -ICAL CONVEN -TIONS**

**Cuban American Art  
from the 1980s**

# RAD -ICAL CONVEN -TIONS

## Cuban American Art from the 1980s

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Co-presented by the Lowe Art Museum and  
Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami

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# Cuban American Art in the Geopolitics of the Late Cold War

By Elizabeth Cerejido

In the chronology section of the exhibition catalogue *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, organized in 1990 by the New Museum of Contemporary Art and The Studio Museum, the first entry corresponding to 1980 reads as follows: “a quarter of a million Cuban refugees arrive in southern Florida during the Mariel boatlift between April and September.”<sup>1</sup> That this distilled timeline of the 1980s— assembled for a curatorial project tracing the period through the lens of identity politics and featuring a significant presence of non-white artists—marked this migration crisis as the beginning of the decade is telling of just how dominant this historic event came to be in the cultural and political discourse of the United States.

Images of hundreds of thousands of Cuban migrants arriving on the shores of South Florida in a desperate attempt to flee Cuba’s communist regime dramatized the narrative of the late Cold War; a narrative in which political and ideological alignments were drawn in a binary fashion across opposing ideologies: democracy (read capitalism) vs. socialism (read communism), or U.S. hegemony against the dominance of Soviet-style socialism. Thus, Mariel is a useful entry point to understanding just how pivotal the mentality of the late Cold War was in informing Cuba/U.S. relations. It is against this sociopolitical backdrop that the following essay examines Cuban American artistic production from the 1980s; the works of these artists cannot be wholly understood outside this context. To this point, this essay accentuates the intertwined relationship that manifested between the particular historical and political processes that came to define Cuban American political thought and the artistic production of this group of artists.

## Mariel and the Aesthetics of Exile

Fernando García’s *10,865* (1980) (pp. 98–99) references the number of Cubans who sought refuge in Havana’s Peruvian Embassy in early April of 1980. The catalyst for this climactic incident was a driver ramming his school bus through the gates of the diplomatic compound. Shots were fired and a Cuban security guard was accidentally killed. Rather than apprehend the asylum-seeking Cubans, the Peruvian government offered them refuge. In retaliation, Fidel Castro ordered the removal of all security personnel from the embassy’s premises, in essence leaving the perimeter of the diplomatic compound exposed. In only a matter of days, over ten thousand Cubans had made their way into the building, setting off a diplomatic

<sup>1</sup> Thelma Golden, et al., *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and The Studio Museum of Harlem, 1990).

crisis between the governments of Peru and Cuba and a broader geopolitical crisis in the region in which the U.S. would play a central role. The Carter administration and the Castro government entered into an agreement that provided a temporary allowance for Cuban exiles to travel to Mariel to claim their relatives and bring them back to the U.S. by boat. Thousands seized this opportunity, detonating what became known as the Mariel Boatlift—the massive influx of over 125,000 Cuban refugees to the US over the course of a few months.

Among the artists featured in *Radical Conventions* who made the perilous journey from the port of Mariel in the western part of Cuba to the shores of South Florida are Carlos Alfonzo, Ernesto Briell, Jaime Bellechasse, and Juan Boza. Mariel as a subject, however, shows up explicitly in the works of a separate pair of artists in the show: Fernando García and Pablo Cano. A comparative analysis of their respective approaches to the subject of Mariel highlights the heterogeneous nature of Cuban American art from this period and the plurality of aesthetic and discursive references that informed their works.

García’s *10,865* underscores the singular place the artist holds in Cuban American art history for being one of the earliest practitioners of conceptual art in an aesthetic landscape that privileged the figural and the narrative. Like many of his peers, García studied at Miami Dade Community College before pursuing advanced degrees elsewhere. At the University of Georgia, García earned a B.S. in Physics and Mathematics. Afterwards, while enrolled at Georgia State University to pursue advanced coursework in mathematics, he concurrently signed up for courses in painting and drawing. This educational experience, coupled with his time in New York in the mid-1970s, when he worked at the Leo Castelli Gallery and met the leading neo avant-garde artists of the time (such as Donald Judd and Frank Stella), influenced his artistic practice and the way in which he arrived at aesthetic solutions. Furthermore, having come of age in the early 1960s, García’s life was shaped by the ideological and political realities of the Cold War. In 1961, only three years after Fidel Castro and his rebel army came into power and launched the Cuban Revolution, García, who was sixteen at the time, was sent unaccompanied from his country of birth to the United States through a resettlement program facilitated by the Catholic Church and sponsored by the U.S. government known as Operation Peter Pan (Operación Pedro Pan).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the hardships Mariel

