

ART

Uncuba



In recent years, an interest in Cuban abstract art has reemerged, especially in the work of artists from the fifties. This phenomenon has resulted in the appreciation of a group of them, forgotten by art critics and the market until recent dates, but it has also had an impact on the appraisal of some who are younger and whose work is circumscribed in the same tendency. The process has extended not only to the market, but also to the artists and some have decided to tackle into abstractionism.

Roberto Diago (born in 1971) is one of the Cuban contemporary artists who have decided to retake the trend after several years of doing figurative art and being acknowledged for it. He studied at the San Alejandro Academy in Havana and began to exhibit in the nineties. He made a name for himself with his direct criticism of racism in Cuba, which had supposedly been eradicated in the country, but still persists, especially on the social level. The topic of racial identity became a conductor and connecting theme with several stages of his work. While other artists focused in identity from a nationalist or religious point of view, Diago chose to do it from a racial perspective, based on his individual experiences. He was born in Havana, in Pogolotti, one of the marginal neighborhoods in the capital. His life there contributed vital experiences which later served him as inspiration.

His first works on the topic were made on jute fabric, which he obtained from coffee bags coming from Ghana. Jute is a material that, since colonial times, has been associated with Afro-Cuban tradition. Its use has survived until our days in Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies and is also associated to poverty and shortage. All these elements were taken into consideration by Diago when choosing the support. This stage in his work is predominantly representational and we see in it evident elements of the urban graffiti, denoting the undeniable influence of Jean Michel Basquiat (1961-1988). At the time, the texts included in his pieces were mostly proverbs of Cuban popular culture alluding to racist aspects. The visual language of this period is direct, frequently verging on the grotesque, especially when representing faces. It is provoking and daring; in short, polemic. Visually, he also takes from other artists as Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), especially in the organization of space and the compositions.

In 1997 Diago took part in *Queloides* (Keloids), an exhibition curated by Omar Pascual Castillo and Alexis Esquivel Bermúdez which set a precedent in Cuba. The exhibition's thesis precisely explored the presence of racism in the country through the work of several contemporary artists. Keloids are the scars emerging on the skin when wounds heal. They might be in persons of any ethnic composition, but in Cuba it was socially established that it was mostly on people of African ancestry. The idea behind the exhibition was to talk about racism, which is rather like keloids themselves: it is very visible, but everybody pretends not to see it or that it doesn't exist. The topic of black race in visual arts has been reflected from colonial times, beginning with the representation of local customs and manners of the "lascivious mulatto girl" and the slave. *Queloides* went further from these perceptions of local customs and exhibited something more serious and disturbing: the palpable existence of racism in a society proclaiming it had been eradicated. This show was followed by *Queloides II* (Keloids II) in 1999 and *Queloides III* (Keloids III) in 2010, in which Diago also took part.

Diago mainly questions the present reality of Afro-Cuban men from a self-biographical point of view. At times, however, he goes beyond the present, questioning the root of the social situation of blacks in Cuba, bringing the role of slavery to pieces like *España devuélveme a mis dioses* (Spain, Give Me My Gods Back), a work from 2002. He tries to illustrate a situation that has been developing for centuries and the way that, since then, an indoctrination process had been brewing which, as a consequence, brought about the religious syncretism of the Afro-Cuban religions today. Part of the Cuban identity is the result of this cultural merger.

Racial stereotypes are another topic he approaches in his work. In a 2002 piece entitled *Todos los negros no tomamos café* (Not All of Us Blacks Drink Coffee) he refers to the precepts with a negative connotation that have been perpetuated throughout the years. To that end, he uses as a reference the refrain of a very popular Cuban song, which goes: "Ay Mama Inés, ay Mama Inés, todos los negros tomamos café" (Oh, Mommy Ines, oh, Mommy Ines, all blacks drink coffee"), immortalized by performers like Bola de Nieve and Rita Montaner. Diago is referring to vignettes that were made in colonial times, the stereotyped representations by Victor Patricio Landaluze (1830-1889), which the 19th century Cuban comic theater had later retaken as part of local customs tradition, in which blacks were characterized as lazy, thieves and quarrelsome. Unfortunately, this criterion was accepted as a truth which, up to our days, persisted on the social level, when it was replaced by the popular saying "they are only good as musicians and athletes." In that same year of 1997, after *Queloides*, the evident racist connotation of this expression prompted Ariel Ribeaux to act as the curator of another exhibition entitled *Ni músicos ni deportistas* (Neither Musicians nor Athletes), an exhibition exploring a subject matter similar to the one presented in *Queloides*. Although Diago did not take part in it, his name is mentioned as that of another of the artists dealing with this topic in his work in the text the curator wrote somewhat later as a theoretical support for the exhibition.

