

## Ajiaco: Stirrings of the Cuban Soul

by Gail Gelburd

In 1939, Fernando Ortiz first characterized Cuban culture as *ajiaco*: a rich stew consisting of a large variety of ingredients, cooked until a thick broth is formed. It was a synthesis of African, Spanish, and Chinese heritage, peppered with indigenous culture.<sup>1</sup> This stew, or syncretic mix of religions and spirituality, defines the very essence of Cuba. The indigenous Amerindians, despite disease, persecution, and near extinction, play an important role in the Cuban stew; their traditions were passed down through the generations. Many Spaniards, who came to the island patronized the new colony and built massive sugar plantations. These plantation owners then imported labor, both free and slave, imposing Catholicism on both alike. Those that came to the New World by force, to make their fortune, or after release from prison, were all indoctrinated with the Spaniard's religion. However, the assimilation of those brought to the island would never come to absolute fruition and rather Cuban culture became *Ajiaco*.

*Ajiaco* is a metaphor for the confluence of forms that have created Cuban culture. The bones of past cultures are left in the stew so that we can still analyze the ingredients. This fusion of beliefs and practices re-combines to create a new form; one that is not exactly like the original, but has enough of the 'bones' to remain distinctive. African culture, for example, became an integral part of Cubanidad. The religions of Paolo Monte from the Congo, the "brotherhood" of the Abakuá from Efik and Efo of the Cross River Delta in Nigeria, Regla de Ocha (Santería) from the Yoruba peoples, emigrated from Africa with the slaves. In the late 1800s, Colonialism brought new cultures into the mix such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Seeking new opportunities in a new land, the Chinese found themselves to be indentured servants in the sugar trade, after slavery had been supposedly outlawed. Other "marginal" people, such as the Moors of Spain were shipped off to Cuba against their will -- later Jewish people emigrated to escape the Nazis. The new inhabitants never forgot their historic past and integrated the old into the mix that is Cuba.

Cuban art of the past sixty-five years visualizes this syncretic mix of influences; to understand it one must unravel and peer into the sources of these traditional cultures and ancient religions. The Catholicism of the Spanish became the base of the culture and wields its way through much of the other expressions. In some art, we can find the image of Christ, the Virgin Mary, Saint Anthony, or Saint Lazarus. In other visualizations, a mix of the Catholic icons, with those of the African, Chinese or Indigenous cultures, create a particularly Cuban flavor. All of the cultures that came to Cuba brought with them their heritage, traditions and spirituality. Whether they intermarried, as most did, or interacted with those of other backgrounds in a more platonic manner, Cubans of various backgrounds have always shared their distinct cultures with one another. The cumulative spirit of these cultures defines Cuba and is visualized in its art.

The African, Chinese and Indigenous cultures of Cuba had a profound effect on many of the artists, who identify with one or more of the elements that permeate the stew. The artist Wifredo Lam wrote of the many cultural influences in a poem:

*...One night in October 1492/ ... "It is Land."/ A magic land, /Eternally voyaging/ in limitless space. Sprung from the four corners of the earth,/Men hasten to reach this New World, / And Cuba becomes the cross- roads/Where*

*all the brigands meet:’ Slave-owners, slave- suppliers,/ And Slaves.../To people the New World./... Later came the others/Catalans , Galicians,/And last of all, Chinese,/...The brave New World! The land of Cuba,/For so long isolated, in the middle/Of the vast sea of the Caribs...<sup>2</sup>*

Their mixed tradition allowed them to go beyond monotheism in order to find the origins of their soul, the *geist* or inner spirit of their art. Those artists who stayed in Cuba and those who left have continually explored the various spiritual traditions, sometimes with little recognition until the Post modern world acknowledged that the “other” (non-euro-centric based art) was important to the investigation of the primordial essence. By the Twenty-first century it became clear that Cuba’s syncretic mix of disparate cultures is not only exemplary of Latin American culture but can be seen as a paradigm of today’s postmodern world.

*Prelude: Syncretist theory as exemplified by Wifredo Lam*

Syncretism commonly occurs in areas where multiple religious traditions exist together in a confined area or when a people are conquered, but not fully assimilated to the conqueror's beliefs. Wifredo Lam was the embodiment of the physical, as well as syncretist spirit that is Cuba; he introduced a way of merging cultures that would herald the beginning of the Ajiaco. He was maternally of African, Spanish, and indigenous heritage while paternally Chinese. Lam fought physically, verbally and through his art against both racial oppression and the degradation of his culture for the sake of the tourists. As he told his biographer Fouchet: "I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the Negro spirit and the beauty of the plastic art of the blacks. In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, and to disturb the dreams of the exploiters. I knew I was running the risk of not being understood either by the man in the street or by the others. But a true picture has the power to set the imagination to work, even if it takes time."<sup>3</sup> For decades, Lam was considered a Surrealist and his cultural heritage was ignored as a resource. More recent studies have begun to delve into the content of the art to find a more profound meaning that functions within the broader context of his being Cuban.

Lam stated that, "when I was a little boy I used to hear strange conversations about the dead."<sup>4</sup> He conveyed to his biographer Max-Pol Fouchet that he remembered hearing drums each night and that he attended ceremonies with his *madrina* (Godmother) Mantonica Wilson, a *santera* priestess. His *madrina* was well-known as a healer and people came from all over the island for her help. Lam recalled that she began by invoking Shangó, of whom Lam was considered a 'son'. The Santeria rituals were an integral part of his life and he studied what emerged from his mind, after invoking these spirits. In a 1951 *Cahiers d'Art* article, Fouchet described Lam's imagery: "...Here some beings still stand halfway between their vegetable and animal states ... Wings of evasion, portents of large birds in flight caress our sight as we watch their escape, their exodus, like tongues of fire in the disquieting infinite... Elsewhere, the sound of the tom-tom, with its obsessive rhythms, is evoked by light and shadow..."<sup>5</sup> Lam remembered looking into a mirror and seeing two heads. He was told that the image should assure him that he could enter the spirit world if he so decided. He remembered seeing a two-headed bat hanging upside down in the corner of his room when he was five years old. "It was then I first experienced the feeling of the passing of the days, of a linkage in memory and of a time which stops for no one."<sup>6</sup> His godmother was aware of his visions and chose him to be the heir to her place in Santería. She gave him the fetish objects she used for healing because she believed that he knew the rituals from his youth. Lam turned her down, telling her that he did not feel that he was "sufficiently gifted."<sup>7</sup> He said that he stopped having "visions" when he turned 18, but the images he created in his art clearly show that the African pantheon never left his mind. Bats, two headed figures, part human, part animal and large wings fill his paintings, while the percussion of the drums can almost be heard from the vibrant strokes that punctuate the space.

When Lam returned to Cuba in the 1940s (after almost twenty years in Europe), he met Lydia Cabrera and Fernando Ortiz. Ortiz was a leading anthropologist who had begun investigating the myths of the African religions. Lydia Cabrera, who had been trained in art history in Paris, brought her insights to the artist through her own investigations and

writings in books such as *El Monte*, first published in Havana in 1954. Lydia Cabrera helped Lam to further understand these images and contributed to his already instinctual and ritualistic understanding of African spiritual practice.<sup>8</sup> Cabrera understood the heritage in which Lam was raised, and his connection to the Orishas. In 1943, she wrote, “the ancient, ancestral black deities who are withdrawn in the soft and engulfing light of Europe obsessed him there... Here [in Cuba] they appeared tangible under the resplendent light of perennial summer. Here they are expressed with beauty and lucidity in each corner of the landscape, in each tree-divinity, in each fabulous leaf of his garden in Buen Retiro. With all the resources of a painter who thoroughly knows his craft, he paints the fantastic and prodigious qualities of Cuban nature in his canvases.”<sup>9</sup> The many paintings and drawings found in Lydia Cabrera’s possession (donated to the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami) give testimony to their close relationship.

By 1941, Wifredo Lam’s paintings had begun to develop a formal vocabulary to express what he understood about African deities and myths, sometimes enhanced by images of Chinese dragons and/or other Eastern mythological figures. He combined Cubism, Surrealism and images of African masks, with Chinese brush painting and an East Asian concept of space. His painting became a creative catalyst for the Cubans who were raised as marginal citizens. His paintings incorporated hybrid figures that morphed into each other to convey the spiritual and the subconscious mix of his ancestors.

Lam incorporated Cuban flora, such as tobacco leaves and sugar cane, with Afro-Cuban symbols, such as birds and animals. The *femme cheval* (female horse) began to appear in his paintings in the 1940s and continued as an important symbol of the inter-relationship between animals and humans as well as their importance in Santería. In Santería, some have suggested that a horse signifies spiritual possession, which is also referred to as “being ridden” by the *orisha* (deity or god) who enters the devotee through the devotee’s head.<sup>10</sup> The genitalia in the images allude to the importance of fertility as part of the rituals, while the face is reminiscent of an African mask. Picasso who greatly admired African masks, was a good friend of Lam and for Picasso, the horse, often found in Lam’s paintings, represented the people. The part white, part black figure is of mixed race like Lam, but also of mixed beings, mixed sexuality and several orisha. The image of Eleguá is often found in Lam’s paintings and drawings, and in *Femme Cheval* sits on top of the horse. Eleguá is portrayed as a small face, often with horns, similar to the small handmade Eleguá heads placed on home altars that Lam would have seen.

Wifredo Lam was not only influenced by African culture, but also by his Chinese heritage.<sup>11</sup> The circular or spiraling composition, the Chinese mythical dragons, the theme of a spiritual unity and the free-flowing calligraphic-like strokes are inspired by the Chinese side of Lam’s ancestry. Wifredo’s father—Yam Lam—was a scribe and a senior member of the Chinese community which brought the world of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism to Wifredo Lam’s sphere of influence. Yam Lam had emigrated from Canton to San Francisco, then Mexico before arriving in Sagua la Grande in Cuba, a province where he was a shopkeeper. He was well-educated and knew several dialects of Chinese. Lam remembers his father meditating as he would “sit and slowly wave his fan.”<sup>12</sup> Although Wifredo was born when Yam Lam was 84-years old, Lam’s formative years were spent with his father who lived to be 102. His father was a deeply spiritual man and knew calligraphy, an art that requires many years of practice to master. He would illuminate proverbs

from Confucius or Lao Tsu on colored paper; the young Wifredo Lam remembers them hanging about the shop. In his 1983 dissertation on Lam, Esteban Montejo wrote that the artist recalled seeing Chinese festivals in his neighborhood, acrobats and gymnasts, and Chinese ribbons flowing in the air. The swirling and spiraling of forms is reminiscent of the ribbons and acrobats, but is also directly related to the concept of space in Chinese painting. This can be seen in the Untitled work of 1947. Frenetic motion and endless energy is enhanced by the abundance of angular shapes that seem to circle a deep abyss in the center, similar to later works such as the *Third World*. The interweaving forms are part of the process of metamorphosis as is the balance of lights and darks. For Lam, all forms of metamorphosis are a process of being possessed by the spirits.<sup>13</sup> His images are at once male and female, always moving and changing, like the Yin and Yang within the T'ai Chi. In Eastern philosophy, there is no beginning and there is no end, but instead a balance of opposites which is ever changing and evolving. Lam captures this amidst a wash of diluted color. Lam's use of gouache on brown craft paper, as well as the limited palette, is reminiscent of Song Dynasty painting, and the calligraphy that would have hung on Yam Lam's walls.

