

CLIMATE CHANGE: CUBA/USA

JANUARY 12 – MARCH 3, 2018
USF CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM

JAVIER CASTRO

GLEXIS NOVOA

CELIA Y YUNIOR

**ANTONIO ELIGIO
FERNÁNDEZ “TONEL”**

*Interviews by Noel Smith
Curator of Latin American & Caribbean Art
Deputy Director, USFCAM*

CONTENTS

• • • • •

P. 4 JAVIER CASTRO

P. 8 GLEXIS NOVOA

P. 12 CELIA Y YUNIOR

P. 14 ANTONIO ELIGIO
FERNÁNDEZ “TONEL”

JAVIER CASTRO

INTERVIEWED BY: NOEL SMITH

NOEL SMITH: After growing up in Havana, you now live part time in Miami, with permanent residency and a green card. Yet you still spend a great deal of time in Havana. When I met you last summer in Miami you reflected on feeling dislocated, feeling that you were not really in either place. You were uncertain on how this situation would affect your work, which has been so tied to your environment in Havana. You wanted to bring further dimensions to your work. After a year, have you found any answers?

JAVIER CASTRO: Yes, I've found many answers in these two years but nothing conclusive. The world is ever more dynamic and transitory. I move between Havana and Miami, and I realize that the fact of being in one location or not, doesn't change much in my life. My modus operandi is to enter into a social experience—that surprisingly is more and more common and easily accessed.

That's why I like to come and go from Havana, since that allows me to move between two very different social models, and that is really fascinating. A more "basic" society (Cuban) of people to people, low speed and low resolution that doesn't seem to change much. The other more technological and distant, like the American "apps society."

The feeling of dislocation is very interesting and a good mental challenge. When you emigrate, and have to learn the new context in order to survive, your mind becomes saturated. In that moment, I decided not to make work, rather to let the new context enter and become habitual in myself. Once the mind has adapted to these new dynamics, it generates other creative mechanisms, and it blooms. That's where I am right now. So, my works will eventually speak of both contexts, as I focus more and more on universal topics. Even so, I am interested in the basics: extreme situations, vices, human conditions tilting toward fiction, within the direct video recording that I do.

My aim is to understand human beings more and more, their basic instincts, the way of surviving and prospering, their relations with others, of loving and declaring, lying, hiding or exposing and being truthful with one's self. The principal opponent is one's self, you are the one who you should constantly overcome and get out of your comfort zone. That's why the answers that I have today are something borrowed, something I have that is not mine, a state that I will eventually pass and go on to another. It doesn't matter if this state is more

or less evolved, that depends on the way it is interpreted and how it is put into practice. The most important is to learn from that. I am also passing through.

NS: There is a marked anthropological slant to your body of work—the norms and values of Cuban culture and society are the focus of your research. This seems to be a common thread running through the works of other artists from your generation in Cuba. Can you discuss the influences in your education and in your environment that led you to this focus?

JC: That viscerally anthropological character of my work has its origins in my education, not artistic, rather domestic and contextual. In my case, I was born and raised in a marginal neighborhood of Old Havana, and that very early defined my interest in understanding and relating to my environment, knowing how to survive there and beyond its borders.

In my house, the rules of discipline were very strict, and in the street there were other rules that were very different, another kind of discipline. I had to respect both or I would have problems.

On the other hand, my artistic education, which I began as an adolescent, gave me other kinds of tools. Each of them have given me a completely different knowledge that, in a conscious way, I have been weaving together to create a visual language that can be interpreted by diverse audiences.

In all areas, you must survive and succeed, be good and direct yourself to different levels and paradigms. At home you learn good manners, gentility, love and good habits, curfews and etiquette. In the street, you learn something totally different, and there you have your first conflict: you overcome it and then you have to figure out a very personal and intelligent way of behaving. You learn to discern and prioritize.

So, I was exposed to three very different contexts: home, the street, and art. I was naturally drawn to use my environment as a space for experimentation and artistic discourse as a daily practice. This becomes a sort of poetics that mixes daily situations and conflicts with the history of art and artistic experiences to aesthetically elevate daily situations, respecting the dynamics of both contexts and transcending their limits.

NS: Can you talk about the videos that you are showing here at CAM? Four videos of approximately six minutes each, shown concurrently—what is the theme that ties them together?