La herida, 2015

Mixed media on canvas / 118 x 78 ¾ inches

Courtesy the artist

Photo: Rodolfo Martínez

Roberto Diago

Irina Leyva-Pérez

Many of the pieces Diago made in this period included the use of masks as a form of representing faces in a generic form, while in a certain way they served as reference and tribute to African art. With a stroke of an expressionist nature, he created his compositions in which chaos, at times violent, seemed to reign. Many of them are of a visceral quality, as *Cuba Sí* (Cuba Yes), from 2002, in which he included a text: “Cuba Sí. Jodido Negro 100% Mi Historia” (Cuba Yes. Fucking Black 100% My History). Another piece from that year, exhibited together with the former one in his individual exhibition *Comiendo Cuchillo* (Eating Knife) in the National Museum of Fine Arts, was *Autorretrato* (Self-portrait). It was a collage in which he used human hair, with the text: “My hair is good too.” Hair is another indicator observed as defining race and the concept of “good hair”—or what is known as straight hair—is the point of comparison in this racial disquisition.

A constant in Diago’s work is his thirst for experimentation, especially with the materials he uses, among which he frequently includes recycled elements. That is how we see pieces of rusty metals, which at a given moment had a different use, come to a new life. Many were previously recycled and went from being containers of food or industrial products, to parts of houses or fences in marginal areas. Going by certain places and still finding metals with the Coca-Cola insignia, surviving since before 1959, is not strange at all. In these areas, houses are made with whatever turns up, adaptation being one of the most evident indicators of marginality and poverty. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Diago uses them as an infallible symbol of social condition. To that end, he created impressive installations in which he reproduced in scale houses very similar to real ones, made with the same recycled materials. At times he placed videos inside, documenting the daily life of the persons living in them.

Taking into account the subject matter of his work, it is not strange that Diago organized initiatives of a social nature in which he involved people from marginal neighborhoods, especially children. One of them was the *Proyecto California* (California Project), in 2005, which consisted of the restoration of the Solar de la California (California Tenement Building), using private funds and involving all the residents. The final result was an improvement of the living conditions of this community and an increase in the feeling of belonging of its inhabitants. By way of documentation, the artist organized an exhibition in which he included installations, video and photography.

His series *Cajas de Luz* (Light Boxes) is also from 2005. The boxes were made from recycled wood, which became a sort of rustic frame containing pictures in white and black of anonymous people in daily activities. Diago was interested in giving specific faces to his criticism and demonstrate that this is the reality of many people.

From figurative art to abstract art

Although many see abstraction as a new trend in his work, the truth is that Diago has been working on it for years. The first “evidence” dates from 1995, a couple of pieces with which he took part in the Juan Francisco Elso National Annual Contest of Contemporary Painting, exhibited in the Havana National Museum of Fine Arts. *Paisaje 1* and *Paisaje 2* (Landscape 1 and 2), both from the same year, were solved in a similar way as to composition: horizontal format, structure in bands, and a palette tending to other colors. *Landscape 2* won the Third Prize.

