

INTERNATIONAL POLICY DIGEST

ART BEAT

Artistic Advances in Key West Between the United States and Cuba

By Sarah L. Taylor | March 6, 2014

The recent art exchange program in Key West between the United States and Cuba is underscoring the important role that art plays in the human experience.



'Caracol' by The Merger. Source: The Art World Online

In January, the first exhibition in 50 years of an American artist opened at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana. The exhibit, entitled “Una Raza La Raza Humana” or “One Race The Human Race,” showcases work by the Cuban-American artist and Key West native Mario Sanchez (1908-2005). The exhibit –

open through April 17, 2014 – forms part of the museum's Cuban Art collection and is considered a monumental step in improving artistic relations between Cuba and the United States.

Born October 7th 1908 in the Key West neighborhood of Gato's Village, Mario Sanchez is known for his colorful bas-reliefs depicting life in early 20th century Key West. Self-taught, his work captures the verve of everyday men and women by drawing on personal experience, Key West culture and the artist's Cuban-American heritage. Today, Sanchez's reliefs are valued at upwards of \$50,000, however the social and cultural history chronicled therein is invaluable.

As a part of the exchange, some of Cuba's leading artists were invited to exhibit their works amid receptions, performances and the festival feeling trademark to the Keys February 20-22nd. Nance Frank – Mario Sanchez expert and curator of the Gallery on Greene in Key West – is credited with presenting the idea to show Sanchez's work in Havana and spearheading the exhibitions in Key West. Alain Pino, Mario Miguel González and Niels Moleiro – collectively known as The Merger – are some of the artists participating in the exchange.

The opportunity for Cuban artists to show their work in the United States represents a definitive advance in artistic relations between the two countries. Before 1959, travel between the United States and Cuba was simple, permitting a constant flow of cultural exchanges – the hallmarks of which are still visible today in Key West culture, architecture and cuisine. Many Key Westerners – including writer Ernest Hemingway – shared a particularly unique relationship with Cuba considering it a source of inspiration and a second home.

However, the fall of the Batista regime marked the beginning of an increasingly difficult relationship between Cuba and the United States. The US embargo against Cuba went into effect October 19, 1960 and was followed shortly thereafter by the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and increased travel restrictions under President Kennedy in 1963. More recently, the Obama administration has allowed students and religious figures to travel to Cuba if approved by the Office of Foreign Assets Control and even more recently in 2011, Key West authorities received the go-ahead to charter flights to Havana albeit with passenger restrictions and ample paperwork on both side of the Florida Straits. Nevertheless, many obstacles remain.

Considering Hemingway's relationship with Cuba, it is appropriate that his home be selected to host one of the visiting artists. In the breezy Hemingway House gardens, a handful of The Merger's sculptures glitter in the Florida sun. The oversized Pop Art inspired figures magnify cultural icons to illustrate controversial social themes. Whereas Sanchez labored to preserve the scenes represented in his

artwork with almost photographic precision, The Merger aims to re-work popular icons and bestow them with new significance through stainless steel, Plexiglas and neon. The backgrounds of the artists themselves are as varied as the materials and objects they employ in their works. Their sculptures, highly visible in International art circles, aim to capture the current social, political and economic atmospheres of modern day Cuba.

At the Hemingway House exhibit, the sculpture “American Dream” (2011) depicts a cartoonish cutout of a young girl blowing bubbles that form the silhouette of the United States. Sculpted from stainless steel, the sober red quartz base grounds the otherwise capricious piece and underscores the sobriety of the inherent social themes: identity; social mobility; the modern day American Dream; naivety; transparency and immigration. Nearby, “Caracol” (2011), also stainless steel, portrays a large hand flexed in the act of measurement as it reaches out from an over-sized measuring tape.

The sculpture has an exceptional sense of movement that, simultaneously, feels painstakingly restricted, emphasizing the geographic proximity of Havana to Key West – a mere 90 miles – while contrasting it with the political distance that exists between the two countries. The Merger’s choice of stainless steel as a medium is, in itself, significant since the polished steel is as reflective as it is impervious to time and decay. In the precise craftsmanship of each sculpture the observer looks into The Merger’s world while simultaneously seeing a reflection of their own.