JC: The work addresses what I consider four basic things for the human being today. There are four screens that are arranged in a gallery so that the spectator can see them simultaneously. The first work shows the hands of a butcher massaging fatty pieces of meat. At first the image is very disagreeable, later it becomes erotic and even sexual because of the way the man is handling the pieces of fat. This work speaks about avarice, vice, lust and possession. The second work speaks about uncertainty and the anxiety of seeing the future.

A man repeatedly throws four pieces of coconut shells on the floor, reads the position they fall in and gives an answer—this is what normally happens. In the video, the viewer cannot get an answer because there are always pieces that fall outside of the frame. So that the reading is continually open and unresolved.

The third is inspired by the phrase “la gota que desborda la copa” (the “final straw”). The video shows a glass that slowly fills up to the top without spilling over. The narrative focuses on the surface tension of the water, alluding to the stress, resistance and tolerance that contemporary society experiences without any possible relief.

The fourth video shows a turtle on its back that tries to right itself repeatedly without success. In Hinduism, the turtle signifies the cosmic order; for me, in this case it has an autobiographical character, and its continual failure is a struggle for stability that ends in suspense.

The connection among all of them are four aspects that concern our societies. The works are there and each viewer will identify or not with one or more of these conflicts.

NS: The video depicting a man *tirando los cocos* (“throwing coconuts”) is mesmerizing and visually beautiful. Yet it depicts a ritual that is utterly unfamiliar to most of our audiences. Can you explain a bit about this ritual and its importance in contemporary Cuban society? How do you transmit the central idea of your video and the ritual within it, to such audiences?

JC: The ritual of *tirando los cocos* is a system of divination that came to Cuba with the religion imported by the African slaves to America. This method of soothsaying works on a binary reading depending on the positions in which the four pieces of coconut shell fall. Each throw should answer the believer’s specific questions with a yes, a no, or a perhaps. If the answer is not clear, the



Javier Castro, still from *Cocos*, one part of *Cuatro Cosas Básicas/Four Basic Things*, 2018. Video installation, four digital videos; 6:30 min. each. USFCAM Commission 2018

cocos should be thrown again until the thrower is satisfied. The questions are directed to a specific *Orisha* or god or to the spirit of a deceased person the questioner is in contact with.

It’s usual to hear the clacking of the *cocos* in homes. The faithful usually ask each morning or at any moment or happening in the day. The most frequent consultations are relative to health, money, stability, travel, judgments, homes, etc. It is a common instrument to which even many nonbelievers tend to recur, in order to have an answer to something that bothers them. (See the above image.)

It’s obvious that an audience that knows about this will understand the work instantly and be able to establish much deeper readings. On the other hand, the viewer who isn’t familiar will be limited and should access the complementary materials that will clarify the idea of the video. In any case they will experience a sequence of images that are, as you say, mesmerizing and beautiful, that I hope will convey the energy of a divinatory system and the anguish of repeatedly trying to tell the future.

*Interview conducted via email November 3 – December 10, 2017.
Translated from the Spanish by Noel Smith.*

GLEXIS NOVOA

INTERVIEWED BY: NOEL SMITH

NOEL SMITH: You recently returned to re-establish a studio in Havana, after living and working in Miami for many years. What prompted this decision, i.e. what changes made it possible for you to re-enter the Havana art scene after so long? And do you consider yourself Cuban, or Cuban-American, or does that even matter anymore?

GLEXIS NOVOA: I left Cuba permanently in 1993 to reside in Mexico for two years and then moved to Miami in September 1995, and I have never ceased trying to be in contact with Cuban culture, and staying aware of the visual arts movement on the island. In 1998 I started an investigation of the first decade of performance art in Cuba, which I have continued up to now. In periods when the migratory limitations were severe and I was subjected to humiliations that prevented me from entering my country for up to three years, I persevered with determination to visit my family and I continued to try to be part of my culture, as far as the laws allowed me. I am thankful for the changes in the immigration policy of the USA towards Cuba during President Obama's presidential terms, and the strategy developed by the Cuban government to allow Cuban emigrants the possibility of 'recovering the right to be Cuban' or the so-called "repatriation." This afforded me the opportunity to have a Cuban Identity Document, with obligations and responsibilities like any other Cuban resident in the island and a few privileges, such as the right to buy one car, or two houses, or to open a business... it was also important that the Cuban cultural institutions have authorized some Cuban artists living in exile to exhibit in official institutions. All this creates a climate that has allowed me to return to the island with a status that seems fairly normal—so far. I have tried to recover the communication that had been interrupted for more than twenty-five years. In 2013 I opened my studio less than 100 feet from the Chinese Embassy in the center of El Vedado, where I work and exhibit my art; it has been frequently visited by local and international arts professionals. I cannot deny that this has been a challenging decision in many ways; although this situation is still not stable, it looks more like it should have always been, with or without Obama or the Revolution.