In 1948, Lam remembers meeting Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Calder, Isamu Noguchi, Frederic Kiesler, and John Cage in New York -- all of these artists had a profound interest in Eastern philosophy and incorporated spirituality into their art.<sup>14</sup> Lowery Sims has also written on the relationship between the New York abstract expressionists and Lam, and their shared interest in mythic and totemic imagery.<sup>15</sup> Lam's obvious interest in the seemingly irrational and the spiritual can be construed as a preoccupation with both African and Chinese influences. His balance of dark and light, of opposites in the sphere of the universal, can be seen as Chinese- or Yoruban- based. His concern for the relationship between man and nature is Taoist as well as Santería. One could see this as a hybrid or, more accurately, as Syncretism. Wifredo Lam's art went beyond the subconscious manifestations and dreams of Surrealism to include his own personal heritage. Lam's art was about the African Orishas and the Chinese sense of space; his art was a confluence of traditions that was not actually surreal as much as it was spiritual and syncretist. He represents an early attempt at incorporating the diversity that is Cuban culture. The African and Asian cultures became the ingredients of the Hispanic stew that is Ajiaco.

### **The Ingredients: Qi of Asia**

In Cuba, the Chinese have always been marginalized, even more so than those of African descent. The prohibition of slavery presented a hardship for the plantation owners, who found themselves without cheap (or free) labor. In 1847, "entrepreneurs" began to "import" what they referred to as "coolie" labor from southern China. Most of these immigrants came to Cuba voluntarily because of the promises of opportunities in the New World. Evelyn Hu-DelHart, in her history of the Chinese in the Caribbean, notes that Chinese labor was usually proscribed by contract for about eight years. This service agreement implicitly made the worker the property of the "master." If the Chinese national wanted to stay in Cuba beyond the term of the contract, they had to sign up for another contractual commitment.<sup>16</sup> The Chinese were treated poorly and even the renowned anthropologist Fernando Ortiz had a blatantly racist view of the Chinese, referring to them as "yellow Mongoloids."<sup>17</sup> The culture of the Chinese survived in enclaves, but found ways to link Chinese culture to

that of Africa and/or Spain. Any serious study of Cuba and Cuban art must acknowledge the presence of this influence. They brought Buddhist and Taoist views of life as well as a *qi* or spiritual energy. The specifics of the religious traditions may not be obviously incorporated, but the interest in the ephemeral and never ending qualities of life, it's relationship to nature, and practices such as calligraphy, sumi ink painting, 2-dimensional space and meditation can be seen throughout Cuban art.

**Flora Fong** was paternally Chinese with a Spanish mother and remembered flying handmade Chinese style kites as a child; she noted that they seemed to have wings as they soared across the sky.<sup>18</sup> She studied the Chinese language and calligraphy. Fong enjoyed the majesty of Chinese costumes, and remembered watching her father meditate all day without speaking. In *One Black Fish and 8 Red Fish*, the eight red *pescado* represent the good things in life while the black fish serves as a reminder that there is always a balance. Red and black are strong Chinese colors and 8 and 9 are considered lucky numbers.

As Fong worked to improve her calligraphic strokes, she made sure to retain the colors of the Caribbean. She found ways to simplify her image to a few brushstrokes, as is the style in Chan and Zen art. Fong began to render space in her paintings from an Eastern orientation rather than the traditional Renaissance perspective that she had learned at school. In 1989, she made her first visit to China and began to understand that an artist can look at nature from the clouds, a naturalistic point of view, or the artist can go beyond that to another level of cultural absorption.<sup>19</sup> Her fauna, such as palm leaves, relate to Cuba, but also to the Chinese character for "Forest." Her fluid strokes, be they black or bright colors, are gestures that give the palms movement. She was now able to refer to the landscape without using specific references. She does not try to freeze a moment in time, as in Western landscapes, but captures the flux of time, as in Chinese landscape painting. She noted that, "Movement of the images gave the feeling that there was wind and therefore there was air. Fong responded to "a certain external convulsion against the shuddering that nature is suffering."<sup>20</sup> Each of these paintings has references to Chinese astrology, mythology and spirituality as well as aesthetic traditions.

**Nelson Dominguez** was inspired by fellow Cuban artists Antonia Eiriz, Wifredo Lam, and Amelia Pelaez, as well as classic Japanese art, Picasso, and his ex-wife Flora Fong. His art from the 1950s focused on genre scenes, but by the 1970s he was fully involved in abstraction. The horizontal plane he created is reminiscent of a landscape format, but his images relate more to abstract experiences.

Nelson appropriated the Japanese use of line and free flowing forms. A great admirer of Japanese prints, he saw in this art an alternative way of looking at space and figurative forms. Dominguez notes that he studied Asian art and was particularly impressed by the fact that in Asian art, black is seen as a color. He [looked to](#) the work of the American Abstract Expressionist artist Franz Klein, who is known for his broad calligraphic black brushstrokes. Drawing and writing are the same for Nelson Dominguez, as they are in Asian cultures; Calligraphy is both an art and writing form, in China and Japan.. His admiration for the Spanish artist Antoni Tapies, who was also very influenced by East Asian art, and is evidenced by his use of line and blacks, and thick paint. What is also evident in Dominguez's art, is his ability to imbue the art with *qi* – life energy. Interested in *Sumi* ink painting, he created expressions with black paint and sometimes ground up tires to get the black oil-like texture.

When asked about art's role in society, Dominguez responded emphatically "I think that in this day and age, smart people should support the possibility of the diffusion of culture to people around the world who make art. Because in the end, all art does is widen people's perception of the universe they live in" Dominguez added, "art is an extension of an artist's life."<sup>21</sup> In an interview with the author he stated, "Sometimes, the essential thing in art, as I see and feel it, is that art comes from the soul."<sup>22</sup>

What artists like Dominguez and **Alejandro Aguilera** discovered is a parallel to Benitez-Rojo's theory found in the *Repeating Island*. Benitez-Rojo sees the Caribbean (including Cuba) not just as the source of its colonial ancestors or the product of social events, but instead sees the Caribbean as a series of rhythms and inter-relationships. By integrating differences, Cuban art avoids the limitations of any one comprehensive doctrine. Alejandro Aguilera has always been interested in the relationship between art and all cultures. "In the period of the development of the arts, [religious icons] were overlooked because they were not favored by the Revolution; religion in art was not banned, but not supported."<sup>23</sup> Aguilera studied Renaissance and Baroque art, although these subjects were not included in his formal training. In his early work, he created mythological figures and carved wooden sculptures larger than the Santos found in churches. Once he emigrated to the United States, he began to explore the art influenced by Japan. He began to study Kandinsky, Mondrian, and the pure act of creating. He became very interested in Japanese philosophy, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese painting and artists or writers influenced by Eastern philosophy such as Walt Whitman, Cy Twombly, John Cage and Octavio Paz. Able to now look at more profound ideas rather than politics (when did he look merely at politics, why is politics shallow, what does the political ref?), Aguilera notes, "It is a matter of being essential... Asian philosophy helps you to understand your real position."<sup>24</sup> Aguilera sees a dichotomy that each artist needs to resolve. The artist must look inside himself or herself to do their work, but once outside their house, they must find a practical solution. The artist then seeks to [find a way to settle the dilemma of an internal personal profound statement that reaches out to society in an engaging manner](#). "Asian philosophy is personal discovery..." His more recent ink drawings are less commercial and more about re-creating experiences. His calligraphic strokes create the ebb and flow of life, within the confines of the delineated space. Aguilera stated that he seeks to "harmonize chaos in his work."<sup>25</sup>

Many other artists have found ways to imbue their art with the spirituality and imagery learned from the East. **Tomas Sanchez** had always been interested in religion and spirituality. As an artist he is eidetic – able to make visible a mental image that is vivid and detailed by absorbing and appropriating the very minutiae of his or her life. His art can evoke sympathy and dismay, outrage and sorrow, or in the midst of the insanity of the world, bring quiet contemplation. He has found a vocabulary that now allows him to create a meditative form for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Sanchez evolved from early works that were based on traditional Christian subjects and violence, to create meditative, contemplative landscapes.

As a child, Sanchez was interested in the priesthood and befriended several Catholic priests and nuns. He created early works such as *Carnes de Aurus* (Vulture Meat) in 1975. He investigated Santeria, but soon turned instead to the practice of yoga-- first from books, then by studying with Maria Teresa Reined in Cuba. Through yoga, he learned to meditate. At Reined's home, he found like-minded souls and a place where he could either meditate six hours a day or paint on the walls of her ashram. To find his true self, he looked to Eastern philosophy, from the *Bhagavad Gita* to *Tao Te*

*Ching*. They each pointed to the philosophical notion of detachment, to remain calm and objective in order to see beyond the surface of the mundane world to one's own inner spirit. If the artist or viewer were wrapped up in the external form, they might fail to experience the internal, more elusive, reality of the art. The artist found his icon to be a "naturalistic" form that creates a meditative experience – the art became the philosophical practice. Creating rolling mountains and pristine shores in monotones, he creates a sense of calm. His art is most successful when it can reconcile what is there with what is not, to reconcile what Derrida referred to as "presence" and "absence." The art suggests, rather than dictates the response. Beauty, in the traditional sense, is inconsequential; rather, what is important is the power of the art to transform the mind and soul.

A descendant of both African and Chinese ancestry, **Esterio Segura** carries the same multicultural heritage as Wifredo Lam. "My work is about memory" he wrote. "Many different cultures are processed through myself to produce one eclectic product...I get images, symbols, ideas, from many different African, Russian, Chinese, old Asiatic influences, all the traditions from centuries ago. And I mix all the traditions together."<sup>26</sup> Segura sees that it all must be seen as one Cuba. He states, "We are living history, and so it is important for people to know I am a Cuban...My work is part of my personal history-it is the time I'm living in."<sup>27</sup> In many of his small sculptural works, he combinesthe Buddha with the face of Karl Marx, and the Virgin of Charity with the face of Lenin. His Buddha is the more popularized big bellied "god" of happiness and prosperity, yet it is also the ideological thinker Marx. In some works, the Virgin of Charity and Buddha embrace, in others she is being raped. His sometimes pornographic images are contrasted by the beauty of the white porcelain, a technique also derived from his Chinese heritage and the Ming dynasty.