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see Yvonne M. Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

refugees faced per the realities of having to start anew in a foreign country resonated with García.<sup>3</sup> However, in his treatment of the subject, the artist turned not to the psycho-emotional dimensions of this migration crisis but to the language of print media and its capacity to communicate at a mass scale, as well as to the aesthetic strategies associated with postminimalism and conceptual art.

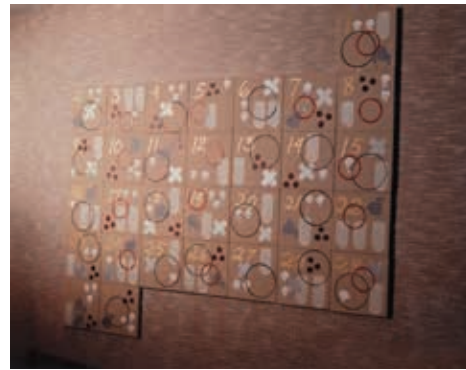


fig.1  
Fernando García, *Calendar* series, 1978-1979. Exhibition at The Artmobile. Photo by Rafael Salazar. Courtesy Miami-Dade Public Library System, Miami, FL



fig. 2  
Fernando García, *Daylight* series, 1978-1979. Courtesy Miami-Dade Public Library System, Miami, FL

García arranged the front pages of local and national newspapers into a grid-like composition to document the first sixty-three days of the Mariel boatlift. The use of newsprint as the work's principal medium highlights a postmodernist approach to his practice by centering the stuff of everyday life—daily news—in the visual and conceptual makeup of the work. There is a dialectical relationship in García's work that stems from the juxtaposition of opposing forces: the logical (expressed through the sequential ordering of the newspapers and in the indexical function of letters and numbers) with the illogical (evidenced by the seemingly arbitrary brushstrokes of red impasto paint that strike through headlines unrelated to the Mariel story). *10,865*, like the *Calendar* series (fig. 1) and *Daylight* series (fig. 2) from the late-1970s, attests to the artist's interest in marking time. In *Calendar*, García divided the picture plane into a similar grid-like composition as in *10,865*. In this work, however, he followed the format of a calendar, populating the boxes designed for dates with apocryphal symbols or codes signifying a specific daily activity. While the content of these notations reveals certain intentional illegibility or randomness, García was always after something more concrete, more methodical. As the artist once remarked, "My painting has to be structural, not arbitrary."<sup>4</sup>

Mariel transformed the geopolitics of the region, as well as the sociocultural constitution of the Cuban exile community. At the local level of South Florida, the refugees that arrived to the U.S. via the boatlift differed markedly from the previous generation of exiles. They were the first group of immigrants to be raised under the Cuban Revolution, were ethnically and racially mixed, primarily represented the working class, and many were practitioners or believers of the Afro-Cuban religion commonly known as Santería. This demographic challenged the widely held perception that Cuban Americans were predominantly white, Catholic, and affluent. For those reasons, many belonging to this new wave of refugees faced racism from the previous generations of Cuban exiles, who coined this new influx of refugees *Marielitos*.

García's treatment of the subject was not only novel because it injected mainstream variants of postminimalism and conceptual art with a sociopolitical and emotional charge, but it also signaled a different artistic current underlying Cuban American art. Rather than relying on metaphor or symbolism, turning to classical art historical

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Fernando García, the other artists featured in the exhibition who came to the U.S. via Operation Peter Pan include María Brito and Ana Mendieta.