I grew up "looking north," listening to my grandfather's adventures of when he lived in Boston and New York City, during the times when Cubans traveled to the US and never stayed. Or perhaps because I always listened with the friends of my youth to the 'hit parade of the week' broadcast live from Florida FM stations to the Havana shores. It is also curious that some of the most important influences that shaped the so-called Cuban Generation of the 80s came directly from the galleries of New York,

MOMA or artists such as Jonathan Borofsky, Joseph Kosuth, David Salle, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, etc., complemented by some Europeans like Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Beuys. Considering that I grew up with all these influences and that I have lived more than half of my life in the US, and with all legal papers from both sides, I could say that technically I am Cuban-American. Although today I am still the same *cubanito* lost in the streets of Havana.

NS: Although you frequently travelled to Cuba to visit family, you did not spend extended periods of time there before re-opening your studio. I can only imagine that you found great differences between the Cuba of the early 1990s and now. What are some of the differences you encountered, and how is this manifested in your recent work?

GN: For me, the most significant change in Cuban society has been that the government allows people to have a legal platform for individual entities, to experience the notion of private property and business. Although it has been recently rescinded, paralyzing the issuance of new licenses, and allowing only those that already exist. The Cubans of today have their eyes fixed on hard currency. All this mixture of anxieties has put the country up for sale. The possession of money, and the possibility of conducting business, has unleashed a number of spontaneous reactions, such as the cries of street vendors, and the decoration, redesign and repair (exterior and interior) of homes, businesses and vehicles. It is an element that has caught my attention.

After more than 25 years of not painting, I decided to reconnect with *La Etapa Práctica (The Practical Period)*, a series of paintings where I described the lack of sense of socialist propaganda in Cuba by the end of the 80s. In these works I was replacing the revolutionary slogans with abstract icons, evolving an encrypted language. I was creating a strategy to say how empty that philosophy was and, avoiding ideological censorship, to say what could not be said. When I changed my context to Mexico or US, my interests focused on everything new that I was discovering; the local Cuban issues no longer made sense, and I had left that period unfinished. Recently I have used the same methodology and formal structure of the early work, returning to work in my mother's household, with the same light and all the affective resonances of Havana's noisy urban environment. This aroused much more colorful and spontaneous paintings, using splashes that

implied meditative processes learned on the road, and the knowledge of a mature heart. I discovered that since ideology was not an important factor in Cuban society now, there was no reason to continue with the concealed messages. Today, Cuban contemporary society speaks straightforwardly about tangible matters. Commerce, money (CUC), American tourists... the street vendors announce their essential products, shouting: cans of meat, pens, salt crackers, room freshener, chlorine, kerosene, tamales! In this transition to pragmatics, honor, morals and dignity are already issues of the past. It is a society where the daily predicament rules. The subterfuges of *La Etapa Práctica* no longer made sense, although that does not mean that censorship and politics are not part of the codes in current society; but, that would take another extended and refined chapter to discuss.

NS: In our conversations, you have often referred to the *traqueteros*, informal or black-market dealers of art and artifacts in Cuba, who operate in the absence of a formal art and antiquities market in Cuba. Can you expand a bit on that, and reflect on the consequences for contemporary Cuban artists and art?

GN: ... I should not expose my good friends. The *traqueteros* have been well established in the intricate jungle of Cuba's black market. Some of them travel to vacation in Europe with their family, they own tourist restaurants, or they simply enjoy life in houses or condos bought for cash in Havana, Miami or Monaco. This type of activity has flourished due to the absence of a real art market; it is not because the galleries do not exist in Cuba, but they are all run by the government and as a consequence, they do not operate properly. *Traqueteros* are agents who buy and sell everything they find valuable, without principles or remorse. They offer you proposals that may include a house for a number of paintings; or "packages" that include paintings of several different artists for a fixed price; or simply the sale of any artwork individually. *Traqueteros* visit or send secret representatives to the local artists' studios and offer tempting sums of money in cash, as well as cars or real estate properties. Once the deal is completed, the artworks are taken to different destinations around the world, including to eBay, where they are re-sold. Some pieces also return to the same market as give-and-take items. In selected cases, specific clients are already waiting for the works. Almost always, the artists themselves and the works suffer the most from this handling. Transactions are usually made at low rates and the works are resold at much higher prices. It is fascinating to discover "jewels" in the midst of these tumultuous transactions. Somehow, you feel the crunch of the old machinery trying to start over.

