



# QUELOIDES

PEDRO ALVAREZ

MANUEL ARENAS

BELKIS AYON

MARIA MAGDALENA CAMPOS PONS

ROBERTO DIAGO

ALEXIS ESQUIVEL

ARMANDO MARIÑO

RENE PEÑA

MARTA MARIA PEREZ

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RACE AND RACISM IN CUBAN CONTEMPORARY ART

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# Queloides: Race and Racism

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According to the Western calendar, spring comes to the north during the fifth month. The rains of May are much awaited, and in Cuba they're said to bring luck. The United Nations has declared this month African culture month, but we are in Cuba, an African American and Afro-Caribbean country where almost nothing at all has been said on the subject. We are still positioned on the traditional equation upon which persistent social asymmetry is modeled in African American countries: man/white/heterosexual/Christian-Catholic versus man and woman/blacks-*mestizos*/heterosexuals/sorcerers. The former are in charge of nations; the latter are just dominated.

More than just a racist practice that was imposed by the former as a way to control the latter, it functions as a mechanism by which racialized, monolithic power, and inherited privileges and advantages are perpetuated. More over, it also fuels racism's pernicious effects and antagonistic division of social spaces, and the hypocrisy that denies its existence.

## *Fine arts, race and racism*

Despite appearances, our most recent African heritage month came and went unnoticed. As in many societies, much more than in those like Cuba, everything is meant to appear

under control. Many things here in Cuba go on behind smoke screens, or even underground, in a hidden manner.

Yet, there have been and are now some important, new events, even though not much is said about them, *as if we weren't supposed to want to see or know about them* (or that they even go on at all). They are silenced or ignored, but still present, which is the norm for populations engaged in resistance. After all, that certainly describes what the black population in Cuba is doing, resisting, struggling against the current, even if official rhetoric affirms and sustains otherwise.

May came in with an event that really made it seem like the month of May, because the third exhibit of *Queloides: raza y racismo* opened on the sixteenth. This art exhibit opened at the Wilfredo Lam Center for Contemporary Art, situated in the historical center of the old and dilapidated heart of the capital. The Center bears the name of the renowned, Afro-Cuban-Chinese (almost Parisian) artist who came home at an extremely old age to die in Havana.

Many are those who are forgotten in Cuba. The island seems to be suffering from generalized Alzheimer's disease, perhaps because we barely drink the elixir that medical science is now touting for its ability to delay this and many illness's onset anymore—coffee—due to poor crops. The organizers of this



*Ave Maria. Meira Marrero/José Ángel Toirac*

third *Queloides* exhibit actually forgot to acknowledge the first exhibit's organizers, even when black Cuban, actor and anthropologist Julio Moracén, one of the original organizers (who is now working as a professor in Brazil), was present at the most recent opening.

What is most important is that if things happen, we should be able to object to them, of course, but if this island does not what to keep reproducing the worst of itself over and over, it would be quite useful for it to block or avoid the substance of its traumas, dramas, and defects.<sup>1</sup> Can this be accomplished without remembering, without memory?

The exhibit *Queloides*, however, is an event that needs to be taken into account in all this, despite its limited coverage in the national media—and I say this about the exhibit for its own merits, quite aside from whether or not it was seen by anyone. The limited if non-existent information the exhibit's guards and employees have to share with inquiring visitors is pitiful, pitiful because it limits viewers' recep-

tion and creativity upon encountering the exhibit's installations, and stifles not only what is communicated by the artist-produced object, but the personal interpretation the artists offer of their own work.

What we find in this third version of *Queloides: Race and Racism* is pain and trauma, introspection and self-discovery, heart-rending and miscegenation, conflicts and interracial encounters—all that and more. The black and white artists exhibited therein employ a multiplicity of discourses with which to ratify for us that the problems their multiracial nation faces are everyone's, and that everyone must identify, confront, and attempt to resolve them. This includes even anti-black racism, with its concomitant '*mulatismo*' (a process by which a black population becomes whiter by having children with whites), which has become rooted in our society because of a historical 'whitening' ideology—even in many black and mulatto people—that was created by their white counterparts.