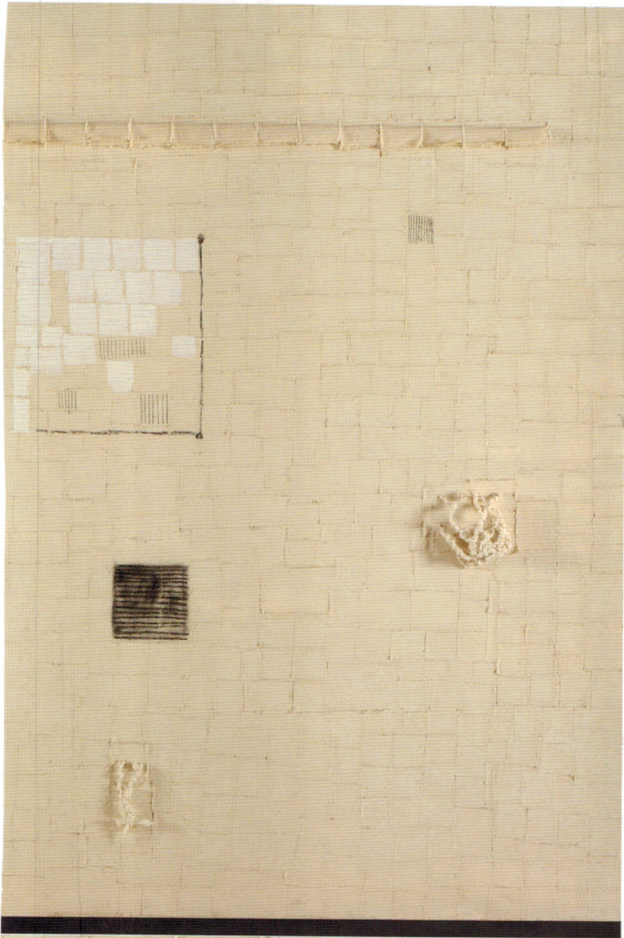
In spite of being fundamentally known as a figurative painter, if we analyze his work in detail we find that, although there always was a narrative intention, very frequently reinforced with the inclusion of texts, there also was an abstract quality that was above all detected in the compositions and the treatment of the surfaces. Diago avoided hyperrealist representation, tending towards a minimalism which frequently verged on abstraction.

This assertion becomes evident in his solo exhibition *Comiendo Cuchillo*, in the National Museum of Fine Arts in 2002, in which many works pointed towards a total abstraction. In some of the pieces, an experimental intention based on the treatment of textures could be seen. The use of surfaces is particularly relevant in the series *Oggún Arere*. The works were made on metal, with small jute curtains covering a text, different in every case. The texts were names of several personalities in Cuban culture, plus one which simply said “you and I.” After these pieces, large scale metal assemblage came, in which he combined these recycled surfaces with found objects.

In recent years, Diago has concentrated on the production of abstract work. His most recent pieces feature formal elements of works he had made in the nineties, and he focuses on what he used to compose on the back of the images. The resource of fragmented, cut and stuck fabrics that he used as a base now reappears again as the main character in the composition. This physical process of tangible transformation could be recently appreciated in his last exhibition in Miami, Florida, in the Pan American Art Projects gallery, located in Wynwood Art District. Here, the works were monochromatic, in white and black spectrums. A couple of them explored the keloids, as an allusion to his participation in these exhibitions and as a reminder that the racism motivating them still exists in Cuban society. The composition of these pieces is almost uniform, except for a “relief” on one side made with a contrasting fabric, exhibiting a thick, coarse seam, with jute thread. Diago’s formal solution for these pieces is visually simple, many times elegant and sober; but connotations are deep and their message is acute.

As in the beginning, Diago continues working with elements of his identity from a racial point of view. His criticism of racism has now a more subtle and refined form. It leaves behind the evident graph to concentrate in textures. The results are these pieces, aesthetically very attractive, almost tactile, which visually trap while, at the same time, conveying a message of social criticism similar to that of his most visceral pieces. ◀





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· Facing page
From **Visiones** series, 2004 (Detail)
Mixed media on metal and wood / 39 ½ x 39 ½ inches

La ilusión que me mantiene vivo, 2012
Mixed media on canvas
67 x 59 inches

From **Huellas** series, 2013
Mixed media on canvas
35 ½ x 49 inches

Courtesy the artist
Photos: Rodolfo Martínez