NS: In your words, your "...work repeatedly turns to the architecture of power, taking social history as its main subject." From our discussions, it seems to me that your installation for CAM is also deeply personal, as you are directly introducing



Glexis Novoa, *View from Pravda Tower, Havana*, 2017. Graphite on Carrara marble and granite (marble recovered from Havana), 10-3/4 x 20-3/4 inches. Collection of Greg & Leslie Ferrero, Miami, FL

elements of Revolutionary culture that influenced the visual and thematic content of your work. Can you talk about how you are using authentic vintage items such as banners, flags, posters and photographs and other paper ephemera from before and after the Revolution, and what this means to you artistically and personally?

GN: The current changes in Cuban society allowed me not only access to once sacred objects—such as flags and photographs—that formerly belonged to the active practice of the official ideology, but also opened me up to very emotional and affective zones. During the last few years, I have been discovering and collecting objects that highlight the aesthetics that inspired my earlier work. Mostly of ideological meaning, elements that remind me of my childhood and youth, and of learning the Leninist Marxist doctrine. Sometimes I discover objects that represent the ideals for which my mother gave the best years of her youth, or for which my grandparents risked their own lives. These memories influence my perspective for any further conceptual analysis. This experience has led me to build my own story reminiscent of the past, as "poems," where I'm aiming to reorder periods and my own version of the Cuban social experience, in which I was an actor. After all, I am from the generation in which supposedly we would become The New Man (*El Hombre Nuevo*), just like Che Guevara. Which gives me a kind of authority for faithfully witnessing what is happening today.

Interview conducted via email November 3 – 22, 2017.

CELIA Y YUNIOR

INTERVIEWED BY: NOEL SMITH

NOEL SMITH: Social practice art aims to create social and/or political change through the creation of participatory art in collaboration with individuals, artists and institutions. While elements of your practice might appear to resonate with this particular art form, it seems to me that there are significant differences. Can you talk about those differences? Would your work be more properly described as “arte comprometido” or “committed art” as I have observed it called in Cuba?

CELIA Y YUNIOR: “El arte socialmente comprometido” or “socially engaged art” comes from a leftist political position, against capitalism as a hegemonic system. It implies, almost always, the desire for change. We are, and have developed our work, in a nation with an official leftist political agenda and an anti-imperialist, anti-hegemonic discourse; more than that, Cuba has symbolized these positions. Thus, the official rhetoric of our government coincides with the discourse, presented as an alternative, by “socially engaged” artists. We believe that to produce and analyze the art produced in Cuba we would have to start by taking this singularity into account.

On the other hand, we have issue with the translation of the verb “to engage” as “commitment,” an action that determines in advance an ethically correct position that is long lasting and has the feeling of belonging to a given social process. As artists, we don’t feel that we should be “politically correct” as an absolute premise, nor do we have the level of membership and time invested in political and social protests like a union member might have, for example.

We do have the desire to tell, connect data, illuminate unconnected areas, but not to resolve what can be considered a conflict; we don’t feel that administering a country is our job. It is our job to reflect upon it; for us every work is an opportunity to think about an area of our social and political context, and we consider that enormously valuable.

For a few years now we have found historical data to be the springboard that catapults us to the future. We have worked with archives in order to understand the present. We understand that this is an important task in an obscure country, with a centralized political and economic system, where its narrative is also centralized in the interest of sustainability. For us the commitment starts with ourselves, in the effort to understand our position in this narrative.

NS: Many artists of your generation participated in Tania Bruguera’s workshop, *La Cátedra de Arte Conducta*, or Art of Behavior (2002-2009). Can you talk about the historical/art historical moment when that workshop operated, the basis of its pedagogy, and what influence it exerted on your practice and those of your peers?