## *Lady of Caridad del Cobre-Oshun*

It is no small deed to begin seeing the exhibit in front of a huge altar with 25 different representations of the Lady of Caridad del Cobre, the Patroness of Cuba (also known as Oshun in the Yoruba religion). The number 5 is Oshun's number, and she is the *orisha* (deity) of love and sensuality, of birthing women and the deity to whom women entrust the safety of their children). She is the deity who asked Olofi (the Yoruba's supreme god) to allow her to accompany her enslaved children to the New World, so she could not just abandon them to their fate. Oshun from the Regla de Ocha or Santeria pantheon, is the *orisha* who syncretically corresponds to the Lady or Virgin of Charity at Cobre, the Mambi Virgin. The conflation of these two figures, this inseparable pair—Oshun and the Lady of Charity at Cobre, are two mulatto women who unite all Cubans everywhere above and beyond ideological, ethnic or racial differences of any kind.

Thus, the presence of 25 images of this virgin does not seem excessive. Five times five—a Kabbalistic interpretation not too difficult for Cubans to figure out. Among these 25 images, one finds not only more traditional representations of stately, white ladies, but also humbler, *mestizo* ones that are equally loved and venerated—for example, a rustic, carved, wooden one whose mutilated baby is missing a leg and arms, and whose crown is made with rough metal; or a very tiny one whose display case measures no more than two centimeters yet reveals an exquisitely carved virgin on a piece of copper extracted from the mine over which this saint's sanctuary is built (in the eastern town of Cobre). Another one has a representation of the Lady of Charity levitating over the beauti-

ful yet humble town of Cobre and the Sierra Maestra mountain range.

The creators of this beautifully composed, imaginative installation, Meira Marrero and José Ángel Toirac, manage to capture many of the myriad ideas that Cubans everywhere—in Cuba or Madrid, Miami or Moscow, Luanda or Beijing—have about their *mestizo* virgin. Significantly, for most of us she is still the welcoming *mother of all Cubans*, an untouchable symbol of dignity and faith in and of a nation always progressing with hope, need and accomplishment.

## *The “Llega y Pon” Reality [Squatter Neighborhoods]*

For some foreigners accustomed to visiting our embassies, to organize a sort of experience that has come to be known as *leftist tourism*—characterized by beautiful, impeccable and precisely organized tours, volunteer work, and previously arranged, friendly visits—Roberto Diago's installation might be a bit more disconcerting. These visitors might find his work downright shocking and subversive.

Those of us who live here, and do not attempt to bury our heads in the sand, understand the implicit honesty of his piece. Since the artist himself is black and from a poor neighborhood in Marianao, and people of a similar ethno-racial and socioeconomic background share certain experiences with him, we can assume to understand the anguish and pain with which his environment automatically scarred him throughout his life.

A very small, highly vaulted room contains Diago's installation. One of them consists of many tiny houses made of roughly splintered wood, and deteriorated, metallic shards, all piled up to the ceiling. A wall-mounted, video screen on one wall projects



*Ascending City. Roberto Diago*

contrasting images of neighborhoods of yore known as *'llega y pon'*, not unlike Brazilian *favelas*, where any kind of architecture goes because their residents have nothing more material than themselves, and their families.

The other thing that flashes at us on the video screen is images of housing with *'peerle'* [Peerless] fencing, as if in a bourgeois neighborhood. Others have Miami-style, louvered windows, and many reveal attempts at privacy and security. Many of the homes reveal the clean laundry of their occupants, although we never see them, as if the laundry lines of their improvised yards were exhibit spaces in a museum of the remote and unwanted. We never see the people who wear this clothing, but their presence is undeniable, even if they are invisible. It constantly reminds us that what shouldn't exist—that which is not comprehensible, justifiable or forgivable—are the terrible and forlorn conditions of the living spaces that some people do inhabit.