<sup>4</sup> Gail Fix, "Fernando García: Between Past and Future" (Paper for Dr. Olson's graduate course in art history, University of Miami, Spring 1980). Vasari Project Archives, Miami-Dade Public Library System.

references, or drawing from a process of interiorization, García approached his thought-provoking performance and site-specific work, multi-media installations, and two-dimensional painting and drawing from the concept of "immediacy," which the artist defined as "making art about where you live."<sup>5</sup> García's guiding philosophy led him to confront the circumstances that defined his immediate reality, like Mariel, as sources, *materia prima*, for his artmaking practice.

Issues relevant to local Miami politics, thus, continued to inform his work. This is evident in another work from this period titled *Anti-Bilingual Bigot* (1987) (fig. 3), exhibited at the main branch of the Miami-Dade Public Library System. García created this multi-media installation (in collaboration with Carlos Alfonzo) in response to the Dade County English-only ordinance proposed in 1981 that prohibited the county from providing funds to public programs that were not conducted in English. The ordinance was repealed in 1993.

The work's disjointed composition had the spontaneous dimension of protest art—a pile of books was stacked on top of a boom box from which the sound of a male voice reading Cervantes (in Spanish) was amplified. These elements were set against a large backdrop painted in black and white by Alfonzo. Letters that spelled out ANTI BILINGUAL BIGOT were placed atop the installation, forcing the public to confront head-on an issue that polarized the community. So much so, in fact, that the letters were subsequently removed due to complaints from the public.

*Anti-Bilingual Bigot* more explicitly elaborates García's interest in grounding his work in the "immediacy" of his environment. Anchoring his practice in the social and political realities of his environment is another way of thinking about site-specificity, of articulating a sense of place and a new sense of identity—that is, of being a Cuban artist in the U.S. and, more specifically, identifying what it means to be a Cuban and American artist in Miami in the 1980s.

These questions were central to the Miami Generation, a group of nine visual artists (of which Fernando García was a member) who arrived from Cuba in the early 1960s as young adults and developed their careers as professional artists in Miami.<sup>6</sup> *The Miami Generation* was also the title of the exhibition presented at the Cuban Museum of Arts & Culture in 1983-84 that helped launch their careers. While earlier generations of Cuban artists had already settled in Miami and across the U.S., forming part of a growing diaspora by the 1980s, the Miami Generation was the new face of exile— young and at the crossroads of two cultural identities, Cuban and Cuban American.

<sup>5</sup> Magda González, interview with the artist, *Diario Las Américas*, November 17, 1983, 6-B.

<sup>6</sup> The artists who were part of the Miami Generation include: Mario Bencomo, Humberto Calzada, Pablo Cano, María Brito, Emilio Falero, Fernando García, Juan González, Carlos Maciá, César Trasobares. For more information about this generation of Cuban American artists, see Giulio V. Blanc and Cynthia Jaffe McCabe, *The Miami Generation: Nine Cuban-American Artists* (Miami: The Cuban Museum of Arts & Culture, 1983). See also, Juan A. Martínez, *The Miami Generation Revisited* (Fort Lauderdale: NSU Art Museum, 2014).



fig.3  
Fernando García in front of *Anti-Bilingual Bigot*, a collaborative installation at the Miami-Dade Public Library that he created with Carlos Alfonzo in 1987. Photo by Rafael Salazar. Courtesy Miami-Dade Public Library System, Miami, FL

Apart from García and fellow artist César Trasobares, most artists from this group turned inward to confront questions of a personal nature and found in classical art historical movements the visual references from which to develop their own pictorial language and artistic narratives.



fig.4  
Pablo Cano, *La esperanza* (Hope), 1981. Photo by Oriol Tarridas

Pablo Cano, the youngest member of the Miami Generation, drew from the Baroque style of Gian Lorenzo Bernini for inspiration in conveying the emotional drama of the Mariel story. Unlike García, who reduced the title of the work he created in response to the boatlift to its mathematical equivalence, Cano's titles, such as *La piedad cubana* (The Cuban Pietà, 1981) (p. 87) and *La esperanza* (Hope, 1981) (fig. 4), among others, serve to heighten the emotional dimension of the Mariel story—the plight of the Cuban refugees and Cuban exiles' hope for a "free" Cuba.