C y Y: *La Cátedra de Arte Conducta* energized the environment of Cuban art and led the art scene to question the forms and ways of connecting with the social context through art. We must say that post revolutionary Cuban art has never ceased to be concerned with social and political subjects, something expected in a society where all aspects of life are politicized. For us the most relevant aspects of the *Cátedra* was that it brought into the Cuban art scene concerns in international art during the 90s, described by writer Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics*. Tania Bruguera brought Bourriaud to Havana as well as Claire Bishop, who later refuted Bourriaud, and dedicated several pages of her book *Artificial Hells* to Tania Bruguera’s pedagogical project. These meetings brought questions about “the art of participation” or “socially engaged art” to the Cuban context, that each artist resolved with their own positions and solutions in their work.

The *Cátedra’s* program was two years long, Monday to Friday, two hours each afternoon. Each week a different professor would challenge us with an exercise; it was intense and a little schizophrenic, since all the units were small capsules of statements that could contradict each other. This provoked the production of works with very different outcomes that entered, or not, into the discussion about socially engaged art. The *Cátedra* offered a time and space for meetings among young artists and international and Cuban guests who provoked a dynamic interchange of production and questioning.

NS: Your installation *Varaentierra* investigates the rise and fall of the cigar industry in Tampa/Ybor City over almost a century and a half, mirroring a similar process in Cuba: what was once a thriving, important industry that supported many thousands of families is now a tourist-oriented, boutique attraction. We are beyond delighted that you chose to focus on our city and its history. Can you please explain how you arrived at this subject matter, and how does it fit within the ethos of your practice?

C y Y: When we are invited to produce a new work for an exhibition or a residency, we try to focus on the social context of the exhibition, and in this case “socially engaged art” is of interest to the exhibition. There is an obvious relationship between Tampa and Cuba in the production of cigars and Tampa’s relationship to the War of Independence. This was our starting point, but we were immediately drawn to the activity of the cigar workers’ unions beyond the war for the nation. That is, the mobilization raised not only the nationalist feeling shared by all Cubans at the end of the 19th century, but also the consciousness of classes and the workers’ struggle in which the cigar industry was particularly involved.

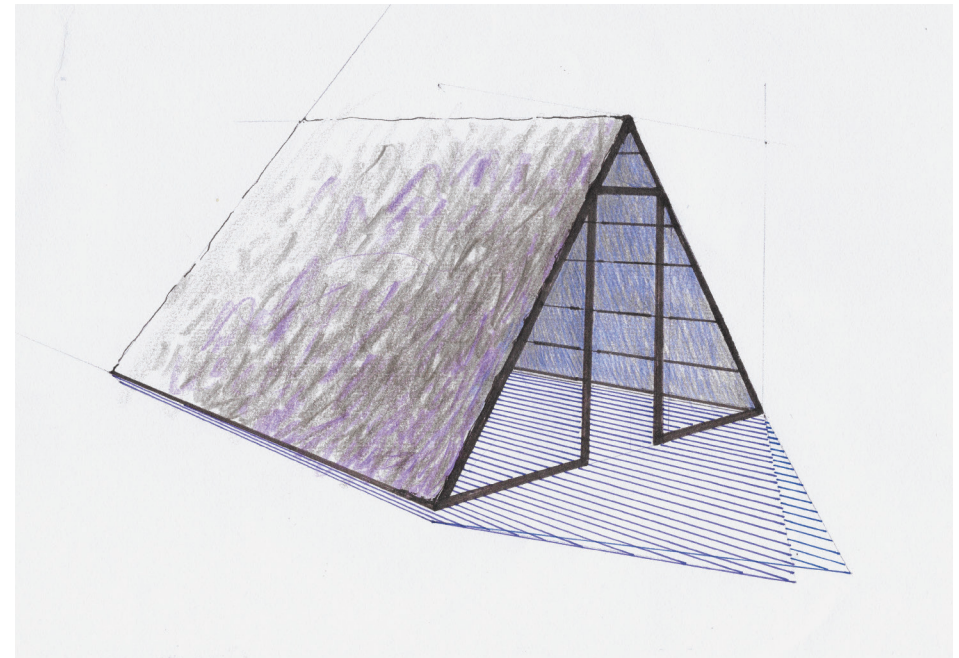
In our actual environment of the destabilization of labor and resulting precariousness of workers’ rights—right to a decent salary, right to demonstrate, right to stability in the labor market—we decided to look at those unions that continued their struggles and demonstrations for reasons other than nationalism after the Cuban War for Independence.

In the cigar’s production process, stripping is the moment in which the stalk of the leaf is ripped off in order to make the leaf more flexible. Stalks discarded by the industry as well as cadavers and the names of unions at the turn of the 19th century exist in our work like ghosts of social commitment.