His intellectual stimuli, like his sculptures, are an eclectic mix of classical sources. One can see that his erotic images recall Japanese *Ukyo-e* prints, his multi-armed figures recall India's Siva, and his Christian figures recall the images of saints. Segura stated, "I see religion from the outside; in the same as Aguilera does. We are investigators of culture."<sup>28</sup> Segura is interested in the culture more than any specific religion. He once described his religion as "AfroBuddistMarxistChristian" and refers to it as an attitude toward living.<sup>29</sup>



## The Ingredients: Ashé of Africa through Santeria and Abakuá

African traditions often appear as the most prodigious of cultural influences in Cuban art. Their rituals and visions were imported by the 750,000 to one million slaves brought to Cuba, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, to work on the developing and expanding sugar plantations.<sup>30</sup> Slaves were abducted from various areas of Africa; Fernando Ortiz counted the presence of over one hundred different African ethnic groups in Cuba. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, they had been organized into associations and social clubs known as *cabildos*, societies of free and enslaved blacks from the same African "nation." The *cabildos* preserved specific African rituals that might have been lost, had they not come together in these groups to share their memories. This heritage, that was lost in most of the Caribbean basin and the U.S., remained strong in Cuba, although often hidden. The African religion of *Regla de Ocha*, today known as Santeria and its *Orisha* (deities, or saints), were critical to the survival of the African culture. For centuries, the Cuban had learned to hide their religion and to practice their spiritual rituals through the dictated traditions of Catholicism, proscribed by plantation owners. Many of the slaves and free descendants were separated from their biological families, but their relationship to a specific Orisha (because they were considered to be a son or daughter of that Orisha) provided them with spiritual kinship.<sup>31</sup>

In 1866, the African slaves were "freed;" the *cabildos* were required to adopt the name of a Catholic saint, register with a local church, and forced to transfer their property to the Catholic Church. Under the rule of the Catholic Spanish plantation owner, the Africans learned to see the Orisha as a Catholic saint. In the African, Yoruba based religion, for example, the ultimate deity, Olodumare, is identified as Jehova. Each orisha, who are each considered to be specific manifestations of Olodumare, are linked to the powers of this supreme deity and represent specific aspects of, or forces of nature. Each orisha has attributes and myths associated with it, similar to those found in ancient Greece and Rome. There are many orisha, but in Cuba the *siete potencias*, or "The Seven Powers," are the most well known. Although the list varies, the following are those most visualized by artists. These orisha are Elégua, *Obàtálá*, Yemayá, Oshun, Shangó, and Babaluayé and, listed differently by different groups, Oya/Ogun. They are identified with catholic saints such as Saint Anthony, Saint Barbara, the Virgin Caridad del Cobre, Saint Lazarus or Saint Theresa.

The African influence was pervasive and appears in the work of the best known artists as well as the untrained. **Elio Vilva** illustrated Elégua with detailed renderings, created simply in pen and ink. A self-taught artist from Trinidad, Cuba, the artist is best known for his work involving the Santeria religious beliefs. He has done extensive research on the iconography of Africa in his native Cuba and copiously includes these details. Elégua is the Messenger, Opener of the Way and is associated with "opening the ways," or crossroads. He is recognized as the keeper of the roads and the world. He is the gatekeeper that stands in the path of life and the celestial grounds. Anytime there is a sacrifice or ceremony he has to be given an offering first. Elégua is said to like candy, toys, and coconut as offerings, or anything children would

enjoy. Worshippers often have in their home a cement head with a metal spike in the top with cowrie shells for eyes and mouth, as a representation of Elégua who protects them in return. **Joel Jover**, another self-trained artist, depicts an upward-pointing human hand in *La Mano Ponderosa* (The Powerful Hand), the hand of God found in Roman Catholic symbolism and in folk culture. It is often seen as protection against the evil eye and considered to be omnipotent, all powerful. In many depictions Jesus Christ and saints emanate from the hand while here it is branches that sprout from the finger tips. In the center of the hand can be found the stigmata, or an eye; here it is replaced in the center with an image of Elleguá. In front of the hand is the image of Elleguá who opens the path for the spirits—a true example of a syncretist image. He also depicts *Virgin with Crocodile* as the Virgin Caridad del Cobre (Our Mother of Charity) in a non conventional way as an icon of Western Culture. Related to the Orisha Oshun, goddess of love, feminine beauty, fertility, and art, she controls the river waters as well as sexuality and money matters, the arts and human pleasures. She also rules over marriage. For Jover, his images brings in the suffering of the Virgin. Ruling over Fresh Water, Oshun is the youngest of the orishas and one of the most popular. As an island, often politically isolated, the patron saint of Cuba is evoked to protect people from the waters that surround them. The crocodile is often the symbol of Cuba for it not only represents the shape of the island, but the notion of a being that lives in the water and on the land.

Cuban artists and Cuban ex-patriots who emigrated to the U.S. carry with them the same orishas. Having been artistically trained in Cuba during their formative years, the bond that ties them together is evidenced in their art. **Cepp Selgas** interprets the Orisha through a variety of paintings that capture the symbols and meaning of each deity. His *Obàtálá* is androgynous, including a face that goes both ways. Father-Mother of Humanity, Bringer of Peace and Harmony, *Obàtálá* is the owner of all *ori* or heads, which is where it is believed that the soul resides. In Santería, *Obàtálá* has been syncretized with Our Lady of Mercy. According to mythical stories, *Obàtálá* is the eldest of all orisha. Granted authority to create the earth, *Obàtálá* is the father figure of the other Orisha and is, for that reason, known as the parent of the Orishas and all human kind. In *Children of Obàtálá*, Selgas portrays the nourishing feature of the Orisha. Both male and female, his powerful graphic image shows the children of the world suckling at the breast of the deity. The stories of *Obàtálá* tell that when *Obàtálá* was younger, he saw the anguish of death on the battlefield and that this transformed him into an Orisha who works for peace. *Obàtálá* is therefore considered to be the chief and judge, wise and compassionate. *Obàtálá* is married to Yemaya the ocean goddess and mother-figure of the Orishas, and they have many children.

Cepp Selgas worked with graphic design and textile design before studying with the famous artists and teachers, Antonia Eiriz and Roberto Matta in Cuba. The patterning in his paintings and formal qualities tell of his artistic background, but it is the underlying spirituality that gives the intricate forms content and meaning. Like the work of his teacher Eiriz and fellow student Tomás Sanchez, the meaning is beneath the surface of the forms. But unique to Selgas is that he purposely plays with the forms so that the positive space is as important as the negative space. The individual elements are completed by the complementary space to create a resolution of the forms. There is a duality in the forms and the content which is resolved in the totality of the image. He conveys this syncretist spirit in many works. For example, in *Family Ties* we see the figures coming together and the ancestral connection to the cultural heritage. His

personal ancestral mix includes African, Spanish and Phillipino; here he highlights the black suffering and the destiny of the mix.

A silhouette of a seated female figure inhabits many of **Maria Magdalena Compos Pons'** works. The female figure (which is usually the artist) is fragmented and reconstructed as a series of large format polaroids which combine to reform the image. As a part of the Diaspora of Cuba, this format reminds us of the disparate parts that comprise the Cuban soul. As she states, "Africa was my backyard... Africa was my mother, my grandmother, my uncle. It was everything that I knew, and that was a very rare feeling but almost a displaced feeling."<sup>32</sup> Her works include a combination of multiple symbols that evoke elements of creation, sexuality and procreation. Compos Pons explores the world's trans-cultural symbols and creates syncretist imagery using fetishes from numerous cultures. These symbols come together to indicate Compos Pons' identity as an Afro Cuban and as a female creating a personal icon. Her early works focused primarily on feminist issues. She then came to use her own body for her art, photographs and performances, but recognizes that there are elements of those performances -- her hair, her dress -- that are a part of her daily life. She creates altars and monuments to "the people who were not heroes" and to the Seven Powers. Her works empower the viewer and "remind the viewer about human needs, desires and pain."<sup>33</sup> She remembers dancing to her father's songs of the Orishas. For Campos Pons, who grew up in La Vega, right where her grandfather had been a slave, there is a very close connection to her African roots, but rather than focus on portraying specific Orishas, she instead embraces the total aura of the African spirit. By using her own body in the works, she becomes the essence of the spirit. The colors convey the meaning of the forms, white for *Obàtálá* or blue and yellow for Oshun.

*Cia Cara* was part of a series that the artist created after travelling to Dakar, in Senegal, Africa. Like veiled Muslim women, we do not see the woman's face and yet we see the beautiful fabrics that the women sold. The fabric that surrounds the head and body was meant for use around the hips in a night dance. But Campos Pons purposely uses the fabric in an unlikely manner. She stated that she was "... celebrating the sense of adventure and power of the beautiful and resilient ladies under their veil working the market from sunrise to sunset in the dusty roads of Dakar."<sup>34</sup> The white of the flowers in her hair and clothing suggest that she has become the daughter of *Obàtálá*. Focusing on the head is again reminiscent of *Obàtálá*. The hairdos and wraps represent the cage that protects or enslaves. The artist, posed with her back to us and her white markings on the skin surrounded by the white flowers of *Obàtálá* gives us the women of Dakar as monumental as the spirit of this principle deity.

She, like so many of the artists of Cuba, sees the rich mix of Cuban culture as a source of her visualizations. She stated that, "Cuba is a hybrid. It is very mysterious. It is very mulatto; it is a melting pot for real. It is a Mesoamerican culture with indigenous tradition, an African culture, and a Hispanic culture that merged ... This kind of interrelationship – interweaving of culture – takes a stronghold to define and to construct what the culture is."<sup>35</sup>

**Clara Morera** studied at the National School of Visual Arts and graduated from the San Alejandro Academy with a focus in painting, tapestry, soft sculpture, drawing, and mixed installations. She carefully stitches and embeds a rich web of forms into a sea of blue to represent Yemayah. One critic wrote of her work, she "discovers the painful extent of her poetic universe. Torn hearts where green branches open out, crowned with golden flowers. Sharp onyx daggers,

which have mutilated pilgrims or escaped. A sky of azure. Sacrificial lambs that murmur the names of Orishas, the metamorphosis of strange butterflies, ready to fly away to more clement skies.”<sup>36</sup> Yemaya rules over the seas and lakes and maternity. Her name, a shortened version of Yey Omo Eja means "Mother Whose Children are the Fish" to reflect the fact that her children are so numerous that they are uncountable. Morera's piece is covered with the fish that are her children as her head rises above them. But her works are not meant to be an illustration of the traits of the various Orisha, rather she has derived her own forms and her own vocabulary from the myths of the Orisha. In other works, her art becomes the offering or Milagros for the spirit of the bird which is meant to represent Ashé, or the life force, the very energy of Africa.

**Laura Luna** visualizes Oya, the Female Warrior, the Spirit of the Wind, Storms, and Magic. She is the Santeria equivalent of Saint Catherine or Saint Theresa and thought to be, judging from her many manifestations, a shape shifter; she provides her children or the people who worship her with the ability to change themselves. Oya is a strong warrior and as a warrior-goddess of wind hurricanes, lightening and tornadoes, she guards the underworld. Oya is the only orisha who has the courage to confront the spirit of the dead and is the mother of the ancestors. Her Ashé is essential to the cycle of life and death. Luna's piece, *Oya*, is a ceramic head whose head sprouts forth to form a number nine (a number crucial to Oya).

She also creates altars to the goddesses' that relate to Cuba, be they Oshun, the Virgin del Cobre of Cuba, or those from other cultures. Afro Cuban gods and other ancient symbols, such as snakes, adorn the spaces. The Altar balances the Orishas, as well as the opposites of male and female, and sun and moon. She has created her own dictionary of symbols from years of reading and studying the images in medieval art, African art, Asian art and in *El Monte* by Lydia Cabrera. It is what helps to tie her to Cuba, it is an element that can make her unique and yet a part of a country that she has not seen in more than 20 years. Her *Hierophany* refers to the Sacred and the Profane. Her altar is composed to enable the viewer to transcend the human experience into the sacred through a revelation. The mirror in the altar brings the viewer into the experience to become the participant.

**Manuel Mendive** is perhaps the artist best known for creating images that evoked the spirits of Santería (Regla de Ocha). Mendive visualizes that which he had seen as a child on the altars, in the votive offerings, in ceremonial decorations, and in different manifestations of religious rituals. Mendive grew up in a neighborhood called Luyano, the blue-collar neighborhood outside of Havana where Wifredo Lam had returned whenever he visited Cuba from Europe. It is a neighborhood tucked away from the city with little traffic, and where everyone knows each other. On Sundays, elders play dominoes and review the week's news. It is also a neighborhood where there is Afro Cuban chanting and drumming emanating from almost every house. He left this neighborhood when he was invited to study fine Arts at the San Alejandro Academy in 1959. Mendive did not have an opportunity to travel to Africa until 1982, but his interest in African spirituality began as a child.

