

Alejandro Aguilera and Radcliffe Bailey: Pitching

Ana Fernández
Art Historian



Alejandro Aguilera and Radcliffe Bailey at Bailey's studio, 2007

Photo: Karen Tauches

Radcliffe, Alejandro and I met at the Hammonds House Galleries in 1998. That first encounter took place during the opening of a small exhibit by Alejandro titled *Black Drawings*. Since then, a relationship began, which developed into a friendship that went beyond the professional and entered

into the world of family. In 2004 I had an unfortunate accident. I fractured my ankle in a fall, and during my six months of recovery Radcliffe visited Alejandro and me regularly. At some moment that I can't remember now (of the many we shared dining, drinking and conversing about art and its intricate turns) the

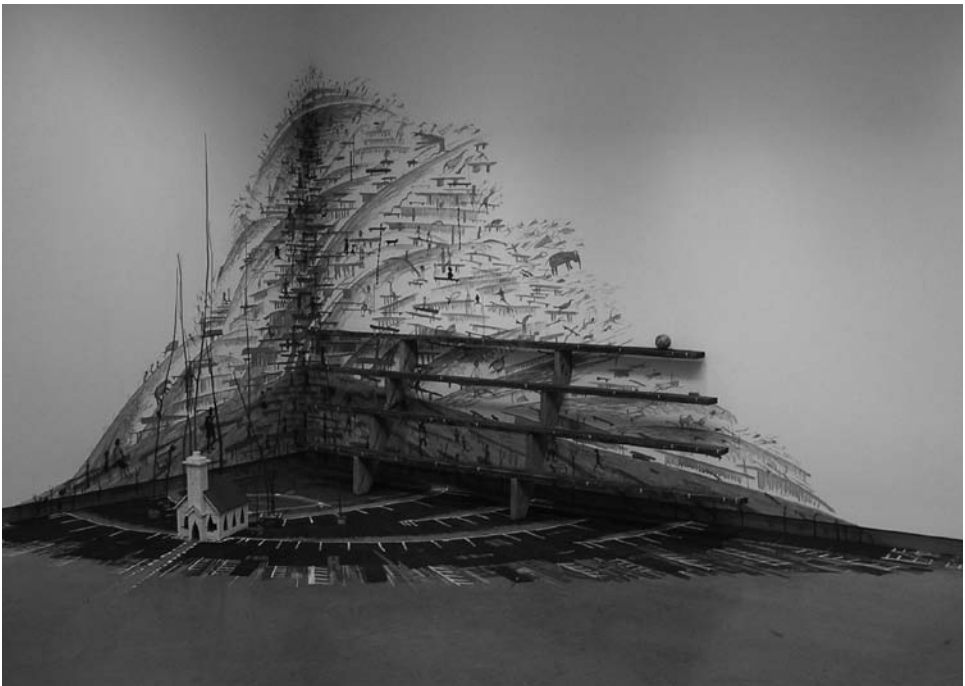
idea arose of doing a project together. The motivations that encouraged that possibility (today finally materialized) were very simple: professionally, Radcliffe and Alejandro share an interest and mutual respect for the artistic work that each of them makes, personally, they share aesthetic preferences and agree on ethical positions.

Ana Fernández: How did the idea of doing an exhibition about baseball arise? What ideas do you have of the game and how are they expressed in this project?

Alejandro Aguilera: The idea of Baseball as the subject for the exhibition was Radcliffe's and the idea of collaborating was a result of our friendship. Radcliffe and I share a mutual recognition of history and culture. This recognition goes beyond the work that is presented. It is an attitude that is central to a worldview that recognizes that culture is sharpened by contact with the 'other.' The work that I have made for this exhibition presents

sport as an activity that is done simply for the love of the game as well as an attitude that encompasses personal liberation. When I was a teenager, playing baseball meant traveling an hour and half to my cousins' house and training all the day in order to be able to play with teams coming from other districts (barrios). The competition was a popular version of the Professional National Series that we watched on television. When our team won, the prize was to climb a hillside, mount cardboard boxes or palms leaves and slide all the way down to the river. When we lost, the prize was the same—but the result was that it gave us consolation.

My work for this exhibition is a tribute to Bill Traylor, the self-taught black artist of Alabama; enslaved and later liberated by the same men in power. He began to draw at the age of eighty-five after being homeless. He left a symbolic inheritance—a definition of art that neither Leonardo da Vinci nor Pablo



Alejandro Aguilera, *Bill and the Baseball Game*, 2007. Installation at Emory University Art Gallery
Photo: Paul Franco

Picasso knew in life. He saw art as a means of liberation, not institutional, but truly within the personal. In my installation Traylor's characters are returning from a game of the National Black Baseball League and carry with them such euphoria, that they begin to fly with their dogs, cats, elephants, and fish. My work is a metaphor of the idea of freedom without adjectives.

Radcliffe Bailey: The idea for this exhibit came about because I noticed that there was a baseball field across the street from the gallery. In addition baseball played a meaningful role in our growing up, me in Atlanta and Alejandro in Cuba. As mentioned earlier the two of us have a lot in common as artists and as guys who love the sport. We both come out of cultures that transformed the game to suit our cultural needs. Baseball, then, is an interesting thread connecting our personal lives and our cultures. When I think of baseball I see that people play it for love of the game, for their family, their communities, to transform their world. So baseball for me is a metaphor that stands for all of these things.