NS: What is the meaning of the *varaentierra* structure (a rustic storm shelter found in rural Cuba) in this context?

C y Y: The *varaentierra* is an excavated provisional dwelling, with dirt walls and a ceiling made of palm logs and fronds. The *varaentierra* is supposed to withstand storms. Covering the floor within the *varaentierra* are the tobacco stalks that obscure a history of unionism that related Tampa and Havana in the past. We are not convinced of the structural integrity of the *varaentierra*, not even in its actual mission of safeguarding dead tobacco stalks.

*Interview conducted via email November 6—December 9, 2017.
Translated from the Spanish by Noel Smith.*



Celia y Yuniór, *Varaentierra* (artists’ rendition), 2017. USFCAM commission.

ANTONIO ELIGIO FERNÁNDEZ “TONEL”

INTERVIEWED BY: NOEL SMITH

NOEL SMITH: I understand that you worked with artist Robert Rauschenberg when he travelled to Cuba for the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (ROCI) in the late 1980s. ROCI was organized by Graphicstudio, USF's print atelier (where Rauschenberg collaborated on over 60 editions from the 70s to the late 80s), so we are very interested in learning what we can about the artist's activities in Cuba. Can you tell us about what your work with Rauschenberg entailed, as well as your impression of the impact of his personal appearance and art on the Havana artistic scene of the time?

TONEL: At the time of Rauschenberg's visit to Cuba, I was already regularly writing art criticism, and on the occasion of the presentation of ROCI in several Havana institutions, I published an extensive article titled “Pasó Rauschenberg sobre el mar,” in the May 1988 issue of *Revolución y Cultura*. I felt then that it was positive, and very important, to have an artist of such significance presenting so many of his works in Havana. We had had some first-hand contact with contemporary art, thanks to Casa de las Américas and more recently, then, to the Havana Biennial; but that was mostly art from Latin America and the Third World, not so much American art. And everyone in Cuba was well-informed about the developments in post-war American art, Rauschenberg's stature, his iconic works, etc.

At the same time, like many of my Cuban colleagues, we felt conflicted because of the fact that Rauschenberg was given access, simultaneously, to some of the most important art venues in Cuba (which was unprecedented), and also because there was very little input from the locals (artists or anyone else) in what he was bringing and/or creating while in Havana. So, to a certain extent, it felt like an act of cultural imperialism: an unexpected version of the “American invasion” that the revolutionary leadership had been warning all of us about since 1961, after the American defeat at Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs).

In reality, my working relationship with Rauschenberg, or with any of the people that were part of the ROCI-Cuba team, was limited. I was present in a meeting held at the Casa de las Américas that took place months before the opening of ROCI in Havana, which was a kind of planning conversation between representatives of Cuban cultural organizations, and a group of people who travelled to Cuba to discuss the details and logistics related to the

future presentation of ROCI in Cuban venues. Roberto Fernández Retamar, then director of Casa, presided over the meeting in which members of the artist's team laid out the general idea of the project, and shared some of the publications (posters, brochures, catalogues) printed in other countries such as Mexico, where ROCI had already been.

Telarte, which I was coordinating at the time, was the production of industrial quantities of fabrics printed with designs by Cuban artists. In 1988, my boss, Beatriz Aulet (Director, Visual Arts and Design Division of the Ministry of Culture) and other people that I was working with, were already working on inviting some foreign artists to contribute their designs. Among the non-Cuban artists were Shigeo Fukuda, Luis Camnitzer, Julio Le Parc, and Hervé Télémaque. Someone must have mentioned Telarte to Rauschenberg during his visit, and he accepted an invitation. Not too long after I received a design by Rauschenberg, that I added to the others that would be created in the *Textilera Desembarco del Granma*, in Santa Clara, in anticipation of *Telarte VI* (1989).

So my collaboration with Rauschenberg was at a distance, and fundamentally consisted in advising the technicians and workers in that Cuban industry, in order to achieve the printing of a textile with an image as close as possible to the one sent by the artist. The original he provided was somewhat adjusted to the technical requirements and possibilities of the industry in our country, so that it was not difficult to “translate” it into an industrial language (very similar to serigraphy, or printing in general). I remember that it turned out very well.