Mendive became initiated as a Santero, and sought in his art to visualize the elemental forces of nature and his ancestors. “He began painting in the mid 1960s with the profound, vivid vision of the Yoruba myths.... centered on this mythology, its implications, and its meaning.”<sup>37</sup> He gives the viewer a profound insight into the spirit of the African soul.

In *My Soul is Nourished*, swirls of color surround the central Orisha. Here we see Eleguá invoked in order to open the path for spiritual communication. Behind the large central figure, we can see all the other deities emerging through swirls of colors, crowned by the peacock feathers that symbolize beauty, pride and immortality. Oshun's messenger appears as a vulture, while a white stark figure cries out.

*Shangó y La Vida* immortalizes Spirit of Thunder, and the Orisha that embodies power. Shangó has passion and virility and is represented in the center of the painting by a large phallus that links the two halves of the composition and then turns into a Royal Palm. For Shangó, the palm tree is the symbol of his divinity and his home. He is a womanizer, but is also charming, generous and foremost a fearless warrior. The other Orisha in the painting are accompanied by animals which serve as vehicles for the spirits, giving clues to the identities of the Orisha. Another deity in the painting is Osain, keeper of the jungle and plants, who has but one eye and can hear out of one ear. On the right is the Ibeyi, twin sons of Shangó; they must always remain tied together to avoid losing their power. They represent fortune and good luck, and here offer their fruits. Snails, roosters, goats, turtles, birds and fish nourish other figures. Although not all can be specifically identified, they clearly represent the pantheon of deities related to Shangó.

To engage in an expression of the spiritual Mendive goes beyond the frame (literally and figuratively as in *Akefunfun*) or, what Derrida calls, the *parergon*. Derrida enumerates, there is an inside and an outside of the work of art.<sup>38</sup> One might also see the visual form and the inner content as inside the frame, while the context in which the art is created, as the frame. Mendive finds his African ancestry to be the context for his art. He stated, "African traditions that so influenced our culture have been the medium that has enabled me to express my life experiences. It is the theme I have always used, it is my means of expression, although my style has changed a lot from my early paintings to the present. At the beginning, my work was aggressive in its impact which produced an ephemeral sensation in the spectator, given the violence of the painting. Now, that is no longer a prevalent factor, but rather subtlety of image, which is designed to envelope the same previously aggressive elements in a more suggestive atmosphere."<sup>39</sup> The context, the frame, embraces the image as the image illuminates the frame.

As a child in Camaguey, **Juan Boza** lived with a family of Santería priests. Early on, he realized that his attraction to Lam's work was not just in the forms, but in their essence. Boza had won a scholarship to the San Alejandro Academy in 1962 and in 1964 was admitted to the Union of Artists and Writers (UNEAC). By 1965 he was admitted to the Experimental Graphic Workshop in Havana where he became a lithographer. He won the Casa de las Americas award in lithography (1967), and in 1968 he started to work as a designer at the National Council of Culture. But the 1970s were a difficult time for Juan Boza in Cuba. In an interview Boza stated: "I had been selected to represent Cuba in the Paris Biennial, when the government announced preparations for the Education and Culture Congress. Many artists were removed from their posts. I was one of them. My entry was cancelled, as the government rescinded my permission to participate."<sup>40</sup>

Boza decided to leave Cuba for the United States on the Mariel boatlift in 1980 (as did Cepp Selgas). "My exodus via Mariel", writes Boza "was an unbelievable journey; the ocean, the waves in the middle of the night, made the end seem near. New York was a tremendous shock; I was not happy with my work. I had to rebuild Juan Boza from scratch

and find my own expression.... I realized that Afro Cuban tradition was part of my culture, of my ethos. ...there is no distinction between my faith and my aesthetics...”<sup>41</sup> Boza became an ordained Santeria priest and created mystical abstract paintings, drawings and alters incorporating Santeria symbolism. Boza often complained that much of the art relating to the syncretism of religion had become too academic, and had even accused Wifredo Lam of this.<sup>42</sup> He believed that the United States “as a result of migration and a lack of institutionalization, allowed a flexibility and constant flux in practice and iconography...”<sup>43</sup> Boza intended for his art to function as a conduit between cultures. He created altars that were central to the African religion. The altars with titles such as *The Offering* or *Yemayá oro inlé* were meant to inspire people to give to the gods. Robert Farris Thompson referred to his altars as “the face of the gods... a place for appeasement, where votive pottery is placed and cool liquids are poured from vessels.”<sup>44</sup>

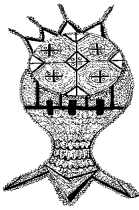
Boza created drawings, prints and altars that embodied the signs and symbols of Santería and the Abakuá. Boza’s work also used some of the more than 500 Abakuá symbols in his work, often combined with the context of a Santería Orisha. In his altars, he used fabrics, metal and even Native American objects to evoke all of the spirits important in this religious pantheon. Boza created only a few major installations in the United States, including *Crowning of the Earth*. This mixed media installation sought to establish a link between man and nature. The installation included symbols, fabric, images of fish and feathers. Eleguá sat at the base of this abstract tree-like form surrounded by dirt, gourds and corn. Within days of the completion of the installation, the corn sprouted and Boza had felt as if his installation was truly alive. Boza felt that he had found artistic freedom in the U.S., but within a decade of his journey to Brooklyn, New York, he suddenly and tragically died of what some believe was a ruptured appendix. Without family and with only a few friends, Boza had been displaced, lonely and isolated. His work was found abandoned and put in storage. Other works that have survived include drawings and prints that friends had held onto for him. Little is known of him or his art today in the U.S., and less in Cuba, as the work that survived is rarely shown.

**Belkis Ayon** sought, through her prints, to merge the myths and conflicts of the patriarchal society of the Abakuá with Catholicism and issues of feminism. The Abakuá is a secret male-only brotherhood from Nigeria and the Cameroon area of Africa that became popular in Cuba in the 1830s. Cuban men entered the Abakuá lodge through rituals (derived from the NgBe society of the Ejagham of Nigeria and the Cameroon). The organization was financed by means of fundraising among its members and has a hierarchical organization of spiritual leaders who facilitate the presence of supernatural beings. As a female Afro-Cuban, Ayon’s interests were similar to those of Lydia Cabrera. Unraveling the myths of the Abakuá was part of her quest to understand, in a postmodern feminist society, how women fit into a patriarchal, spiritual world. Her art investigates and explores not only a world where women were forbidden, but incorporates the primacy of the female mother image—a figure central to most religions. While men were sworn to secrecy, Ayon -- who was not permitted access—was able to reveal through her art the myths of the [Abakuá](#).

Belkis Ayon first became interested in the myths and images of the Abakuá while a student. She stated, “I was involved in researching art from Cuban cults when something curious happens: I was in the class ... trying to make some sort of dancing devil and Pablo Borges, who was my professor at the time told me that what I was doing could bring serious implications.” This piqued her interest and Ayon persevered -- she learned more about the Abakuá than most

women, despite being refused information from their libraries.<sup>45</sup> The story of the original myth, according to Ayon, tells us that there once was a secret society of men and a secret society of women. Each society was represented by an animal. In order for each society to attain prosperity and wealth, they had to hunt their animal in order to assume its properties. When the animal was killed, (the sacred Leopard for men and sacred Fish for women) its characteristics and strengths transferred into the man who slew the animal.<sup>46</sup> It was difficult for the men to capture the power in the Leopard, so eventually, according to Belkis Ayon, the man decided to steal the woman's secret-- Tanze the sacred fish.

As Ayon tells the story, a woman named Sikan went to the river each day to fetch water. One day, as Sikan was fetching water, the sacred fish Tanze jumped into the gourd that she held to collect the water. When the man saw that the fish was no longer in the river, he sent the snakes to find out what was happening, or at least to frighten the girl at the river. Frightened by the snake, she dropped the gourd containing the sacred fish, but Sikan had already embodied the spirit of the fish because the fish had chosen her. The men of the Abakuá, however, would not stop their quest to gain Tanze's powers. They decided to kill Sikan in order to release the powers which she now possessed, but gained nothing. After committing the murder, a brotherhood of 12 or 13 men (this number differs in various interpretations) agreed to a treaty, while under a leopard skin, that women should be excluded from their quest to embody the powers of Tanze. Taken from Africa and now shipped off to Cuba, they organized their "brotherhood" in Havana, Matanzas, and Cardenas as they had in Africa, and continued the rituals.



9. Lydia Cabrera  
illustration

Ayon does more than just narrate the story. She pares down the original myth and recreates it in her work. The narrative comes together to inform us about the myth as a metaphor; Sikan represents all women, attacked by snakes; erotic symbols that were a threat to Sikan and to all women. Belkis Ayon stated, "I discovered in Abakuá, persistently relating them to the nature of man vivid personalities, with feelings, which sometimes grips us, feelings; we don't know how to define, but these fugitive emotions... with the spiritual. They incorporate into my work, personalities like the leopard man, a figure identified with imposing power and aggression-- a 'macho' who sacrificed Sikan, the woman who discovered the secret ...at the hands of the man at the altar so that the secret would remain among them and not disappear."<sup>47</sup> For Belkis Ayon, the sacrifice of Sikan is reminiscent of the sacrifice of innocence. The goat or lamb is a symbol dating back to pre-Christian and early Christian iconography and, in her work, represents the slaughter of the innocents as described in the Bible. Ancient cultures sacrificed a lamb and other animals to appease the gods. Christian doctrine refers to Jesus as a sacrificial lamb that takes away the sins of the world. In one of Ayon's most important works, we see a lamb on the shoulders of Sikan. It is a key symbol in Ayon's art. The figure's body is also covered with the scales of the fish to represent Tanze. Sikan is immortalized as the "Mother of the Abakuá."

In a major work, created shortly before her death, *Dando y Dando* Ayon collaborated with Angel Ramirez to create a monumental five foot square collograph. In this work the Spanish icon figure of Colonialism and Catholocism reaches out to the Abakuá icon of Sikan, representing the two parts of Cuban identity. Only the snakes found on the bottom of the image appear to connect them both. But Belkis Ayon's work is a syncretic mix of European technique and African mythology. She developed her technique at a time, euphemistically called the Special Period, when there were very few materials available. She developed an intricate matrix on cardboard, adding to it, cutting into it, and pasting on

more cardboard to flesh out the piece. She drew her image on the cardboard and then built it up using, sandpaper and other materials such as carbon in order to achieve a thick textured block. The deep values of blacks and whites are obtained by using different items such as gesso and acrylic varnish sealer. First outlining the figures on the matrix and then engraving the matrix itself to achieve the black lines; the finished matrix is actually a collage of different papers that are held together with white glue. She then embedded the themes of the Abakuá into this work that synthesized Western techniques of printmaking, and yet iconography from Africa as well as Catholicism and Byzantine art.