Although major policy reforms between Cuba and the United States are still a long way off, the efforts of curators and artists in both nations are raising awareness about American-Cuban relations and providing a record of current social, political and economic conditions. Art is, by its very nature, the product of human activity.

Often, it doubles as a record of that activity and the policies and ideas that influence it. For Cubans visiting the Una Raza exhibit in Havana, it will be the first time many of them experience the Key West of Sanchez’s youth. Likewise, The

Merger’s sculptures bring the complexities of modern day Cuba to the artistic doorsteps of Key West residents and tourists. What this art exchange reminds observers is that art is a reflection of the people and society that create it as much as it is an entertaining diversion. In considering works like “American Dream” and “Caracol” viewers are asked to look back while continuing to look forward to the future with mindfulness, respect and, most importantly, a sense of irony.

Although the exchange between Cuban and American artists may appear a modest advance, and is in no way a surefire indicator of the future of American-Cuban relations, it is a testament to the place that art – in all its forms – holds in the human existence. Where social and political barriers have been constructed, the human appreciation of art prevails, surmounting all obstacles and cataloging the experience of one race: the human race.

The Green side of red.... About The – Merger in Factoría Habana art gallery

A functional structure is one whose vertebrae are perfectly balanced and keeps harmonic rotation. In a competitive world like the present to create a team is one of the biggest challenges, however, The - Merger has not only achieved that strange fusion but has also built a successful art business.

Neatness, polychrome, perfection of finish, which is scary spot with the single reflection, the beauty of Narcissus, the magnitude of the known big and beautiful... that is the result of work by Mario Miguel González (Holguín, 1969), Niels Moleiro Luis (La Habana, 1970) and Alain Pino (Camagüey, 1974), artists from such different worlds. This symbiosis has produced worldly objects as fruits reminiscent of Claes Oldenburg to Pop, which however in light of postmodernism, go beyond a banal search of superfluous concepts. The beauty per se, or industrial and artistic live on in the works designed to make humans feel threatened, diminished, in sight of a hand, a knife or a heel.

Artworks that could be the dream of Tarantino: unbridled fantasy in a lipstick that is a deadly weapon or Monarch butterflies that de-construct a speech of migration. The attraction is inevitable, the seduction of the viewer ... immediate. The-Merger rather than trying to conquer a different universe in contemporary Cuban art, is establishing a space "another one" where you do not need to say anything, where it is not required to go any further, because the piece mutes any possible doubt.

Factory exhibits The – Merger's first sample in Cuba: where aesthetics basks itself to forge contemporary it into a symphony with six-handed, and stop at traffic lights red confused between Teal.

María Lucía Bernal.

The-Merger: Negotiating potential space. Creative process, transition structures, and production of values.

... a field can be defined as a network or configuration of objective relations between positions.. These positions are objectively defined in its existence and in the determinations they impose on their occupants, whether agents or institutions, by their current and potential situation in the structure of the distribution of different sorts of power (or capital) (...) – whose possession implies the access to the specific profits at stake in the field - and, also, by their objective relations to other positions (domination, subordination, etc.).

Pierre Bourdieu & Loic JD Wacquant, *An invitation to reflexive sociology.*

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Fusion is defined, in economic terms, as the union of the patrimonies of two or more legally separate people for the sake of forming a new society. While in physics, this term refers to a process by which solid matter changes to a liquid status due to the action of heat. Or in nuclear physics, it is known as the process by which several atomic nucleuses of similar charge join up to form a heavier nucleus; this phenomenon entails the release or absorption of a great amount of energy.

Any of the previous situations could be applied to metaphorically described the pristine condition by which arises The-Merger, a sort of artistic enterprise – probably the usual classifications of group or collective, that have prevailed in the Cuban art field during the last decades, limit the understanding of the functional structure of this tactical union between three creators – formed in the year 2009 by