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FLOWERS, LIES AND REVOLUTION: CONTEMPORARY CUBAN ART

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FLOWERS, LIES AND REVOLUTION
CONTEMPORARY CUBAN ART

MAY 21 THROUGH JULY 18, 2010
SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART • UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA–LINCOLN
Kcho, *Sin título*, 2003, oil and charcoal on canvas, 37 x 52 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Cover Julio Larraz, *Study for Venus*, 1994, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan
Flowers, Lies and Revolution surveys some themes that emerge in contemporary Cuban art, as revealed in three private collections in Lincoln, Nebraska. What a landlocked state and a sealocked nation share are the desires, comforts, and complexities of the other. This exhibition celebrates the transnational scope and vision witnessed in the breadth and focus of the three local collections: those of Karen and Robert Duncan, Kathy and Marc LeBaron, and Lisa and Tom Smith.

The collections represent the dominant trends of a new generation of Cuban artists that emerged in the last 30 years. Their work continues a tradition of testing the limits of artistic freedom in Cuban society—a critical practice consistent with the Cuban Revolution in 1959, but which fell under intense state scrutiny in the 1970s.

In recent decades artists have worked with increasing self-reflection in responding to life in Cuba. They have explored new representational strategies with which to frame their aesthetical and conceptual responses. The art they produce is less concerned with the standpoint of the collective—an earlier, revolutionary interest—than with the individual’s response to the collective—a later, laissez faire interest. The island’s contemporary art reveals an increasing sensitivity to individualism in its critical responses to Cuban society.

The words “flowers” and “lies” in the title allude to the duality that many Cubans experience living in post-revolutionary Cuban culture. Flowers may symbolize the idealized beauty and natural splendor of the island—a lure the island still has for many outsiders. Flowers also symbolize hope, as, for example, in the development of a new society or an expectation of growth and health—a blossoming. Political realities, however, tend to mitigate hope and idealism. Reality gives the lie to false or exaggerated expectations, in this case Cuba. The hope for a revolutionary ideal society, an island Utopia, never materialized as such.
“Revolution” refers to the 1959 change in government led by Fidel Castro, but also to the current economic transformation: the ongoing implementation of social and economic reform by the Cuban government. Cubans have a double economy. They purchase goods in government-sanctioned markets, but in order to have a wider selection of products, they resort to black market exchanges. Many Cubans have two jobs: one that pays in pesos and one in dollars. Others receive money from families abroad.

Cuban artists also live this duality, and it surfaces in their work. They have witnessed many changes in Cuba. In the 1960s the social atmosphere was more liberal than in the 1970s when artists began to feel restricted in their pursuits of artistic freedom. This state scrutiny resulted in a silent revolt by artists. In the 1980s Cuban art began to receive positive press internationally, but this attention led to increased government censorship.

Many of the artists included in this exhibition currently live in Cuba, periodically traveling and working in other countries, including the United States. Most live in the capital city of Havana for its available resources and its institutions of formal education. Their mobility in terms of place and influence lends their work a transnational dimension.
Lidzie Alvisa, *Girasoles de Van Gogh (Sunflowers After Van Gogh)*, 2005, digital print, 27 1/2 x 19 1/4 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron
Lidzie Alvisa’s sunflower photographs titled *Girasoles de Van Gogh (Sunflowers after Van Gogh)* capture the transnational influence and play of duality, as symbolized in the living and dying sunflowers. Vincent van Gogh famously mutilated himself to prove his love—a sacrifice for an ideal. The art historical reference has current relevance to Cuban politics. Dying sunflowers, for example, offer a *memento mori* to the life of social ideals, as well as prompting another set of dualities: objects fresh and decaying, soft and hardening, healthy and injured, youthful and declining.

Aimée García also symbolizes the duality of Cuban life in *Promesa (Promise)*, a painting that depicts the artist with an open palm by candle light, but revealing a shadow of the same hand with fingers crossed—a manifest gesture of transparency, hiding a secret desire or hope—two economies of symbolism.

García’s painting titled *Engaño (Deceit)* takes us from the theme of duality to its consequence, duplicity. Many of the works in the exhibition contain the suggestion of a lurking duplicity. Some works express it directly, such as Rocio García’s De la serie: El triller: En el reservado aún (from the series: The thriller: in the booth, even.) In Esterio Segura’s *Pinocho y Napoleón cuentan la historia (Pinocchio and Napoleón*
Aimée García, *Promesa (Promise)*, 2007, oil on canvas, 39 x 47 inches
Collection Lisa and Tom Smith
Douglas Argüelles, *De la serie: Veilo No. 004 (from the series: Veil No. 004)*, 2008, oil on canvas, 76 1/4 x 98 1/4 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron
Tell the story), for instance, Pinocchio stands on a stack of history books, suggesting to us that history is told by figures who perpetuate little white lies by standing on the narratives of political empire. The books we read to build ourselves up, it suggests, make little Pinocchios of us all.