NS: One of your pieces in *Climate Change* is *(Elogio del) darwinismo/(In Praise of) Darwinism*, a seemingly simple installation of five concrete blocks spelling out the word “A \$ E R E” (with a dollar sign standing in for the “s”). *Asere* is a popular colloquial Cuban word of African origin that can denote a close friend, relative or a casual greeting. Yet everything about the installation, from the sophistication of the title to the crudity of the concrete blocks, points to a complicated discourse involving social theory, economics, politics and daily life in Cuba. Can you please illuminate your thoughts on making this work?

TONEL: This work relies conceptually on—or we could say it is a commentary about—“social Darwinism.” That is, it alludes to the interpretations of Charles

Darwin's theory of evolution, which tried to apply the scientist's ideas to human society, especially dating from the colonial and imperialist expansion that occurred between the 19th and 20th centuries. Some might say, with reason, that Darwin himself opened a breach with his writing, where ideas belonging to biology and natural sciences could be applied to social theory. In the case of my installation, the idea of "praise" should be interpreted as ironic, because in my opinion social Darwinism deserves derision, if not contempt, above all for its ties to racist ideologies, like Nazism. I reject that "the survival of the fittest," or the competition for power, natural resources and economic wealth can be understood and explained as if they dealt with mere biological issues.

"Asere" is a word that denote affection, friendship, brotherhood, familiarity, closeness. In my work, this word represents a process of mutation, in an evolution similar to that of the species described by Darwin. Briefly, I have tried to talk about the market's and ultimately money's, conquest of the Cuban imaginarium, thought, social space and affections. I think that the Cuba of the turn of the century, and in this new millennium, is a society permeated, more and more visibly, by the centrality of money, the accumulation (although relatively limited) of wealth, and social inequality. The brotherhood proclaimed in the word "asere" is transforming, evolving before our eyes, changing into something different, and money is key in that mutation.

NS: *Hacer arte no debería ser caro/Art Shouldn't be Expensive to Make*, also in *Climate Change*, is a humorous and accessible installation with a sharp satiric bite. While your critical commentary is obviously not confined to the state of the arts in Cuba only, the intent and aesthetics of the artwork clearly reference and connect to the strong tradition of *humorismo* and political satire in Cuba. Can you talk a bit about how you use these elements in your overall body of work?

TONEL: I think that in very powerful sectors of the best known international art—including in very visible areas of Cuban art today—the aspiration for the spectacular seems inseparable from financial ostentation, specifically relative to producing works that require investment measured in tens or hundreds of thousands or millions of euros, US dollars or any other reserve currency. Biennials, fairs, public commissions, collections and even museums and galleries support projects whose high cost would appear to be a sign of respectability and artistic values, when not an unmistakable sign of the marketability of the resulting works. Frequently, these productions are created with complex technologies, and organized with a work structure very similar to those employed by the most efficient actors of the corporative world. The

staggering participation of capital, present from the beginning of this type of work, indicates the future mercantile value of the creations, and is also a guarantee that the final product will be accepted as a sure investment, bringing the expected revenue.

My installation *Hacer arte no debería ser caro* is part of a heterogeneous series that is still growing, which I started around 2009. With this work, I am attempting to comment on the proliferation of this kind of art whose celebrity is inseparable from the high costs of its production. The installation can also be understood as a recognition and homage to several artists I admire—Marcel Broodthaers, Lawrence Weiner, Alighiero Boetti, and Luis Camnitzer, among others—some of whose works have inspired this work and others. They are all creators of paradigmatic works that conjugate the use of texts and images with poetic values, a great ingenuity in manipulating low cost materials and in displaying and installing their artworks. I see many of their works as examples to emulate.

I agree that something of the satiric could be perceived in this, and in some of my other artwork. A good part of my work, I believe, is permeated by a humorous perspective, and irony and satire appear frequently. This is not premeditated; it is rather a perspective that blooms naturally, something like a congenital way of explaining myself and of understanding the world. I suppose that this predisposition to humor was a decisive element in the impulse, very early in my career as artist—since the mid 70s—that led me to publish caricatures, and illustrations tinged with humor in several Cuban magazines. The proximity to the publishing world, and the close collaboration with publications like *DDT*, a satirical biweekly that was very popular in the 70s and 80s, stimulated me to study the tradition of local and international caricature. It helped me to appreciate the importance of humor in different areas of Cuban artistic production, from the Vanguard art of the early twentieth century (Conrado Massaguer, Rafael Blanco, Eduardo Abela...) up to the production of later artists especially from the second half of the 1900s, whose works I also appreciate and still admire: Samuel Feijóo, José Luis Posada, Jesús González de Armas, Manuel Hernández, Osneldo García, Eduardo Muñoz Bachs, Chago Armada...