This is a visible manifestation of our *'non-achievements,'* of a present we are not supposed to see, of a reality shared by so many people who seem to be getting a *'revolutionary'* back turned on them. This is an *homage* to those who after a fifty two-year *revolution of the poor, for the poor, and by the poor* still lack something as basic as a decent place to live—those who prior to 1959 lacked this, and are still forced to accept this legacy. That part of *'yesterday's Cuba'* we learned about as youngsters, from the pages of *Bohemia* magazine, which later shocked us as adults, awoke us to a bitter reality that it still exists today, because it never ceased existing.

### *Raceless philosophy*

The photographic work of the always transgressive, black Cuban artist René Peña, could be seen as much more penetrating, acute,

and philosophical, particularly when seen all together: each image seems to lead to the next, each one transmitting forward to the next its distinctive strength and essence.

We see a man with a provocative cap who glares as us with a penetrating gaze, who seems to be subjecting us to an inquisitorial exam, and wondering if we are entertained by the ornament of spectacle or accept being challenged by his interpellative gaze. He and the man who is posing humbly while wearing baggy orange pants and black sandals, in his bathing trunks and looking down at his feet, and reproduces the death of Marat, are one and the same. We are standing before a *'Cubanized,'* *'Afro'* reproduction of the assassinated Frenchman.

Strictly speaking, there are no blacks or whites, natives or foreigners, no distinction between the professions of some and others. What René Peña artistic reproduction seems to be saying to us is that we can all have the same fate, and even the same death.

There is much more to be seen in the sculptural part of the exhibit, for example, attempted genealogies that connect yesterday's escaped slaves with today's Castro-regime's, black leaders; projects that use a feminist discourse to reflect on the problems that women today face due to the an ill-formed patriarchy, sex, and much of what is human and even divine. Yet, to leave Belkis Ayón's installation for last, just before finishing seeing the exhibit's last space, is an irrevocable luxury for artists, curators, and visitors.

### *Hope in Afro-Feminism*

That last, vast and naturally lit exhibit hall contains some of the following works by her: *The Family, The Dinner, The Consecration*, etc. What is revealed to us is a liberated woman who was and continues transcending, despite



*Untitled. René Peña*

her physical disappearance (she died in 1999). She has what some people call a divine nature. The powerful forces of goddesses and divinities stirred in and took her so quickly, that we had to quickly learn how to appreciate her, so we black, Cuban women could always evoke her and have her within us, and keep her as one of our own beloved, necessary, and always present ancestors.

Belkis and the *Efik* fish-woman she crafted make possible the miracle that this deity speaks to us—and not just to Abakuá men. Belkis uncovered for us that Afro-Cuban, male world that she penetrated with a skill that allowed her to return it even to them. She was a fifty-year old, Cuban Afro-Feminist, and for her to speak of feminism and Afro-Cubanness constituted a two-pronged, serious and feared transgression. As in the past, when Belkis accepted so many challenges and risks, in *Queloides*, she once again offered us the best of farewells at that/this precise, strangely hopeful, as well as disconcerting moment.

Like Belkis, we must face challenges—remain trapped in hope but not move too early

towards the unknown, so we can accomplish what is so very needed right here and now. That is why it is so important to remember her, and Orlando Zapata Tamayo,<sup>2</sup> yet always be aware of their quick and much too early departures. This is why we must remind Guillermo (Coco) Fariñas<sup>3</sup> that we do not need martyrs but heroes—because there is so much to do. We need these heroes to be alive and trying to build something through hope.

### *(Re)Signifying Anti-Black Codes*

The final exhibit hall offers us art that is both suggestive and troubling. It leaves us feeling a mixture of shock, shame, confusion and then, finally—hope. Painter and video-artist Manuel Arena Leonard offers us a gift that really shocks our thought patterns. We must leave thinking and even looking for some kind of support. His is another perspective that helps reveal for us what is intimate. It assists us in our attempt to extract a message from his work that despite its obvious nature—the



*The Consacration. Belkis Ayón*

obvious presence of pain in his work, and in everyday life—we would prefer to see as far-away and invisible, even though it envelops us and, worse yet, we bear it inside of us.