Contemporary artists have also used new media to introduce the issues related to the syncretist mix of African and Catholic imagery. **Sandra Ramos**, who is known for her printmaking oeuvre, created an installation, *March of Promises*, that incorporated the new medium of photography and video in a work dedicated to Babaluayé or Saint Lazarus. The iconic image of Lazarus, who represents healing, is usually shown as an old man dressed in a sack, his body covered with wounds,. Every year, from the night of December 16 into the 17th in Santiago de Las Vegas. there is a four kilometer procession to the Church of Saint Lazarus to pray for healing. During the prior year, people had made promises to do something for Saint Lazarus so that he would heal them. They come to pay their promises, be it crawling on the ground, carrying a boulder or whatever task was required. The pilgrims tend to be the poor and sick; they are individuals who are marginalized by the system and people who usually know little about art. They now become the subject of the art.

Ramos began to photograph the people at the procession in 1999. She installed seventeen light boxes on the wall outside of the AIDS hospital that the people in the procession had to pass on their way to Saint Lazarus. When she installed the light boxes later in a gallery, the installation was accompanied by scores of Santos-like St. Lazarus figures. The figures were made of cast plaster and she formed a line of them to resemble the marchers proceeding to the shrine. Ramos intentionally arranged the figures to cast long shadows, making their march appear endless. A video on the floor in front of the plaster St. Lazarus figures showed the march of the pilgrims from the year before, so that there is a seemingly endless march watching a seemingly endless march. She does not merely present this in order to offer a realistic portrayal, but to elaborate upon the collective unconscious that brings together those who have been marginalized. She presents the pilgrimage and the promises, not the healing. It is a work about the nature of the individual who comes with hope in spite of their twisted bodies, hunger and/or illness. They are a metaphor for society.

The installation explores themes on many levels. It is, of course, about the need for healing, which one can consider on a physical, spiritual or political level. But the procession is also one more way to move away from the everyday real world and find solace in something else, to believe that there is some other power that will help them with their sorrows. Art is spirit visualizing into matter and can show the beauty and evil in our world, or raise the individual spirit to ask questions. Ramos, known for her printmaking and suitcase installations, has tackled this popular religious event because she sees it as a metaphor for Cuba. Interested always in the societal issues of Cuba, this is an existential exploration as well. She has revealed the *balseros*, alcoholism and the quest for the US dollar in other worksin ), but this piece, begs the question as to whether this is all but one more form of escape from the sorrows and afflictions that people face.



### *The Ingredients: Spirit of the Amerindians*

The first group met by Columbus in 1492 is believed to have been a group of Amerindians, referred to as Tainos. It is assumed that they were the most populous group in the Greater Antilles (including Cuba), but were nearly exterminated by the Spaniards-- killed by the sword, famine, or imported diseases. But some Amerindians survived in Puerto Rico, other Caribbean countries, and remote enclaves in Cuba. They also intermarried and interwove their heritage with that of others that had come from Africa, Spain or China. The Cuban–American artist Ana Mendieta expressed their plight when she wrote, “In a matter of a few years due to the inequality of weapons, overpowered by hunger, sickness and hard labor and stripped of their national identity, the few survivors where [sic] rapidly assimilated by the conquistadors. From that tragic event little has been saved; the cultivation and use of certain plants, the way they built their rustic homes, some domestic artifacts, the words with which they named the earth, fauna and flora and some very little knowledge of the gods in whom they believed and trusted.”<sup>48</sup>

We do know that they, like many indigenous peoples, were observers of nature who sought to live in harmony with their environment. Frogs, dogs, hummingbirds and alligators were all an integral part of this Shamanistic belief system. Many artists who sought to understand the indigenous culture of their country, learned what they could in Cuba, but also travelled to Mexico and the United States, Columbia and Venezuela where information on indigenous culture could be more readily found. They hoped that their study of other indigenous people would help them to better understand their own culture. They took that information and wed it with the spirituality of Africa, Spain and China.

**Juan Francisco Elso** was one of the Cuban artists particularly interested in the cultures of the Americas, as well as that of Africa. He had an interest in anthropology and in creating an art that had meaning beyond the aesthetics of the form. Introduced to Santería and initiated into the practice, he was also fascinated by the symbolic powers found in objects of pre-Columbian Amerindian culture. He stated, “I believe that the magnitude of art is to be able to find that light that is in all things and human relations. That can be done with a conscious or unconscious form, in agreement with the more or less rational processes that each one brings inside.”<sup>49</sup>

One of his early exhibitions (1982) *Tierra, Maíz, Vida (Earth, Maize, Life)*, for example, emphasized the importance of agriculture to indigenous cultures. The exhibit included text and a recording of songs from the Bari Indians of Columbia and Venezuela. The art that he created invokes the ancient spirits of the ancestors and the earth through the use of blood, seeds, and soil. It reflects an intimate involvement with the land and indigenous American traditions. Luis Caminitzer wrote about Elso soon after his death, “...with singular precision, Elso handled a strange mixture of secularity and mysticism, of magic and ethics. This mixture governed all of his actions in art and life ...In some other society, these seesaw changes and the interpretive risks associated with them would have condemned them to an alienated individualism. But living in Cuba, with its clear understanding, it’s almost physical awareness of belonging to a complex social fabric, its pantheistic membership in the universe, all this was transformed into what may have been a fully realized ‘Latin American spirituality’, and not merely a nascent projection of its values.”<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, very few works by Elso have survived. His untimely death and the fragile nature of the works have severely limited its accessibility to the general audience. *Pájaro que vuela sobre América* (Bird that Flies over America)

is a major work that has survived in spite of the fact that it is made of twigs, earth, basketwork, and honey. Also referred to this piece as related to the legends found in many indigenous cultures, especially those in the Amazon.<sup>51</sup> Most legends see the bird as a messenger of the gods. In some versions the bird is a macaw, (as in Columbia), and represents the need for survival; the bird brings food and seeds across large expanses of space. The bird also represents freedom and flight for the shaman as he passes from death to rebirth. Elso's bird is a cross between human and animal and can be the mediator between the human world and the cosmos. The head of the bird is reminiscent of a skull, but its deep set focused eyes remind us of a predator. The body of the bird is a crucifix and in the center of the cross is a heart that is covered with sludge and ash. The heart relates to an entire series that he created of "bleeding hearts", an important symbol in Hispanic culture. The materials are from the earth and relate to the fragility of the earth and perhaps life, perhaps foreshadowing the fact that Elso would only live for two years after this piece was created.

Elso did not try to copy Santeria or Amerindian myths or rituals, but rather incorporated them into the image of a larger, more universal spirituality. In his application for a Guggenheim fellowship, shortly before his death in 1988, Elso wrote, "for me art is a long process of seeing the world as a whole and myself as a part of it. Processes and observations are more important than my work. Through them it is possible to experience a type of learning that is almost mystical, and they shape my attitude towards life.... This entire experience is based on a Latin American spirit that we are only just beginning to perceive as a system of values .... This development will lead to changes in our culture and some of us will be their humble heralds."<sup>52</sup> Elso's influence reached well into the next generation, having a profound effect on the art of Tania Bruguera, Esterio Segura, Kcho and Carlos Estevez and in their use of dirt seeds, natural materials and carved wooden figures as well as complex spiritual symbology.

**José Bedia** combines African spirituality(Santería and Paolo Monté), with indigenous cultural traditions, to create an art about the relationship of man with the Cosmos. In his drawings and installations, he creates a personal interpretation of the spiritual world. Unlike traditional Western art, his art is not narrative; it is experiential --a life history that is embedded in the object. His works serves as a place for healing; the viewer experiences the spirits and therefore becomes a participant. Many of his ideas came from Wifredo Lam. He was greatly influenced by Lam and spent days with him at the end of his life talking to him about spirituality. (*Ay Tata Protect Us* was in fact owned by Wifredo Lam's second wife.)

Bedia was introduced to the practices of the Native American Indian and pre-Columbian Amerindian culture as a way for him to connect to American indigenous peoples. In the 1980s, when Bedia began investigating Amerindian traditions, little was known about the Tainos.<sup>53</sup> He found that these indigenous people had similar worldviews to those of many Amerindian societies. In 1985 Bedia received an invitation, through a grant from the Ford Foundation, that enabled him to go to Long Island, New York for four months. Bedia fondly remembers taking the train to NYC museums to see African Dogon figures and other art objects he had never before seen in person. He also frequented the Museum of the American Indian, which had a great impact on his work. Through connections in New York, he met the artist, Jimmy Duran who enabled him to travel to an Indian reservation in South Dakota.

Bedia has come to combine totemic objects from the Dakotas, playing on the coincidences between these objects and their relationship with nature. He links the general belief among indigenous cultures around the world that

supernatural forces reside inside the natural realm. Similarly, in Bedia's art, humans and animals are interconnected, illustrating the need to live together as in *Ay Tata Protect Us* where a dog licks the wounds of the leg of a man, (perhaps a reference to Babaluyae). The Tainos believed that animals, especially dogs have a spirit. Mesoamerican Indians believe that every person has an animal counterpart in the forest; when one dies, so does the other. His interest in Native Americans was one of their spirituality, and the objects that embodied that spirit. He has called himself a "frustrated anthropologist". His work uses religion, kitsch, politics and typology as the signifiers. They incorporate objects of modern technology and modern life as well as various spiritual traditions. In *Sacred Profession* a man sits *zazen* meditating, holding incense in front of what could be a hog plum or guava tree. The long leaves and small fruit hanging from the branches suggest this spiritual tree of the Taino. The guava is associated with the dead and one can see the spirit immersed in the tree. The Taino believed, as in the African and Asian cultures, that the living and the dead had a spirit. Bedia stated, "In my case, I seek a more general knowledge, more sensible, more inspired. I seek to bring out the presence of the past in the present."<sup>54</sup>

Bedia uses common Native American symbols such as geometric shapes, a half Moon shape, or the symmetrical geometric designs that resemble patterns on a basket or textiles.<sup>55</sup> The Zemi of the Taino is understood to be a sacred symbol which is in the shape of a triangle. Each point represents the process of existence as Life, Death, and Creation. We can see this in *Predestined Figure*. The figure is surrounded by concentric circles which may also represent the imaginary central hole that connects the Earth to the Cosmos in Taino culture. Similarly, in African Bakongo culture the concentric circles link man and nature, heaven and earth, bringing man into a spiritual contact with the moon. The disk shape mimics the shield of the Amerindian while the triangle shape relates to a teepee form, the earth or a mountain. The mountain sits on a sphere that gives the mountain the movement within the form. These various graphic images all relate back to Sioux pictographs found on Tepee covers, clothing, and shields. Like many Native American groups, Bedia also frequently includes written descriptions of a scene on an image. The formal elements, and mythological components link back to an understanding of these traditions.

Leandro Soto and Jose Bedia were two of the key artists that helped **Ana Mendieta** connect to her cultural heritage. In turn, she provided them with access to the artworld outside Cuba. Mendieta's youth was spent in Cuba where she remembers studying about early civilizations. The work of Ana Mendieta invokes the spirituality of Africa and the heritage of Amerindian people through performances and *earth body* sculptures, which have been documented in film and photography. These would become a significant source of inspiration for the performance art that she first created in the United States. She saw her own body as the vessel for her artistic expression. Her works were created at site-specific locations on beaches, riverbanks and in the deep woods of Mexico, the United States and Cuba where her physical being would be incorporated into these sites.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the fact that Mendieta was physically living in Iowa since age 13, she felt a dire need to reconnect herself to her Cuban roots. She recalls seeing some Afro Cuban rituals carried out by her grandmother's housekeepers.<sup>57</sup> She instinctually felt connected to the earth but felt that she lacked in-depth knowledge about the rituals. Mendieta sought out other Cubans living in the United States, and went on trips to Mexico to learn more about her Hispanic heritage. An

admirer of Frida Kahlo, Mendieta found a relationship between Kahlo's spiritual heritage and that found in the indigenous peoples of Mexico. The writings of Lydia Cabrera became an important link for Mendieta to Cuba. She came to use the *anaforuana* (sacred signs as described by Lydia Cabrera in her book of the same title) that were used by the Abakuá to sanctify a location. Mendieta was further drawn to certain characteristics of Santería and indigenous practices, particularly those related to earth-centered rituals and those that were female-oriented.

