

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

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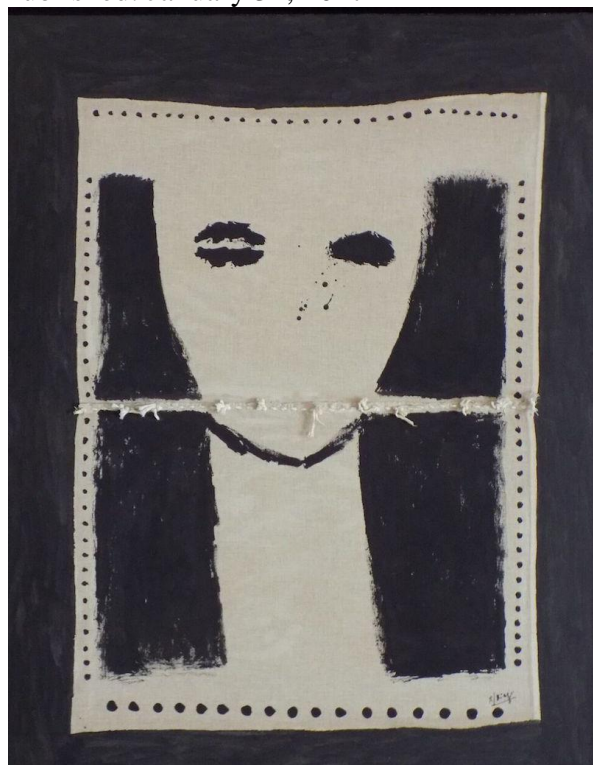


Cuban art and culture worldwide

Preview: Juan Roberto Diago at Harvard

In a double interview, artist and curator discuss the show opening tomorrow evening

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Juan Roberto Diago, *Sin título* (Untitled), 2011
Courtesy Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, Harvard University

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

Tomorrow evening, the [Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art](#) at Harvard University welcomes [Diago: The Pasts of This Afro-Cuban Present](#). Juan Roberto Diago and the show's curator, Alejandro de la Fuente, spoke about the exhibition with *Cuban Art News*.

How would you describe the exhibition?

Juan Roberto Diago: I would define it as an encounter with everything I've done up to this moment.

Alejandro de la Fuente: This is Diago's first retrospective exhibition, a look at his first two decades of creative work. Even though his career is still young, he has gone through several different periods, in which his artistic language and the materials he used have changed.



Juan Roberto Diago during the installation of "Diago: The Pasts of This Afro-Cuban Present" at the Cooper Gallery of Harvard University
Courtesy Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, Harvard University

How were the works chosen for the exhibition?

JRD: We tried to search out a logic that carried forward from the beginning--a group of works that articulated my creative development from the start.

AF: Selection was based on two main criteria. First, that visitors could see how Diago's work has evolved since the mid-1990s, and the variety of formats and materials that he's used. Second, I selected pieces that, despite their diversity, highlighted the central themes of his work—especially his interest in writing a history based on the experiences of Afrodescendants, in Cuba and the world.

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY



Juan Roberto Diago, *Paisaje I*, 1995
Courtesy Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, Harvard University

Are there some works that were essential to include? Why?

JRD: Some works were marked for inclusion from the start, to demonstrate the use of certain materials that have been part of my output up to the present.



Juan Roberto Diago, *Aché pa' los míos* (Blessings for my friends), 1999
Courtesy Cernuda Arte

AF: Yes, definitely. Some key works, from key periods, had to be in the exhibition. For instance, I thought it was important to include *Paisaje I* (1995), to provide a sort of chronological and formal baseline to the whole exhibition. I wanted to illustrate his early debt to Basquiat, and *Grito* (1997) was a superb example of this influence and of his raw anger. I knew also that we had to showcase some of the important works that he produced at the turn of the century, when his creativity coalesced into a body of work of unparalleled strength and excellence.

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY



Juan Roberto Diago, *Grito*, 1997
Courtesy Cernuda Arte

Here the problem was one of abundance: there was much to choose from. I wanted to include *Mi Historia es tu Historia* (2000), because it encapsulates Diago's history-rewriting efforts. But I also wanted to include pieces where Africa is deployed as a reservoir of cultural sustenance, community and resistance, as in *Aché pa' los míos* (1999).