However, forty years on, Cano's fantasies for a monumental fountain in bronze to memorialize Mariel have been reduced to discolored, broken and mended clay figures in raw form, and their vulnerability to the passage of time shifts the focus of the work's subject from Mariel to the work's materiality. Although the small figures elicit an intense emotional response through their physical expressions, they draw the viewer in further for their rich and textured sculptural dimension, obscuring what could otherwise be construed as facile metaphors for the unrealized dream of a "free Cuba." Furthermore, Cano's direct citing of Bernini and the Renaissance flirts with postmodernism's penchant for art historical appropriation, a strategy many artists in this exhibition relied on, such as fellow Miami Generation artists María Brito, Juan González, and Carlos Maciá.

Postmodernist readings aside, the difference in approaches between García and Cano not only underscores the plurality of styles that comprise Cuban American art, but the extent to which Cuban exile politics specifically, and the broader political narrative of the late Cold War, informed cultural production. Furthermore, Cano's musings about a lost Cuba in need of rescue align with the prevailing sentiment that drove the cultural politics of the Cuban exile community.

### Miami's Own Culture Wars: 1980s Cuban Exile Politics

By the 1980s, the first waves of Cuban exiles who migrated to South Florida in the previous two decades had begun to establish themselves as an economic force with increasing political power. On the political end, the founding of the Cuban American National Foundation, led by the charismatic entrepreneur-turned-politician Jorge Mas Canosa, and the subsequent creation of Radio Martí helped shape a cohesive ideological narrative around which the exile community could rally—a "cause," that is, to topple Castro, to "liberate" Cuba from communism, to rescue that which had been lost. These sentiments, especially the notion of rescuing Cuba, also had profound repercussions in the cultural sphere; the founding and subsequent demise of the Cuban Museum of Arts & Culture—one of the first cultural institutions founded by Cuban exiles—is a case in point. Envisioned as a place that would

represent "the patrimony of a community in exile that fights to maintain intact their dignity, history, and traditions . . . and to rescue and give shelter in Miami to all who speak to us of our distant country," this statement became the museum's de-facto mission.<sup>7</sup> Founded on these ideologically-driven principles, the question of what defines Cuban art and who gets to claim it, in other words, issues of cultural legitimacy, quickly became political ones. When Ramón Cernuda, a member of the museum's board of directors, included artworks by artists still living in Cuba in a fundraising auction, members of the exile community protested by burning a painting by one of those artists, Manuel Mendive, outside the museum. José Juara justified his actions thus: "I am a civilized man . . . but we are at war, and this is an act of war."<sup>8</sup> Ironically, Juara's weaponizing of art and culture finds resonance with a declaration made in Cuba by Fidel Castro in 1971 in which he stated that art had to be a "weapon of the revolution."<sup>9</sup> In exile, art too became a weapon; in the context of the museum's crisis, it served to defend a political ideology.<sup>10</sup>

The controversy surrounding the museum eventually reached local, state, and federal government levels. Leading elected officials with ties to the exile community pulled state and federal funds from the museum for its alleged association with artists still living in Cuba, in other words, an association that immediately labeled them as suspect (read communists). Exacerbating tensions, Ramón Cernuda's art collection was confiscated by the FBI for purportedly being in violation of the Trading with the Enemy Act. In 1989, the case *Cernuda v. Heavey* reached the district court for the Southern District of Florida, which ruled that art is intellectual property and thus exempt from the U.S. embargo on Cuba. This contentious battle between censorship, freedom of expression, and its relationship to government funding echoed the culture wars being waged on a national stage at the same time. The artists featured in *Radical Conventions* and the works that represent them must be understood as informed by these contingent factors. In other words, it is within this framework that Cuban American artists operated and from which they had to articulate renewed understandings about self, including and beyond cultural identity.