For my part of the project I have created an imaginary team called the "Liberators." The Liberators are composed of people who have influenced my life—be it musicians, writers, artists, athletes—all working together toward the common goal of liberation. We both use earth or clay as the connector between our work. The use of clay or earth relates to our respective sandlot baseball experiences.

A.F.- Radcliffe, some ideological fluctuations have historically marked the work of black artists in the United States. For example, in the 90's, the post-black ideas born in New York's art world placed critical scrutiny on the Afro centric vision that saw race as a defining condition of identity. You have ignored those ideological swings. Your attention has always been centered in a universe which I would

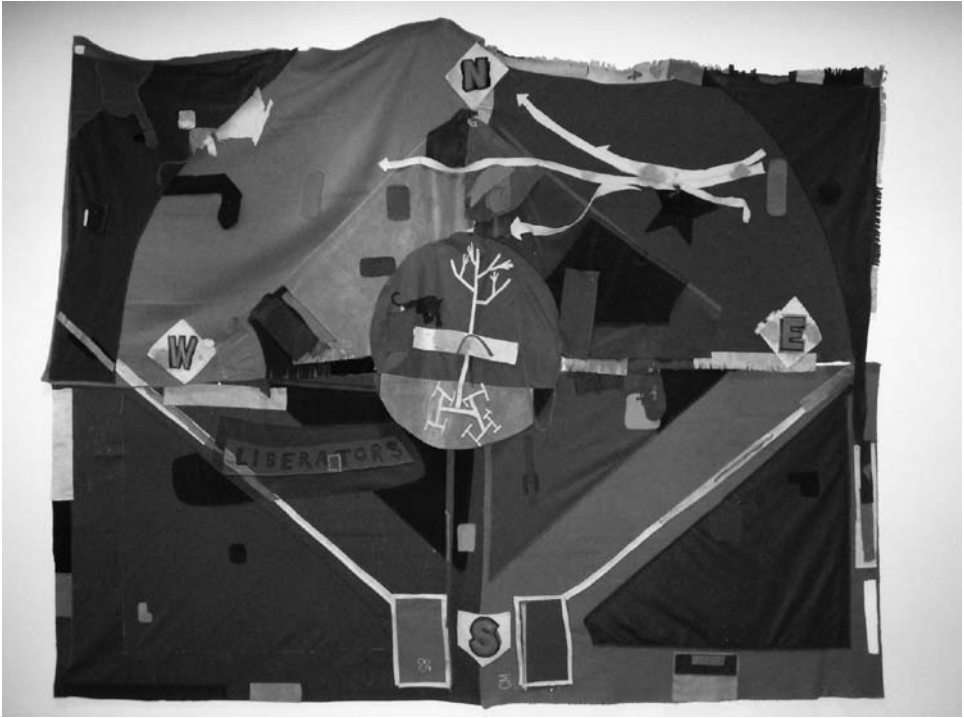
describe as eminently Afro-American—exploring it at the level of its historical and social past, as well as a more personal or private experience. How does your investigation of the origins and the historical past of the black diaspora experience in the United States, inform this project?

R.B. This project is consistent with the body of work that I have been doing and I think that, at this point, I have only scratched the surface. I don't want my work to be considered merely nostalgic. I am interested in an Africanism that permeates our contemporary world but goes unnamed and not talked about or fully addressed culturally.

I am interested in the impulse of that mysterious African force that propels black people wherever they are in the world and in conveying its spirituality which I feel exists in-between the tangible and the intangible.

A.F.- Alejandro, in the last ten years you have worked with different expressive languages and techniques not only to expand and open up your work but also as an effort to create a sense of freedom that is experienced at a personal level. I see in that effort not only an aesthetic statement but also an ethical one. How has that sense of freedom which generally guides your work manifested itself in this particular exhibition?

A.A. My work in Cuba was considered part of the work made by artists that were interested in social critique. As it is known, artists and writers in countries dominated by a communist bureaucracy make use of satire, irony, and grievance. Very few times are these individuals allowed to exercise a moral or political critique without it resulting in personal persecution or incarceration. Cuba has not been an exception. In this sense, the art work that I have done outside of Cuba has focused on what for me are the central subjects of modern culture and the art of our day; the



Radcliffe Bailey, *Black Diamond*, 2007. Emory University Art Gallery
Photo: Paul Franco

search for freedom, the recognition of the plurality of histories and cultures, and a redefinition of the western idea of beauty. I am sure that Cuban baseball players, stars both over there on the island and here in the United States, are looking for the same things. This exhibition is a sincere tribute to them.

A.F.- For me the art scene in Atlanta suffers from a provincialism that is not expressed in the art that is made in this city, but specifically, in the sphere of artistic distribution and consumption. In my opinion, the individuals and art institutions, with decision making power as to the visual arts in Atlanta, are neither articulating nor validating their own criteria regarding contemporary art. I see them as being more comfortable in importing and validating art and ideas that have already been authenticated elsewhere. What are your opin-

ions on this matter? And in what artistic context do you see this project?

A.A. Whenever the history, culture or art of a country (or certain region) are manipulated, neglected, or confused, they turn into mirrors, into realities that do not express but rather reflect the state of affairs.

R.B. The art scene, the institutions, artists and collectors need to be open to the world outside of Atlanta to appreciate and support Atlanta as fertile grounds for young emerging artists.

Right now we are at the beginning point of this collaboration and a lot has yet to be worked out in terms of artistic context.

Atlanta
January 2007