Ana Mendieta's main source of information on the Taino culture was Professor José Arrom and his book *Mytología y artes prehispánicas de las Antillas*. She came to recognize that the cave is reminiscent of a womb and as the Taino people believed, they emerged from the cave. The principle art of the Tainos was the stylized motifs found in the rocks. This was meant to evoke the spiritual forces of nature. Taino peoples often painted the caves, carved the rocks or buried the images in the ground.

In January 1980, Ana Mendieta made the first of seven recorded visits to Cuba. During her second visit with a group that included Lucy Lippard, Martha Rosler and Mendieta's husband Carl Andre, she saw the artist organized seminal exhibit *Volume I* and spent time with several of the young artists including Jose Bedia, Elso, and Leandro Soto. Umberto Peña also took her to meet older artists such as Antonia Eiriz, and Amelia Pelaez.<sup>58</sup> She visited towns known for Afro Cuban rituals, and museums to see objects and to visit altars, which she documented in photographs. After a boating trip with many of the artists from *Volume I*, she was brought to the Jaruco area of Cuba, about twenty miles from Havana. Mendieta obtained permission to carve life-sized figures into the soft limestone wall with a piece entitled *Esculturas Rupestres*; she hoped that this work would evoke the spirits of the Taino inhabitants of Cuba. Mendieta wrote, "My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe."<sup>59</sup> She also created drawings related to her carvings and those of the Taino. In her proposal for a grant, she drew preliminary sketches of the rock forms and gave them names, titles that are no longer necessarily associated with specific pieces. However, the images depicted here relate to the drawings that she calls *Guanaroco* (First Woman), and (the one with zig zag forms) is *Itiba cahubaba* (Mother). She wrote, "I understand that myths are the accumulation of the experience of a people, based on their most profound and significant beliefs. They express the general attitudes and feelings, how they perceived the world and represented natural phenomena."<sup>60</sup> Before she died Ana Mendieta had been organizing the materials of her art in order to present it in a book. She wrote that she hoped that the book would constitute "a step towards revealing the artistic and spiritual legacy left by the ancient inhabitants of Antilles."<sup>61</sup>

Mendieta's art recalls the history of the image of the goddess, its relationship to Gaia, and her connection to the earth as the ultimate goddess that gives birth to the soul of the land as well as the soul of the person. Mendieta saw the goddess as a symbol connecting the earth to her own physical female being.<sup>62</sup> Her *Silueta/Silhouette* questioned the transitory nature of our existence, the role of spirituality in our lives and underscored the need for us to be connected to our heritage and our land. She created archetypal figures and became the form. The art that she created, especially in the *Silueta/Silhouette* series, recalls the sea and sand of Cuba, but also the religions. Her work is a contemporary re-interpretation of many of the rituals of ancient religions such as Santería, Palo Monte, Tainos, and Abakuá. She brought the various aspects of the African religion and its Catholic ancillaries into her art as she explored issues of the displacement of people. She symbolically displaced earth and replaced it with grass, moss, flowers, flames, feathers into

a cavity that was shaped by her own body. She wrote, “art is a material part of culture, but its greatest value is its spiritual role.” She saw her work as a means for healing – healing the earth, after the displacement and loss of its nourishment. Mendieta came to see the earth as a living thing, from which one gains power. She said, “now I believe in water, air, ... they are all deities.”<sup>63</sup> In African and indigenous spirituality she found the “holistic harmony of the universe.”<sup>64</sup>

**Leandro Soto** creates art which is interdisciplinary, multimedia, cross-cultural and syncretist. African, Asian, Mexican, native American spirits coalesce in his work. “For me art is always a system of relationships, a careful equilibrium between one thing and another,” Soto stated, “call it nature, spirit, society, psyche, or the individual. My art explores these relationships by engendering responses closer to the poetic, the mythic and the sacred ways of perceiving reality. The work can be figurative or abstract; however the key here is the inner organization of the work and its metaphoric implications. In my artwork, the personal anecdote has been displaced, leaving plenty of room to attempt an understanding, not only of the purely aesthetic necessity but also of a desire to understand those key symbols and rituals that transcend individuality. My approach to art includes multi-cultural and inter-disciplinary components, which are the result of my traveling, living and experimenting with different art forms and cultures. Aiming always at a synthesis and integration of values, my purpose is to significantly contribute to cross-cultural understanding.”<sup>65</sup>

**Soto** left Cuba for Mexico in 1988 and says he “carries Cuba with him wherever he goes.”<sup>66</sup> While living in Tobasco Mexico, near the Yucatan, he created an art school for native children. When he left Mexico for the U.S. in 1993, a rich pantheon of gods and goddesses from his native land and Mexico went with him. While living in the U.S., Soto updated this ancient mythology, making room for mainstays of US pop culture and global signifiers--from Hershey's Kisses to Mickey Mouse. He went to Arizona and discovered the Kachina of Native Americans, he went to India and discovered Durga of Hinduism; as he travels he increasingly sees the connections between the spiritual traditions of all peoples. While living in Arizona, Soto began to see more concretely the parallels between the indigenous American cultures and African culture. *KachIreme* merges the indigenous rituals of Arizona with the Abakuá of the Congo. The performance he created for this work evokes the Kachina of the native Americans and the Iremé or masked Diablo of the Abakuá. Evoking the Kachina cultural influences means using many symbols that come from Amerindian culture, but also coincidentally resembles those from Africa. The installation is accompanied by a DVD of a performance. The *íreme* witnesses rituals and observes, but does not speak. Rather, the *íreme* protect the brotherhood and expel evil. The suits of the *íreme* are usually painted, and then have fringes on the end of the sleeves and pants. They wear a large pointed hood/mask which has cut outs for the eyes, which are sometimes filled in with white. A large disk on the back of the head is the compliment to the front eyes giving the *íreme* four eyes. The cosmological diagram is here used as well—it contains two staring eyes to remind us of Sikan and Tanze (the sacred fish), and a fusion of their power. Soto becomes the *íreme* (the spirit messenger) once he dons the costume. When a man puts on the checkerboard or saber tooth patterned suit (supposedly related to the Leopard society costume of Abakuá) and the pointed hat and mask, he becomes the spirit of another world. *Iremé* is the transitional figure between humans and the spiritual world.

The DVD that accompanies the installation of *Kachíreme*, begins with views of the mountains and rocks of the indigenous people. Many Amerindian traditions believe that certain stones contain powers which hold ancestral spirits.

They have a strength and power beyond that of humans. Suddenly the *íreme* is seen in the mountains, huddled near a cave sleeping because caves hold the origins of the world. The Amerindian music rises as does *íreme* and he begins to fill a long scroll of paper with symbols –a Teepee, a sun with an eye, spirals, water, arrows. It should be noted that he paints with a Chinese calligraphic brush symbols that are both African and Amerindian. As he moves, the land appears to move with him and the boundary is blurred between what he paints and what he sees. The colors are depleted and he returns to painting the calligraphic strokes, while African music now plays in the background. He then takes the long scroll of symbols and holds it up to the sky for the spirits to behold -- as he does the Amerindian music returns. It is this very long horizontal scroll that finds its way, conceptually, onto the wall of his installation, again blurring the boundaries between performance and installation, the real and imagined. The *íreme* now shakes a large book and the world appears to move again. We soon learn that the book contains the calligraphic markings that retell the story of the *íreme* lost in the desert. Colors reappear, rocks reappear by his side, he holds it up as in a dream, standing on top of the mountain, dancing in Amerindian steps to African Abakuá music. It is a fully syncretist work and all boundaries are blurred. Back in the installation we don't know if it is a real or imagined, African or Amerindian.

Soto's art transcends time and space as well as boundaries of nations and cultures. He invites the viewer to become a participant in the installation. Surrounded by a scroll with symbols from both cultures, the horizontality of the space is emphasized. We are in the land, in the cave, a part of the earth. The sculptures that punctuate the space not only give a vertical complement, but serve to stand as the figures in the land. They each have a light (literally) that represents the soul or spirit of the individual, or ghost that once was there. The feathers are symbols of prayers and of creativity, the founder of ideas, while mirrors and bottles on the sculptures are there to capture the spirits. Round paintings adorn the wall like protective shields, accompanied by sticks that are the skeleton of the cactus but now become prayer sticks that mark the ground. Throughout his installation arrows can be found that connote direction and power. The arrows pointing downward in yellow reflect the descent of life while the upward arrow is painted in white for death. The costume once worn in the DVD is now on the floor, surrounded by the white chalk; the marks on the floor signify the movement of the energy from the *íreme* and the white is the skin of the dead. Soto points out that underlying all the visible forms in the animate and inanimate world there exists a vital essence from which the spirit emerges. Soto's imagery moves us to experiences beyond the form. The work is never fully predetermined. It is a partially unconscious expression of the mind, the emotions, and the soul. In Soto's art there is always a reverence for the spiritual, be it the *qi* in his *sumi* ink paintings or the *ashé* in his large scale paintings of the Orishas, or a confluence of them all. Soto seeks to understand the mysteries of the unknown through his paintings, installations and performances. His art embodies the spirit of the Afro Cuban, Chinese, and Indigenous religions and explores the issues of identity faced by all Latinos and those of the Diaspora.

## *The Stew: Ajiaco as Postmodern theory*

In 1979, Jean-Francois Lyotard presented his essay on the Postmodern condition. He discussed the end of the meta-narrative and the importance of small narratives within a pluralistic society. In rejecting the primacy of the Western tradition, Postmodernism enabled the artist to take the fragments of the “other”, the “small” stories of non-Western cultures and reform, reinterpret, and blend them with Western tradition so as to formulate bodies of knowledge which could be used in today’s post-capitalist society. Postmodernism emphasizes a plethora of views from a variety of sources. The artists of Cuba have been in a unique situation to deconstruct the meta-narrative of modern society. While many Western artists were still steeped in their own inbred Western traditions, Cuba was propelled into this new world view. Alienated from the outside world, as US and Cuban leaders restricted outside travel, telephone and internet service, Cubans looked to what was accessible. Postmodernism erupted on the scene in Cuba because the artists born into isolationism, limited personal freedom, but intellectual challenge, and a culture that valued art explored, the many cultures that comprise the Cuban stew. They found that they had an intellectual heritage that was based on a rich spiritual tradition; many artists investigated the bones of Ajiaco in new ways.