More than forty years later, the same debate persists in South Florida, reviving the late Cold War rhetoric and mentality of the 1980s. As recently as 2020, the newly elected Cuban American Mayor of Coral Gables Vincent Lago canceled a city-wide art project because it included the participation of two artists—Cuban-born,

<sup>7</sup>Mignon Pérez de Medrano, *Victor Manuel: Un innovador en la pintura cubana* (Miami: Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture, 1982), 2–3. Unless otherwise noted throughout, translations from Spanish are by the author.

<sup>8</sup>Sergio López-Miro, "Selling Cuban Art 'Act of War,' Protester Says," in *Miami News*, April 23, 1988, 4A.

<sup>9</sup>In 1971, Fidel Castro declared art to be "a weapon of the revolution" during his address to the Congress of Education and Culture. See *Política cultural de la revolución cubana* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1977), 87.

<sup>10</sup>For more information about the history of the Cuban Museum of Arts & Culture, see Elizabeth Cerejido, "Museum as Battleground: Exile and Contested Cultural Representation in Miami's Cuban Museum," in *Art Museums of Latin America: Structuring Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 205–218.



Miami-based Sandra Ramos and Chinese-born, New York-based Cai Guo-Qiang—whom he deemed, without proof, were “communist sympathizers.” The irony of censoring artists for their beliefs—tactics employed by the systems he purportedly abhors—is lost on Lago and his supporters.

### **Circulation of Cuban American Art: Transnational Encounters and the Politics of Multiculturalism**

At the same time, the political and artistic landscape for Cuban American artists living and working elsewhere, that is outside the dominant political narratives of the Cuban exile community in Miami, differed greatly from their counterparts living and working in South Florida. Working in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco, artists like Nereida García-Ferraz, Ana Mendieta, Carmelita Tropicana, and Tony Labat, respectively, were exposed to a more expansive range of artistic conventions and conceptual strategies, as well as more diverse social issues and political positionings that had persisted from the 1970s. Just as important, García-Ferraz, Mendieta, and Tropicana infused their paintings, site-specificity and performance works with a Latina perspective, in turn challenging the mainstream tenets of the late 1970s variant of the feminist movement.

In the context of Cuba/U.S. relations, most sought opportunities to engage directly with the island and on their own terms. In the process, they confronted questions of cultural identity, which led them physically back to the island, instead of fantasizing about recovering a lost Cuba. The experience of return informed their works from the early 1980s, as featured in this exhibition, placing their artistic production squarely in the center of the geopolitics of Cold War Cuba/U.S. relations for the ways in which they challenged that prevailing political narrative, both nationally and in specific relation to the politics of the Cuban exile community.

### **Ana Mendieta: “Dialectics of Liberation”**

By the time Ana Mendieta arrived in New York in 1978, she had already begun to establish herself as a leading contemporary artist with her “earth-body” works in which she carved or drew her silhouette onto the natural environment. However, although she produced very few pieces in the city, New York was important for it was there that her awareness of social consciousness and political activism became solidified, especially a growing self-awareness of being Latina. In addition to her involvement with the magazine *Heresies*, Mendieta joined the women-run collective A.I.R. (Artist in Residence) Gallery in 1979. There, she was active in their programs but soon forged her own space and voice within the platform. During her first exhibition at A.I.R., she organized a panel discussion on the topic of Latin American women artists and later participated in a talk that centered around the following question: “How has the women’s art movement affected male art attitudes?” Her convictions about these very issues led her to write a rather provocative text for

the catalogue *Dialectics of Liberation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists in the United States*<sup>11</sup> of an exhibition by the same title that she co-curated. In it, she declared the feminist movement in the U.S. as “basically a White middle-class movement” that failed to represent “us” (women of color). With an emphasis on the concept of “liberation” already evidenced in the title, Mendieta additionally wrote: “We of the Third World in the United States have the same concerns as the people of the Unaligned Nations . . . to end colonialism, racism, and exploitation.”