From these and other experiences of apprenticeship, an awareness of the value of humor has remained in my work, as an element that can enrich the central concept of the work, above all when the humorous is embodied from the very beginning of the idea. In art, I think, humor facilitates levels of depth and a complexity that are unreachable by other means. In its best expressions, humor allows broadening the contents with paradox, surprise, irony, and

sometimes, the force that emanates from the grotesque. If you don't believe me, see Rabelais and Daumier, Cervantes and Picasso, Virgilio Piñera and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea.

NS: Your profile within the Cuban artistic, literary and intellectual scene is very broad and deep—artist, curator, critic, art historian, historian—and you and your work are very much in demand internationally. I feel that this gives you a unique, global perspective on Cuba and its society and culture. From your vantage point living and working between Vancouver, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Havana, how do you see the current overall situation in Cuba in light of the frequent fluctuations in the Cuba-US political, diplomatic and economic relationship?

TONEL: It is true that our perspective on the country and the culture, that we consider our own, changes according to the place where we find ourselves—at least, that is my experience. During the past two decades, my life has moved, fundamentally, between those cities and urban areas that you mention. Nonetheless, Havana and Cuba have never stopped being a center for me, personally and professionally. Independently of what happens in the relationship between Cuba and the United States, I consider that my country would benefit enormously by putting into practice new and different, even contradictory, ideas, within its borders. Those ideas and concepts would have to be decided by a majority of the Cuban citizens and they could facilitate, in the best-case scenario, the opening to urgent, unpostponable transformations in the economy, political life and society in general.

Today Cuba faces grave problems, of every kind: from an increase in poverty and inequality, to the aging of its population, to the anemic growth of its Gross National Product, to the mass emigration of talent in all areas of knowledge. Of course, it could be argued that these issues are not exclusively affecting Cuba; they are in part exacerbated, locally, by globalization and the current state of world affairs. To begin to change the negative tendencies of today's Cuban society, we can't wait for the United States to do anything. The blockade or embargo is a sign of hostility, an obstacle, and a weight that drastically affects Cuba's development, as well as normal relations between both countries. The US government will decide when they want to eliminate that obstacle, which they themselves created. But Cuba's destiny cannot nor should subordinate itself to a decision like that, which no one knows when and in what circumstances will arrive. If we guide ourselves by history, it is obvious that the powerful elites of the United States have maintained, during decades, a largely stable consensus, at least in the policies and in the most visible decisions, of how to relate to Cuba. The tardy gestures of President Obama, in the field of



Antonio Eligio Fernández "Tonel", *Iluminaciones (Illuminations)*, 2012/2017.
Ink on paper, 78-3/4 x 59 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Cuba-US relations, although notable and hopeful, were in my opinion timid and insufficient, and left the door open to the kind of regressive policies that seemingly are favored by the current administration in Washington. As much as the relationship (whether hostile, stalled, dynamic or normal) with its powerful US neighbor is important to Cuba, I think that the unblocking of creative forces within the borders of the Cuban archipelago, in relations and in political institutions, in the economy, and in all spheres of social life, is an unavoidable process, that depends upon, and should be driven by, the citizens and the government of that archipelago.

*Interview conducted via email November 10 – December 6, 2017.
Translated from the Spanish by Noel Smith.*

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN ART

University of South Florida
4202 East Fowler Avenue, CAM101
Tampa, FL 33620-7360 USA

Hours: M–F 10am–5pm, Thurs. 10am–8pm, Sat. 1–4pm
Closed Sundays and USF Holidays (Jan. 15)

cam.usf.edu | **f** USFCAMFan | **ig** @irausf | # usfcam
813-974-4133 | info: 813-974-2849 | caminfo@admin.usf.edu



Hillsborough
County Florida



Climate Change: Cuba/USA exhibition and events are supported in part by USF World, USF Institute for the Study of Latin America and the Caribbean (ISLAC), CAM Club, USF Cuban American Student Association (CASA), and in memory of Janet G. Root. The USF Contemporary Art Museum is recognized by the State of Florida as a major cultural institution and receives funding through the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs, the Florida Council on Arts and Culture, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Arts Council of Hillsborough County, Board of County Commissioners. The USF Contemporary Art Museum is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums.



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH FLORIDA
COLLEGE OF THE ARTS