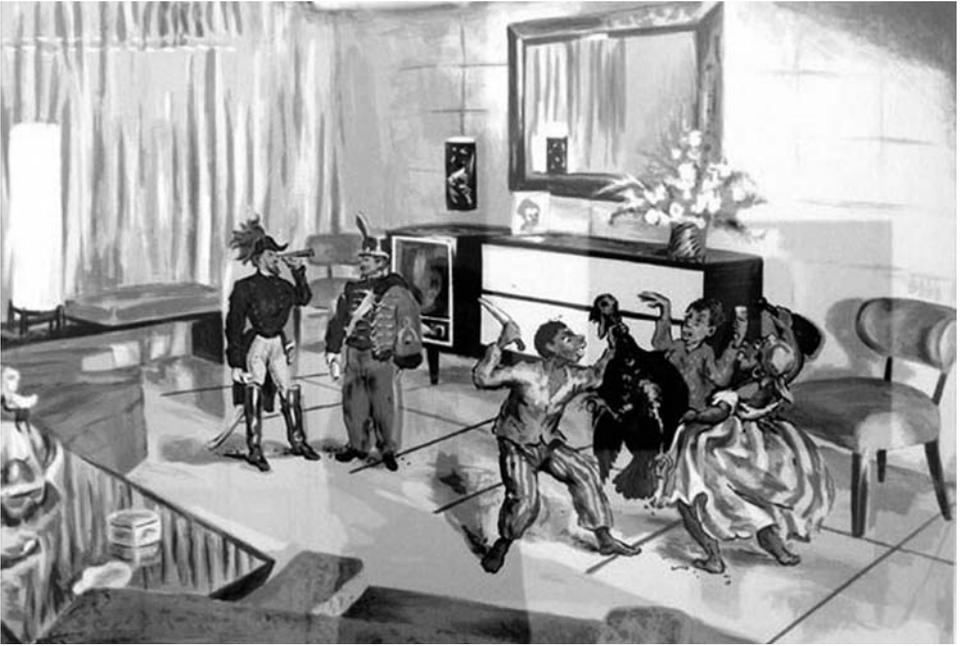
Those tubes filled with black paint, and others filled with excrement, keep gravitating in our minds. These images can be as aggressive as the installation's title: *Negro de mierda* [Shitty Blacks]. Here the subaltern appropriates the kind of violence that has been used against him, not so much to turn it around, but rather to (re)signify it, give it a new meaning, in this case, to publicly vent repeated attempts to victimize blacks and a refusal to admit having done so. There is no self-victimization here, just a good, fighting response with the weapons at hand. Furthermore, those who would like to turn us into 'others' within our own country—since they say we are all illiterate—do not necessarily know how to use or decode these weapons.

The creator of this piece is not naïve. The discomfort and even irritation that looking at his installation and reading its title can produce in us is similar to what we feel when we are

treated in this or some other unmeritorious way on account of our skin color or physiognomy.

Unwarranted attacks produce blunt responses. That concept would seem to be the basis upon which this apparently unwarranted, written response discusses this art—but that is not the case. This art's blunt response is not only justifiable; it is irrefutable. Five centuries of aggression against the humanity of blacks and mulattoes deserve responses from everyone—human or divine. If these responses don't automatically come forth, then we must go out and fetch them, insist upon them, shame them out into the open. We must offer them to ourselves, and ourselves offer them as a people whose integrity has individually and collectively suffered, been minimized and objectified in the gaze of our own, national 'others.'

It is almost impossible not to be stirred by Arena Leonard's installation, no matter our race or ethnic origin, or sex or gender preferences, or ideology or party affiliation, or nationality or social status. Racism did not remain in the past. It is the topic for today and



*The Reign of Freedom and Necessity. Roberto Alvarez*

tomorrow, and we cannot continue being impassive and fatalistically accept it as is—and accepting just crumbs in exchange for it.

Tribunals and trenches are needed for fighting any and all social evils. Art is not only part of a world of dreams and idealizations, but also of a concrete affirmation of what good and evil exist out there, and in us, and of course, to show us what is actually possible. It is a space for beauty and grotesqueness, for pleasantry and pain, for suffering and anguish, because all of them are real and coexist, and cross the line between competence and contrariness, between antagonism and obvious belligerence.