Mendieta equating peoples of the “Unaligned Nations” (meant to refer to the “Nonaligned Movement”) and the “Third World” with the conditions of disenfranchisement of Latinos in the U.S. predates the post-colonial debates and discourse of identity politics prevalent in cultural and academic circles in the late 1980s and 1990s. Her references to the “Unaligned Nations” and the “Third World” are significant because they shed light on the extent to which her practice and worldview were informed by leftist contemporaneous sociopolitical thinking. They also help reorient her work in a broader geopolitical context, that is, these political positionings help create a narrative that is counter to the conservatism of the Cuban American community on the one hand, and against the dominant Cold War discourse of the Reagan administration, which reversed all pro-engagement policies toward Cuba put in motion by Jimmy Carter. Seen through these political frameworks, one must understand the radicalism of Mendieta’s practice in 1981, specifically through a work she produced in Miami titled *Ceiba Fetish* (1981). Thus, Mendieta’s silhouetted inscriptions on natural landscapes refer to the territorial and the geographic as socially, ideologically, and politically contingent sites; they exist “across a concrete material terrain always already marked by politics and history.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Ceiba Fetish: At the Intersection of Geopolitics and Cuban Exile Ideology***

The remnants of the silhouette that Mendieta drew with glue and human hair onto the trunk of a silkwood, or *ceiba*, forty years ago appear ghost-like but nevertheless persist in a discernable form even today. Mendieta’s *Ceiba Fetish* (pp. 154-155) was rendered in a single, seemingly uninterrupted linear mark delineating a head, shoulders, and an elongated torso, and extends downward to where the trunk of the *ceiba* and the ground meet. The work, executed in 1981 on her return from Cuba, where she had created one of her most ambitious bodies of work known as *Esculturas rupestres* (Rupestrian Sculptures, 1981) (p. 157) under the auspices of the Cuban Ministry of Culture, belongs to Mendieta’s extensive earth-body works, or *siluetas*, which were traditionally ephemeral. Shortly after completing *Ceiba Fetish* in 1981, practitioners of Afro-Cuban derived religions began to leave

<sup>11</sup> Ana Mendieta, “Introduction,” in *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* (New York: A.I.R. Gallery, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Anne Raine, “Embodied Geographies: Subjectivity and Materiality in the Work of Ana Mendieta,” in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 230.

offerings at its base, activating the work in ways that went beyond its artistic dimension. The use of hair further heightens the work's spiritual and symbolic charge, for hair is considered in many religions and mythologies an organic material that possesses transformative powers. In addition to the presence of non-Western elements and associations of the work that complicate easy readings of site-specific art in the Euro-American sense, where Mendieta chose to create *Ceiba Fetish* is equally significant.

The *ceiba* commands an imposing presence in the pedestrian promenade known as Cuban Memorial Boulevard, located in the heart of Miami's Little Havana neighborhood where numerous monuments have been erected to memorialize attempts by Cuban exiles to combat Castro's communist rule. An impressive memorial stands at the entrance of the Boulevard in honor of Brigade 2506, a group of Cuban veterans who fought in the ill-fated invasion of the Bay of Pigs in 1961. A figure in faux bronze memorializes Tony Izquierdo, a young Cuban who fought the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, amid plaques and other monuments that pay homage to political prisoners. Closer to Mendieta's *ceiba* stands a white sculpture of the Virgin Mary, which followers of the Catholic religion adorn with offerings.

Cuban Memorial Boulevard represents the ideology that shaped Cuban exile thought and the political history of that community, one specifically aligned with the binary ideology of the Cold War. It is also a site of constant activation through ritualization and performativity that opens other discursive and ideological pathways of a more plural nature. Practitioners of African-derived religions pay homage to the *ceiba* through offerings, placed specifically on the side in which Mendieta inscribed her silhouette, while those of Catholic faith lay offerings in parallel at the feet of the white Virgin with her back to the *ceiba*. Veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion and their families also engage in the act of ritual production when they gather every year on the anniversary of that historic date and rest floral arrangements and elaborate wreaths against the bronze obelisk. Thus, Mendieta's *Ceiba Fetish* resides in a site that is transcultural for its plurality of cultural and ritualistic traditions. However, *Ceiba Fetish* is also representative of a performativity of a different order—one that is intersectional in historical, political, and identitarian ways, and equally constitutive to the work's aesthetic import. Created by an artist whose politics opposed those being memorialized at Cuban Memorial Boulevard, how can we read *Ceiba Fetish* from a historical, political, and ideological perspective?