In this vein of admonishing us to become aware of what deceives us, Douglas Argüelles offers a work titled De la serie: Velo No. 004 (From the Series: Veil No. 004). The painting contains a sentence affirming Frederick Nietzsche’s lament that we need “to shatter people’s ears so that they may hear with their eyes” (from Thus Spoke Zarathustra)—a harsh image denouncing complacency of the masses as a form of internalized duplicity.

Exodus and flight continue to weigh heavily on the Cuban imagination. The boat—a smallish vehicle of questionable seaworthiness—has become a classic icon of Cuban frustration. We find it the works of Ernesto Pujol and Kcho. Esterio Segura’s De la serie: Todos quieren volar: Híbrido de Chrysler (from the series: Everyone Wants to Fly: Chrysler Hybrid) and Alain de la Cruz González’s Un tranvía llamada deseo (A Street Car Named Desire) take that desire of exodus and flight to new imaginative and hybridized depictions—composite pictures that are the stuff of dream images.
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron
Also dreamlike are Frank Martinez’s prints combining images of ideal flight-attendant service with overlays of graphics suggesting subjects in servitude. Katiuska Saavedra’s *La muerte del héroe es como una puesta de sol (Death of the hero is like a sunset)* and *Asfalto (Asphalt)* both depict a dead hummingbird—the promise and the impossibility of flight. Alain Pino’s *Escape III*, captures perhaps the ultimate expression of the will to escape. When rafts, boats, and flotillas no longer suffice, the body exercises its will in the water.

The body in contemporary Cuban art has become an important symbol for the individual in solitude and isolation, the locus of desire and frustration, and the site of love and betrayal. The body as locus of desire appears in several artists’ work, including Duvier del Dago’s *De la serie: Iconografia política: MININT (from the series: Political Iconography: MINISTRY OF INTERIOR)* and Yoan Capote’s *Racional (Rational)*. Both are ironic plays on the infiltration of erotic desire in matters state bureaucracy and human reason.

The body as both marker of desire and site of isolation is represented disturbingly in Humberto Diaz’s depiction of nude figures bound and trapped by sheets of saran wrap—one pointed titled *De la serie: Objeto del*
Sandra Ramos’s *Ser cultos para ser libres (Be Educated to be Free)* depicts a young woman in the shape of the island of Cuba, here, too, in a black sea, but with a row of pencils like prison bars to underscore the sense of isolation. We get a sense of the burden of Cuba’s isolation from the sheer solitariness of figures depicted in contemporary Cuban art. We find it in Sandra Ramos’ island-shaped young woman, who reappears in another work, titled *De la serie: Mar de lágrimas: Cristo en la escalera (from the series: Sea of Tears: Christ on Staircase)*; in Rodolfo Peraza’s *Estadios (Stadium)* series, Teresa Ayuso / Juan Luis Morales’ *Segundo sexo (Second Sex)* series; Agustin Bejarano’s lonely traveler in *De regreso (Toward Home)*; and in Aimée Garcia’s dark self-portraits, among many other works in the exhibition.

We see in the exhibition evidence of an increasing self-reflection and self-irony among...
Cuban artists in responding to life in Cuba. One senses from these works the feelings of solitude and isolation, the struggle with duality and duplicity, and the competing forces of desire and exodus.

A work that perhaps captures best the Cuban ambivalence about fidelity to nation and people is René Francisco's *Filigrana (Filigree)*—suggesting a delicate line or entanglement. It conveys the story of the artist's dual affairs, where love of one is betrayal of another, and fidelity falls to compromise and question. It is as well the story of internal struggle for Cuban artists with their complex love and betrayal of nation and ideals.

Jorge Daniel Veneciano, Director
Sharon L. Kennedy, Curator of Cultural & Civic Engagement
Britt-Marie Varisco, Curatorial Intern

René Francisco, *Filigrana (Filigree)*, 2004, oil on canvas, projector, slides, 83 x 59 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Lidzie Alvisa
Girasoles de Van Gogh (Sunflowers After Van Gogh), 2005
digital print
27'/ x 19'/ inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Lidzie Alvisa
Las Trampas (The Traps), 2008
paper, pins
28'/ x 18'/ inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Lidzie Alvisa
Las Trampas del Interior (Traps Inside), 2008
photography, pins, acrylic
19'/ x 10' x 1'/ inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Lidzie Alvisa
Sinfonia (Symphony), 2001
paper, pins, 22 x 28 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Abel Barreto
Implosión (Implosion), 2007
charcoal and pastel on cardboard
27'/ x 27'/ inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

José Bedia
Kindembo Arriero, 2000
acrylic on canvas
94 x 116 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Agustín Bejarano
De la serie: Las coquetas I (From the series The Coquettes II), 1998
engraving, 29 x 44 inches
Courtesy of Galería Nina Menocal,
Mexico City, Mexico

Agustín Bejarano
De regreso (Toward Home), 2006
dry point on cardboard
28'/ x 35'/ inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Agustín Bejarano
El muro de las contemplaciones (The Wall of Contemplations), 2008
mixed media resins, 11 inches (diameter)
Collection Lisa and Tom Smith