It was important to include some of his polemic light boxes, which some critics have understood as a turn away from the belligerence of previous works. The installation *Ciudad en Ascenso* (2010), originally produced at the Mattress Factory museum in Pittsburgh for *Queloides*, allows me to explore another genre, as well as Diago's growing attention to issues of urban poverty and marginality.



Juan Roberto Diago, *Ciudad en ascenso*, 2009
Courtesy The Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

The exhibition is appearing in a gallery of African and African American art. What is it like to present the work in this context?

JRD: It's very important to show, to as broad a public as possible, that artistic creativity is plural. In the world today, the West is presented as a singular paradigm. That vision of a "unique world" is not true. There are other visions, other knowledge. The vision of the Afro-diasporic culture is more than masks, more than drums, more than big breasts or buttocks. It's more than a skin color. A space like this allows the possibility of expressing ourselves, in our own voice.



Juan Roberto Diago, *Mi historia es tu historia*
Courtesy Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, Harvard University

AF: Diago's work is anything but insular. The central preoccupations of his career—racism, the need to write new histories centered on the experiences of Africans and Afrodescendants, the richness and continuing vitality of African cultures, marginality and urban poverty—are issues that affect not just Afro-Cubans, but people of African descent the world over.

His art may be anchored in the specificities of this Afro-Cuban present, as the title of the exhibit suggests, but it is incomprehensible outside wider frames of reference concerning Africa and the Diaspora. What I am saying is that a space like Cooper Gallery does not provide an external or

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

different context for looking at Diago. His work *is* what Cooper Gallery was designed to promote and study. African American art does not equal United States art.



Juan Roberto Diago, *Autorretrato* (Self-Portrait), 2000
Courtesy Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, Harvard University

That gallery happens to be at Harvard University. What is it like to present the work in that context?

JRD: I think that this prestigious institution has been very brave to open a new door to other creative experiences, other visions.

AF: The way I see it, Harvard University has much to gain by hosting exhibitions like these. We are a world class institution of higher learning and we are interested in studying contributions, approaches, ideas, and subjects that challenge established narratives, epistemologies, and disciplines. What happens when, as a historian, you dialogue with a visual artist who is invested in the parallel project of reconstructing his own pasts? What are the history lessons that we can learn from someone like Diago? Exhibiting at Harvard means that we take those lessons very seriously and that we approach these artists as knowledge producers of the highest caliber.

Juan Roberto, could you speak briefly about artists who have influenced you, or that you feel a connection to—both Cuban and international?

JRD: Artists like Wilfredo Lam, my grandfather Diago, [Manuel] Mendive, and [Anselm] Kiefer, and writers like [Alejo] Carpentier and Samuel Feijoo have helped shape me as an artist, to this day.

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY



Juan Roberto Diago, *No puedo hablar* (I can't speak)
Courtesy Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, Harvard University

What would you like visitors to take away from their experience of the exhibition?

JRD: I'd like them to share my concerns, and take a moment to enjoy the work I've created so far.

Other thoughts?

JRD: To continue fostering meetings, building bridges between people today, for a more prosperous tomorrow shared by all.

Diago: The Pasts of This Afro-Cuban Present opens with a 6 p.m. reception tomorrow evening, February 1, at the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. A conversation between Diago and de la Fuente will take place at noon this Friday, February 3, at the gallery. The [catalogue of the exhibition](#) is available through Harvard University Press.

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY



Juan Roberto Diago, Sin título (Untitled), 2015
Courtesy Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, Harvard University

— Susan Delson

Susan Delson has been the New York editor of *Cuban Art News* since 2009. A former member of the Metropolitan Museum of Art education department, as editor she has worked with the Museum of Modern Art, Asia Society, El Museo del Barrio, and other institutions. Her books include the film study/biography *Dudley Murphy, Hollywood Wild Card* and (as editor) *Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals*. As a magazine editor, she has worked at Forbes, Louise Blouin Media, and other companies.