### **On Early Cuban American Art History: A Conclusion**

The artistic production by artists from the Cuban diaspora, with few exceptions, has largely been framed as either separate from or in opposition to that created within the nation (Cuba). The attendant critical discourse around the subject of postrevolutionary Cuban art, and specifically Cuban American art by artists

who emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, thus echoes this binary thinking. Specific to the literature on Cuban American art, the repetitive framing of that production almost exclusively within the pathos of trauma and memory has all but rendered the very real lived experiences relative to the conditions of exile and displacement, and of biculturalism, as familiar tropes at best, and empty stereotypes at worst.<sup>13</sup>

The terminology used to describe Cuban American art has served to reify its exilic condition. In 1983, Cynthia Jaffe McCabe described the work of the Miami Generation as "diverse in media, even when abstract, their canvases, objects and conceptual pieces contain references to a shared immigrant experience."<sup>14</sup> About the Miami Generation, Cuban American art historian Giulio V. Blanc described them as being influenced by "revolution, exile, coming of age in a foreign land, myth, nostalgia."<sup>15</sup> These early descriptions continued to inform subsequent analyses about the aesthetic significance of these first and second generations of Cuban-born artists. As recently as 2004, art historian Lynette Bosch compared Cuban exile artists to "Dante's damned souls . . . Cubans outside Cuba must walk forward facing ever backwards, cast out of Paradise, Cuba's Adams and Eves exist caught between a promise of return and a dream of lost homes that can never be regained."<sup>16</sup> In addition to these pathos-laden and clichéd framings of Cuban American art, the existing literature has overwhelmingly focused on the biographical and descriptive, not on the contextual or the historical, nor on the relationship between politics and artistic practice.

*Radical Conventions* was conceived as a counternarrative to the above, aimed at challenging assumptions about what Cuban American art is and who represents it. It reorients the works of Cuban American artists instead within the context of the particular political factors, ideological positionings, and historical circumstances that informed their lives and, by extension, their practices. To that end, the project asks: how can we look at the broader social, artistic, and political frameworks that defined the late 1970s and 1980s through the specificity of Cuban American art? Or, said differently: how can we understand the works of Cuban American artists in dialogue with the American avant-garde and the politics that defined that period? Those questions led the project to focus on Cuba/U.S. relations and the

<sup>13</sup> See Carol Damian and Jorge Santis, *Sin Rupturas/Unbroken Ties: Dialogues in Cuban Art* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: NSU Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale, 2008); Lynette M. F. Bosch, *Cuban-American Art in Miami: Exile, Trauma, Postmodernism and the Neo-Baroque* (Aldershot, United Kingdom: Lund Humphries, 2004); *Cuban-American Literature and Art: Negotiating Identities*, eds. Lynette Bosch and Isabel Alvarez-Borland (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Cynthia Jaffe McCabe, "Preface," in Giulio V. Blanc and Cynthia Jaffe McCabe, *The Miami Generation: Nine Cuban-American Artists/La generación de Miami: Nueve artistas cubano-americanos* (Miami: The Cuban Museum of Arts & Culture, 1983), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Giulio V. Blanc, "Introduction," in *The Miami Generation*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Lynette M. F. Bosch, *Cuban-American Art in Miami: Exile, Identity and the Neo-Baroque* (Hampshire, United Kingdom: Lund Humphries, 2004), 56–57.



rhetoric of the Cold War. As demonstrated in this essay and in the exhibition, the relationship between Cuba and the U.S. played an oversized role during the 1980s in the American political landscape. The rhetoric and thinking that informed this late Cold War phenomenon is framed in this project as contingent to processes of artistic and identitarian formation, not outside them; the leftist political thinking of many Cuban American artists, deemed “radical” by the Cuban exile community—analyzed in greater detail through Mendieta’s work—is an important aspect to understanding the development of early Cuban American art, and thus should be considered integral to that history. The institutionalization of Cuban exile political ideology, vis-à-vis the founding and eventual folding of the Cuban Museum of Arts & Culture, helps us understand the cultural politics of a community. However, it should also force historians to question the influence of the polemical nature of that ideological rhetoric in the artistic practice of the artists who came of age against this cultural-political landscape.