Douglas Argüelles
De la serie: Velo No. 004 (From the Series: Veil No. 004), 2008
oil on canvas, 78'/ x 98'/ inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron
Agustín Bejarano
*Tejedora de mano III (Handloom III),* 2003
etching on paper, 30'/3 x 23 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Ivan Capote
*Relax,* 2003
metal, leather, shells
8.26 x 7.87 x 3.34 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Yoan Capote
*Madness,* 2004
patina on wood
16.53 x 10. 23 x 3.93 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Yoan Capote
*Racional (Rational),* 2005
metal engraving, 27.6 x 19.7 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Yoan Capote
*Summertime,* 2005
metal engraving, 15.7 x 19.7 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Yoan Capote
*The Kiss,* 1999
bronze, cotton, perfume
3'/2 x 2 x 2 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Enrique Martínez Celaya
*Winter and Silk Flowers,* 1998
gelatin silver print, 15'/3 x 15'/3 inches
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust

Alain de la Cruz González
*Un tranvía llamada deseo (A Street Car Named Desire),* 2008
oil on canvas, 78'/3 x 50'/3 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Duvier del Dago
*De la serie: Iconografía política: MINISTRY OF INTERIOR,* 2008
oil on canvas, 57'/3 x 32'/3 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Duvier del Dago
*De la serie: Teoría y práctica (from the series: Theory and Practice),* 2008
ink on cardboard, 27'/3 x 39'/3 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Duvier del Dago
oil on canvas, 41 x 73 inches
Collection Lisa and Tom Smith
Angel Delgado
_Serie pespunte gris oscuro (Dark Gray Stitching Series), 2000_
pen, color pencil, cold cream on handkerchief, 14.96 x 14.96 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Humberto Diaz
_De la serie: Objeto del deseo (from the series: Object of Desire), 2001_
color print, 47 x 31 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Humberto Diaz
_Infeto (Graft), 2003_
lambda print, 39.4 x 24 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Roberto Fabela
_Sirena pájaro (Bird Siren), 2004_
oil on canvas, 62 x 46 1/4 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Diana Fonseca
_De la serie: Los amantes (from the series: The Lovers), 2008_
lambda print, 23 1/4 x 31 1/4 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Diana Fonseca
_De la serie: Los amantes (from the series: The Lovers), 2008_
lambda print, 23 1/4 x 31 1/4 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Diana Fonseca
_Pasatiempo (Pastime), 2008_
lambda print, 11 3/4 x 15 1/2 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

René Francisco
_Filigra (Filigree), 2004_
oil on canvas, projector, slides
83 x 59 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

René Francisco
_Reproducción (Reproduction), 2001_
dental cream tubes, linen, Scloss Moyland Museum Bag, 27 x 14 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Aimée García
_Engaro (Deceit), 2007_
digital print on PVC, 27 x 20 inches
Collection Lisa and Tom Smith

Aimée García
_Promesa (Promise), 2007_
oil on canvas, 39 x 47 inches
Collection Lisa and Tom Smith

Aimée García
_Sin título (Untitled), 2003_
lead, wood, headphones
83 x 59 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan
Rocio Garcia
De la serie: El triller: En el reservado aun (from the series: The Thriller: In the booth, even), 2006
oil on canvas, 55 x 47 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Teresa Ayuso / Juan Luis Morales
De la serie: Segundo sexo: Yezabel (from the series: Second Sex: Yezabel), 2008
digital print, 23 x 59 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Kcho
Sin título (Untitled), 2003
oil and charcoal on canvas
37 x 52 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Julio Larraz
Study for Venus, 1994
oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Frank Martínez
Blanco y negro (Black and White), 2008
mixed media on canvas, 56 x 72 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Frank Martínez
Sin título (Untitled), 2006
mixed media, charcoal and serigraph
43 x 31 inches
Collection Lisa and Tom Smith

Ana Mendieta
Silueta Series: Tumba #2, 1977
color print, 13 1/4 x 20 inches
UNL-Robert E. Schweser and Fern Beardsley Schweser Acquisition Fund, through the University of Nebraska Foundation

Ana Mendieta
Untitled (Mendieta draped in fabric, Cuilapan Church, Oaxaca, Mexico) about 1973, black and white print 9 1/4 x 6 1/4 inches
UNL-Robert E. Schweser and Fern Beardsley Schweser Acquisition Fund, through the University of Nebraska Foundation

Fichú Menocal
Gallo fino (Rooster), 2007
colored pencil on paper
25 1/4 x 19 1/4 inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron

Narciso Montero
La silla de Lam (Lam’s Chair), 2004
watercolor on paper, wood chair
41 x 32 inches
Collection Karen and Robert Duncan

Fichú Menocal
Black Rain, 2007
recycled upholstery materials
Courtesy of the Artist
Duvier del Dago, De la serie: Teoría y práctica (from the series Theory and Practice), 2008, ink on cardboard, 27⅞ × 39⅞ inches
Collection Kathy and Marc LeBaron