The spiritual traditions of Africa, China, Spain or Amerindian culture nourished the very soul of the Cuban. These traditions inspired the artists to create images that provoked an understanding of some ‘ultimate reality.’ Indigenous rituals, Chinese symbols and African iconography give the Cuban avant-garde artist a unique language, an encyclopedia of spirituality and symbology. Rather than adapting strict European signifiers, Cuban artists found their own vocabulary. The visualizations of the Cuban artist went beyond the syncretism of Lam to an integral conscious manipulation of the various forms in order to create a “Universal” language. The art shown in this context does not merely illustrate the spirituality, but seeks to embody its essence. Each artist took from those cultures that which best suited their needs of self expression. Some artists specifically studied the myths and the rituals of one or two of the cultural traditions, but many of the most contemporary of the artists have gone beyond the specifics of the religion to embrace the “Universal” and to connect it to broader socio-political issues. The artist leads the viewer to see this Universal spirit in the particular, beyond the form to ideas, and emotions that have no form. The artist can point to the moon and its nuances, but cannot give us the moon-- the artist points to the idea but needs us to complete the association. All of the artists discussed point us to the way to experience the soul of Cuba. Carlos Estevez, Santiago Rodriguez Olazabal, Perez Bravo and Luis Cruz Azaceta broaden the scope of Ajiaco. They create a new narrative that energizes the “other.” Their Ajiaco, like those previously discussed, address the issues inherent in Post-Modernism.

**Carlos Estevez** studies the intersections of time and space, body and spirit, while consistently seeking out the Universal philosophical beliefs found in all cultures.. In an early work entitled “To be the Spectator of Your Own History,” he depicts a figure holding his own head while looking at himself. Carlos Estevez does that a lot –he always seems to be looking and analyzing not at what is on the surface, but what is within. Estevez has brought together intellectual and spiritual references to comment on the nature of his very existence. In *Nobody can see through My Eyes*,

the figure's nude body is a roughly hewn "everyman" and yet it is the artist. With remnants of old paint, scars and cuts which marks the form, it is reminiscent of figures carved by Elso and Aguilera. The well-worn surface of the piece gives it the appearance that it embodies the patina of time and represents the history of mankind. Like most of Estevez' work, reality is what is seen from within, not from without. "Estevez employs visual metaphors to piece together a world view, one that avoids establishing a totality by remaining endlessly open. This worldview is a space where other world views, myths, and imageries from a variety of cultures, anthropological interpretations, philosophical ideas, experiences and personal visions can interact."<sup>67</sup> In *Noone can see through my Eyes* the mind of a rough hewn figure reaches out across the dark earth in 12 directions. Visualized by the branches and red lines in the dirt, it engages a variety of directions at once. The branches (literally and figuratively) of the path never quite make it beyond the island on which the artist seems isolated. The figure is found in a cage made of the branches or paths he has made for himself; he is trapped in his own world, on his own island.

In his later work, Carlos Estevez continues to peel away the facades that prevent us from seeing into the soul. In drawings and collage, he focuses on figures put together like marionettes and yet clearly individualized. The marionette symbology connotes the manipulation of "man" in society and the difficulty of escaping those strings which control us. In *La Carrera* the figure sits zazen in meditation. As in Estevez' early work, which saw the eyes and head as a source of power, these later works show the *cakras* as key pinpoints on the body. The main *cakras* are clearly identified, but circling his entire torso is the circle or "racetrack" of life. The never ending circle is more than just the human condition of running in place, it is the restless spirit of our souls. It encircles the *Hara*, the source, the center, the source of *qi* or all energy. In this way, rather than studying any one specific religion, he creates archetypal images that speak globally to a Post Modern world. In works such as *Lugares desconocidos (Unknown Place)* the *cakras* are comprised of circles with the four cardinal points, or as a wheel which represents the dharma or turning of life. The eight spokes of the wheel represents the eight fold path of Buddhism: a path to enlightenment and the end of suffering. The wheel traditionally turns both ways but only, when the body and mind are at peace, can the wheel of life rest and release the individual from suffering. Here one wheel is by the figure's heart creating an obvious metaphor about the primacy of compassion in the path to enlightenment, and the other is in the palm of his right hand. The right hand is generally the hand that gives the gesture of turning the Dharma wheel of knowledge. Estevez stated, "For me, art is a way to understand life. I don't do it just for pleasure; I do it to gain knowledge. I learn while I'm working. For me, ... my work is a reflection into the human being. I'm interested in human spirituality. ...to search into the material presented... the symbolical meaning of the object."<sup>68</sup>

The work of **Santiago Rodriguez Olazabal** also has a spiritual strength that creates a dialogue, not with any one person, religion or god, but rather with that which speaks to a collective memory of those from Africa and Cuba. His personal memories and dreams speak to a collective unconscious. "...In my work, sometimes I start with Ifa, I have a dream, and from this dream other dreams are derived. My work has a strong relation to my dreams. Sometimes the works are presented to me, and I just have to produce them."<sup>69</sup>

Olazabal comes from a religious family, including *Ifa* priests and priestesses, but his heritage, like that of most Cubans, is a mixture of Spanish and African ancestry. He has been initiated into the *Ifa* cult and that of *Oshun*. Olazabal



states that "...for me to create is a reason of being. And for me my religion, the religion I practice, is another reason of being. They are very linked. When I do an object (an aesthetic object) I do it similar to when I do a religious object. For me there are no boundaries, there is no separation. They are mixed, because I have this possibility..."<sup>70</sup> He states that his art is derived from "an African religion that is alive, and practiced in Cuba, but my formation responds to the West... I am a man from the Western hemisphere. I respond to a European school of thought, and have European habits. I am not an African, I have to think as a man from this hemisphere, and especially from the Caribbean. I cannot deny that. If I do, I am a liar, and I am denying myself and part of my genealogy."<sup>71</sup>

Olazabal appropriates symbols from various cultures. He states that "When I talk of wood or paint with an emphasis on the space of the object, they are not spiritually charged because they are "art" objects. Viewers often think that they have very specific meanings as if they are charged with a specific Orisha, but that interpretation is left to the viewer... It is up to those who want to get inside the piece and de-codify it as a religious object. ... It is simply the cross that indicates the cardinal points: the four elements, the four energies. ... It can be wind, water, fire and earth, for example. When I use the shells, or *dilogún*, they are also coming from the North American aborigines, from the aborigines of the Amazon and from the African aborigines.... This richness of reading is what keeps the work alive." He continues, "I started to use the image and colors not only for aesthetic questioning, but also to write my thoughts. That is why I always say drawing for me is writing: it is my calligraphy. It's the way I write, the way I translate my thoughts, the way I... communicate what is inside, inside of my being."<sup>72</sup>

The titles of Santiago Olazabal's works are also critical to understanding the link between his art and the wisdom that comes from past generations. *Fue en ogunda méji donde ògún el camino a la tierra* illustrates the breath, the spirit, the power and energy that brings about change. The work illustrates the orisha Ogun, who can bend iron with his *ashé*. He is the warrior of life and death and his spirit and fire creates the forms. He molds civilization like he molds iron. Some say he lives in the knife and clears the path for men, but he also represents virility. He is energy and a sustainer of life, the form that is bent becomes a boomerang shape, bringing back all the energy to within. The blood drips from the knife to show that he is alive; the dots portray the energy that pervades the atmosphere. *Cuando el alma gemela vino a buscar a persona* is about the transformative energy found in much of his work. He shows that death is part of the cycle of life. The spirit of the living is his twin soul. In poetic ways, he visualizes the transmigration of the soul. He brings in an unknown world by depicting the finite and the eternal. Here Olazabal seeks to depict the destiny of all human beings, their violence, their passion, and their soul. The works do not just represent a specific deity, but its significance. They are not about personages, but rather the spiritual philosophy which is an integral part of his life. Art can create an ontological visualization that is prodigious. It can visualize the very nature of existence. It might be beautiful, horrific or sublime, but ultimately, its power is in its ability to elicit a response in the viewer beyond what is depicted in the form.

The photography of **Marta Maria Perez Bravo** captures the rituals, superstitions, and material expressions of Cuban spirituality. She uses her body to create personal myths that articulate a cosmic myth that is informed by a variety of sources. Much of the work of Marta Maria Perez Bravo refers to Cuba in a syncretist mythological context, but she ultimately creates her own myths and sees her own body as a personal altar. Her body functions as a landscape, upon

which we find other paraphernalia. These photographs are not documenting a moment in time, but a constructed situation, as someone might paint or draw. Her work, as in *Components*, shows the Catholic symbols being dropped into an African Paolo Monte stew pot. She uses the female body as an altar that shares the power and transcendental knowledge, located in her own body; her *ashé*, her personal secret energy, and the head is the source of power of the Orisha.<sup>73</sup> They are all part of Ajiaco.

Ana Mendieta taught her about the art world. Elso guided her as if a mystical priest and Joseph Beuys, who came to Cuba in 1979, brought her Eastern philosophy, giving the young Perez Bravo a link back to the totality that is Cuban culture.<sup>74</sup> Her stark black-and-white photographs create a tension, and yet portray a frozen moment in time of a performance. She writes that the work is created “ot to recall moments ... but charged with contradictory elements – strength and weaknesses, sleep and wakening etc.-along with other elements, that might be suggested by the images themselves.”<sup>75</sup> Artists like Carlos Estevez, Perez-Bravo, Cruz Azaceta and Santiago Olazabal have deconstructed the materials used and the narratives of the nineteenth century to create meta-narratives that relate to their own personal stories.

**Luis Cruz Azaceta** internalizes the quest. The bold colors of his early works have been replaced by a preponderance of black and white with punctuations of color. Violence has been replaced by a quest. He writes in a poem: “...Exiled with brush in my hand/ head in my land/ a howl/ structuring time and space/ to penetrate it/ up and down/ side to side/ in the center/ on the edge/ to leave a trace on the road... (“...Exiliado con broca en mano/ la cabeza en mi tierra/ y un grito/ Yo pinto para estructurar el tiempo y el espacio/ Penetrario de arriba abajo/ de lado a lado/ en el centro/ en la orilla/ dejar la huella en el camino...).” Having dealt with displacement from Cuba, violence, AIDS, 9-11, and Hurricane Katrina, Luis Cruz Azaceta appears to have created an image of the structure of a world that is confused yet organized, random and yet contained. His work *The Artist* tells a story, but one that is a metaphor for the universe. The small nude male figure in the painting is straining to see something amidst the maze of tubes and lines and color wheels, dripping color in the background and apparent flashes of light. This artist’s world is contained within the frame and yet the path is certainly not clear. The confusion punctuated by a shape of color, or is, as he wrote in his poem *Without words*, “a tear on red, a dream on blue, a smile on yellow”.

There is the feeling that the extraneous has been stripped away to reveal the artist’s core. In an interview with Edward Sullivan, Luis Cruz Azaceta spoke of his desire to evoke the "essential" element of things. The artist noted that they were often like religious icons. “By isolating an image and centralizing it on a surface you’re creating an icon and it becomes, in a certain sense, something like a religious object, even though that’s not my intention. ...What I try to do in my work is to go from the particular to the universal statements. That’s the whole aim of isolating the image and stripping away from it anything extraneous.”<sup>76</sup> What comes from the soul cannot be predetermined, but emerges from myriad inner convolutions so as to express the origins and the essence of what it means to be an artist. What we come to learn from Cuban art then is that there is no one Cuban cultural identity, rather it is a combination of many spiritual and cultural traditions. The appropriation of African, Asian and Amerindian things old and new, high art and low art, even Modernism has become a critical component of this Postmodern discourse. Under this cultural paradigm, there is no one way of looking at anything, and differing views are not conflicting, but complimentary.