fig.5  
José Bedia, *Perfil de un pueblo* (Profile of a People), 1985. Installation view during *Radical Conventions* at the Lowe Art Museum. Photo by Oriol Tarridas

Finally, the project challenges entrenched and, again, binary notions of what defines Cuban American art. While it is important to recognize value in the specificity of the term and its concomitant social, historical, political, and cultural characteristics, generations of exiles, who have subsequently settled in Miami and elsewhere in the U.S. since the 1980s, continue to expand and complicate easy categorizations of the term. Here, the inclusion of José Bedia serves to unsettle those assumptions; although Bedia created the featured work *Perfil de un pueblo* (Profile of a People, 1985) (fig. 5) during a residency in New York, he was still residing in Cuba at the time, destabilizing the binary way of thinking about Cuban and Cuban American art as geographically circumscribed, or as inside vs. outside Cuba. Bedia’s work in the exhibition, alongside García-Ferraz’s and Ana Mendieta’s, points to early transnational exchanges taking place as early as the 1980s—not just across geographic boundaries, but in terms of information and circulation of art. Cuba-based Bedia, working in New York on his first artist residency in the U.S., created a visually stunning installation focusing on the history of Native Americans, in other words, North American history. While on her travels to Cuba, New York-based Mendieta provided Bedia and his generation of artists with American and European art magazines and other visual sources that opened their references to American and, by extension, global contemporary art. And artists like García-Ferraz in Chicago and Tony Labat in San Francisco were each creating critically significant and conceptually innovative work stemming directly from their experience of return to the island.

Finally, Bedia’s participation in a project about Latinx art more broadly also sheds light on another discursive framework: the aesthetics of multiculturalism. While the multiculturalist agenda that many institutions in the U.S. adopted in the mid-1980s served to bring wider visibility to artists of color, specifically Latinos and Latin American artists working in the U.S., it simultaneously worked to

further marginalize them for the limited and ignorant ways their visual language was understood in the American context. North American curators saw in the juxtaposition of elements from the real and the imagined, in other words a surreal and magic realist aesthetic, an irrational way of looking at the world, the romantic “primitive” in touch with their roots, or worse, as constitutive to Latin identity. These grossly essentialist and superficial readings of these various styles missed their more political and subversive functions, for central to these visual languages was the language of resistance, a pushing back at what many Latinx and Latin American artists saw as the encroachment of Euro-American hegemonic trends in modern and contemporary art. The relationship between aesthetics, multiculturalism, and the circulation of art by Cuban and Cuban American artists in the mid and late 1980s is an area of art history requiring more curatorial and scholarly attention.

One of this curatorial project’s principal goals is to provide other critical and scholarly perspectives that problematize and complicate how Cuban American art has been discursively constructed. Moreover, the artists represented in this exhibition and the work featured attest to other ways of thinking about identity; rather than helping to *define* Cuban American identity, they reveal ways of *instrumentalizing* it. For that reason, the title in the exhibition dispenses with the hyphen between Cuban and American, metaphorically allowing room for the plurality of identities and subjectivities, of circumstances and realities that make up what it means to be Cuban American, thus countering sociologist Gustavo Pérez-Firmat’s theory that “having two cultures,” . . . [Cuban Americans] belong wholly to neither one.”<sup>17</sup> While there is truth to this sentiment, *Life on the Hyphen* reinforced the bifurcated ways in which processes of identity formation relative to Cuban Americans have been understood. This project follows Darby English’s understanding of identity, who, writing about Black artists, remarks that they “engage other topics and modes of work using their identity as a perspective,”<sup>18</sup> (my emphasis). The perspectives or plurality of visions represented in *Radical Conventions* tell of *other* histories—artistic, sexual, gender-related, and historical—at work in Cuban American cultural production from the late Cold War period of the 1980s.

<sup>17</sup> Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: the Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 13.

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