This explains why this last work so effectively displaces the viewer. It forces him to reflect upon himself and his context. It forces him to trace back over the footprints he made as he walked about unconcerned. Those black, white, or *mestizo* people who profess to have nothing to do with racism, who claim to have been unscathed by it, are obligated to see them-

selves in the sheen of that black paint, and smell in that stench the arbitrary and unjust nature of their philosophy of life. What they see reflected is that monster they have within, as people who believe themselves to be historically and biologically justified to continue with their discriminatory practices.

The artist violently assaults one of our greatest and unspeakable traumas, the violent practice of anti-black discrimination. He leaves us no alternative. We will either leave the exhibit engaged in deconstructing the discourse of racism, or we will engage it some time soon—no easy prospect. Essentially, many of us have inherited it, almost like a biological trait. Others see in it robust ideas of dubious origin. Either way, both views of it are equally absurd and brutal, insensitive and perverse, pathological and abominable.

*Queloides goes north*

African America is one big place. Throughout it are people of common ethnic and racial origins and atrophied economies. Their evil legacy of sociocultural, economic and political asymmetries, and histories of shared struggles have resulted in their psychologically damaging and atrophying placement on the bottom rungs of hierarchies in numerous collective imaginaries. In our attempt to reposition ourselves socially, not all African American nations are progressing at the same rate. Cuba has much to learn about this endeavor.

That is why it is important that this third version of *Queloides/Keloids* (unlike the first two) is taking advantage of gradual, reciprocally opening doors between the United States and Cuba, and crossing borders into the cold city of Pittsburgh, where the University of Pittsburgh Center for Latin American Studies and the Mattress Factory Museum have made it possible for it to be exhibited. This is made doubly important at this time because the U.S.'s black population has just seen a culminating moment in their struggle and victory over civil rights with the election of the first black president—Barack H. Obama—an extremely significant event for the imagination and self-esteem of black people all around the world.

The importance of this exhibit's arrival is also reinforced by the historic relationship between the U.S. black and Afro-Cuban population, which despite the last 52 years of repression reached an apogee several months ago when 60 U.S. African Americans of national and international prominence sent a letter to the Cuban government criticizing interracial relations on the island, and making demands on behalf of black Cubans. The presence of this exhibit in Pittsburgh is also justified by the presence of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, which has always included and

fomented Cuban studies, and supported meetings with artists and academics from the island.

The conceptual and socially committed art we see in *Queloides* is not gratuitous, even if many who are consciously or subconsciously racist may think it somewhat forced or uncomfortable—a much too elaborated stretch. Cuban television took one month to cover *Queloides*, although for no apparent reason it had to be visited from the rear of the building, as used to be the case before 1959, when black and mulatto people had to do just so. Not too few now would like to see that happen now.

This kind of observation or comment can always garner one accusations of being *too sensitive, racist, and divisive*, to which is added *no one sees that but you, you and your bad intentions and your habit of harping on racism*. These are the facts. Each and every one of us can adjust his or her view of them by means of his or her own analyses and life experiences on this 'black-and-white' island where José Antonio Saco's white, anti-black, *criollo*-style

#### Notes:

1-Martínez, Iván Cesar and Benemelis, Juan F. *Los fuegos fatuos de la nación cubana. Un análisis sobre la esencia filosófica-política del racismo en Cuba, su vigencia y el futuro de la nación cubana*. Kingston: The Ceiba Institute of Afro-Cuban Studies, 2009.

2-Oppositionist Orlando Zapata Tamayo died on February 23rd, 2010, at 43 years of age, after a more than 80-day hunger strike.

3-Guillermo (Coco) Fariñas went on a total hunger strike (refusing food and water) on February 24th, 2010, as a protest against not being permitted to attend Zapata's funeral, and then went on to demand the release of 26 sick political prisoners in danger of dying. He refuted accusations in the national press that these political prisoners were mercenaries, because mercenaries do not die for an ideal. He ended his strike when the government began to free political prisoners from the famous Cause of the 75 group (who were arrested in 2003).