Art is thus like a footprint left in the mud. It is the trace of what was once there. Upon contemplation of its size and weight we may begin to discern what or who left the footprint; we can begin to comprehend the sources, thoughts, feelings, ideas, and cultural traditions. Yet what remains after they are gone is the absence of their presence. The artist unveils the presence that once was, but also allow us to contemplate the absence and possibilities of what it could be, what it means, where it was going, what is its “ultimate reality.” The spiritual in art lies in the space between the forms, between absence and presence; the synapse between the nerves is where the trace of the footprint can be found, it is the remains of the spirit of the soul.

How can we judge the size and scope of the spiritual in art, the visualizations of the soul, except by measuring it. We must weigh the steffage of the painting against the mundane, and the form depicted. The artist must go beyond the details of the religious institution and religious iconography in order to imbue the form with the *Macht*, or power of the spiritual. And when the creation becomes larger than the form, larger than the projections or expectations, then it becomes more personal, intimate and individual –it also becomes more Universal. It is here that it begins to touch upon the “ultimate reality.” In the end, spiritual art is not about any one religion, but about that which unites them all. Lucien Goldman notes, “The ... genius seems to us to be the one who realizes a synthesis, whose work is at one and the same time the most immediate and the most philosophically aware ... the genius is he who, in order to speak about his own most concrete and most immediate problems, implicitly raises the most general problems of his age and of his culture...”<sup>77</sup> Cuban artists study the various ancestral religious traditions and create spiritual visualizations which speak to the very soul of Cuban Ajiaco and the 21st Century. Cuban art takes us beyond the physical form to a place where we may meditate upon the existential and ontological questions of life.

#### Notes:

---

<sup>1</sup> Fernando Ortiz “Los Factores Humanos de la Cubanidad” in *Orbita de Fernando Ortiz* (Havana: Ediciones Unión) 1973 p154-157

The term Ajiaco that Fernando Ortiz used is a combination of the African term for the Amerindian condiment of a green pepper (ají) and it is completed with a spanish suffix.

<sup>2</sup> Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam* trans. Kenneth Lyons and Richard-Lewis Rees, (Barcelona: Editions Poligrafa, 1989) p.33

<sup>3</sup> Fouchet, 188-189

<sup>4</sup> Fouchet, Lam

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Gaudibert “Foreward” May 1989 Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam*, p. 7

<sup>6</sup> Fouchet p. 38, 42

<sup>7</sup> Fouchet p. 49

<sup>8</sup> Cabrera had returned to Cuba in 1938 to do research on the African stories that she remembered from her youth. She was sickly when she was young and was raised by a “black tata”, a black nanny. As a professional researcher, she wanted to know the truths behind these stories. She worked for a decade to develop the materials for her book *El Monte*, which was published in 1954. This book is still considered a seminal text in understanding the Afro Cuban religions. Cabrera not only wrote about the Orisha but also was among the first to write about the Abakuá. Male and female artists alike have used her book as a dictionary of symbols of the African culture.

<sup>9</sup> Lydia Cabrera “Wifredo Lam”, *Diario de la Marina* (January 30, 1944 translated and cited by Herzberg in *Wifredo Lam: The Development of A Style and a World view*” 47-48 Simms p 69

<sup>10</sup> Lowery Stokes Sims, “Lam’s *Femme Cheval*: Avatar of Beauty,” *Wifredo Lam in North America*, Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Even Fernando Ortiz referred to Chinese people as “coolies”.

<sup>12</sup> Fouchet, p.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Merewether, “At the Crossroads of Modernism: A Liminal Terrain,” *Wifredo Lam: A Retrospective of Works on Paper*, New York: Americas Society, 1992, 23.

<sup>14</sup> For more information on this influence and John Cage’s role in particular in spreading information about Eastern cultures see Gelburd, *Transparent Thread*, U Penn Press.

<sup>15</sup> “A Way to Kill Space,” *Newsweek*, August 12, 1946, 106-107. As quoted in Lowery Stokes Sims, “Myths and Primitivism: The Work of Wifredo Lam in the Context of the New York School and the School of Paris, 1942-1952,” *Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries 1938-1952*, New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba and Peru in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labor or Neo-Slavery,” *Journal of Overseas Chinese Studies*, 2 (1992): 149-182, Sims p. 11 .

- <sup>17</sup> Frank F. Scherer, "Sanfancón: Orientalism, Confucianism and the construction of Chineseness in Cuba, 1847-1997" Patrick Taylor ed., *Nation Dance : Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean* CERLAC pre-publication paper University of Toronto July 1998 <http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/papers/pdf/Scgerer.pdf> Accessed February 2005
- <sup>18</sup> Yanet Toirac, "Flora Fong" *Opus Havana* Number 2 2003
- <sup>19</sup> Toirac *ibid*
- <sup>20</sup> Toirac *ibid* p. 36
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with the artist in his studio, June 2003, Havana Cuba
- <sup>22</sup> Interview with the artist in his studio, June 2003 Havana Cuba
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Aguilera, July 2005
- <sup>24</sup> Interview with the artist Aguilera Atlanta Georgia, July 2005
- <sup>25</sup> Interview Aguilera
- <sup>26</sup> Yuneikys Villalonga interview with the artist Segura August 2005 Havana Cuba
- <sup>27</sup> Interview between Yuneikys Villalonga and Esterio Segura August 2005, Havana Cuba
- <sup>28</sup> Interview between Yuneikys Villalonga and Esterio Segura August 2005, Havana Cuba
- <sup>29</sup> Discussion with the artist, Segura in Massachusetts, Summer 1996
- <sup>30</sup> Isabel Castellanos, "From Urkumi to Lakumi" in Lindsay. For three centuries, 10 to 12 million Africans were shipped to the New World, especially those of Yoruba heritage. At the turn of the 19th-century, especially after the Haitian Revolution in 1800, Cuba became a leader in producing sugarcane for the New World. This would forever alter the course of Cuban history, for this brought the need for slaves in Cuba. see also Arturo Lindsay, *Santeria Aesthetics* "History of Santeria", Wm. B. Fagg, *Nigerian Images* (London: Lund Humphries, 1963).
- <sup>31</sup> The Orisha ancestors mediate in the lives of living human beings. At first, during the Revolution, the African religions were not seen as anti-Marxist because they were not organized institutions; they were not deemed threats to the Revolution. As Cuba became more involved in African policies, they saw the folkloric quality of the culture as an important link. Later, the exoticism of these religions would stimulate the tourist trade.
- <sup>32</sup> Quoted in Barbara Thompson, ed., *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*, "Decolonizing Black Bodies", (NH: Hood Museum of Art, 2008)
- <sup>33</sup> *Memoria*, p.112
- <sup>34</sup> Barbara Thompson
- <sup>35</sup> Barbara Thompson
- <sup>37</sup> Gerardo Mosquera "El Mitro Por dentro", *Revolution Y Cultura* (Havana August 1987)
- <sup>38</sup> Derrida *The Truth in Painting* p.11 U of Chicago press 1987
- <sup>39</sup> Rogelio Martinez Fure "Dialogos imaginarios" *Arte y Literatura*, Havana 1979 pp. 239-243 quoted in Mosquera 240-241
- <sup>40</sup> Restrictions against his blatant use of Afro-Cuban imagery caused him to stop showing his art in Cuba and he began to restore religious objects. Interview with Juan Boza conducted by Ricardo Viera in New York, 1986; reproduced in Ileana Fuentes-Perez *Outside Cuba*, p. 21
- <sup>41</sup> Ileana Fuentes-Perez, *Outside Cuba*, "Boza" statement by the artist, p.206
- <sup>42</sup> Much has been made about Juan Boza's criticism of Wifredo Lam in an interview before his death in 1990 with Ricardo Viera. Boza claimed that Lam's understanding of Santeria was that of an outsider and that the images were created from a European sensitivity. But both artists came from a family where the Santeria religion was practiced. The difference was that Lam came back to it as an adult when he realized that it was what he had been searching for as a Surrealist artist and looking to better understand his own culture. If the Orishas are there to guide, then that is the function of Lam's paintings while Boza creates an homage to the Orisha itself and specific altars which are charged with the energy of the Orishas.
- <sup>43</sup> This excerpt is from his application for a Guggenheim scholarship written shortly before his death. The document is in the archives of Benjamin Ortiz, CT. who helped Boza to write the application.
- <sup>44</sup> Robert Farris Thompson "Face of the Gods" *African Arts*, Winter 1995 p.50
- <sup>45</sup> An interview with David Mateo, November 1993
- <sup>46</sup> This rendition of the story was given to the author a few years before her death.
- <sup>47</sup> Brown, *Abaqua* 2003:40
- <sup>48</sup> Bonnie Clearwater, *Ana Mendieta: A Book of Works* (Fl: Grassfield Press, 1993 ) p. 25
- <sup>49</sup> Luis Bolaños, "Juan Francisco Elso For America", UNAM: Institute of Aesthetic Investigations, <http://morgan.iaa.unam.mx/usr/humanid> Accessed July 9, 2004
- <sup>50</sup> Luis Camnitzer, "Por Una Espiritualidad Latinoamericana" catalogue *Por America*, Museo de Arte Alvar y Carmen T. de Carillo gil, Mexico City, 1990
- <sup>51</sup> Rachel Weiss, "La Orbita de Marti", *Por America: La obra de Juan Francisco Elso*, (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, 2000), p. 152
- <sup>52</sup> Quoted in Luis Camnitzer "Elso Padilla" in Marketta Sepala, *No Man Is An Island* Young Cuban Art, (Finland: Pori Art Publications, 1990)
- <sup>53</sup> More recently, much work is being done in Cuba to recognize and understand this heritage
- <sup>54</sup> Interview with Nina Menocal, Jose Bedia "La Isla en Peso," 1993, Mexico City, p.15
- <sup>55</sup> Feldman, p. 24
- <sup>56</sup> Mendieta had been born into a wealthy family that had political connections to the Batista regime. In 1962, at age 13, Ana was sent away from Cuba with her older sister as part of the Pedro Pan movement to get children out of Cuba and away from Communism. It was organized by the Catholic Church and backed by the CIA. Raised by nuns in a series of foster homes for adolescents and sometimes juvenile delinquents, she was indoctrinated with Catholicism.
- <sup>57</sup> Olga M. Viso, *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body*, WA: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2004) p. 45, 63
- <sup>58</sup> Viso, *Mendieta* p. 80
- <sup>59</sup> She named the figures after the Taíno and Siboney goddesses, *Guacar, Atabey, Itiba, Cuhahaba, and Guabancex*.
- <sup>60</sup> Clearwater, p. 25
- <sup>61</sup> Clearwater, p. 25
- <sup>62</sup> Mendieta's application for an environmental art project in 1979 at the Morris Museum of Arts and Sciences spoke strictly of the relationship of the Goddess to the earth and her attempts to create a series related to this. In it, there was no indication of her Cuban heritage being an important part of her work, nor was it when I interviewed her
- <sup>63</sup> Linda Montano "An interview with Ana Mendieta." *Sulfur magazine*, ( East Michigan University, 22 (Spring 1988) p. 66
- <sup>64</sup> Mary Jane Jacob, *Ashé in the Art of Ana Mendieta*, Lindsay,
- <sup>65</sup> Interview with the artist March 2003, Willimantic CT
- <sup>66</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>67</sup> Gerardo Mosquera "Cuerpo y Cosmos" *Atlántica: Revista de las Artes, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria*, 1995 Reproduced in Nodal, Vives et al, *Memoria: Cuban Art of the 20th Century*

---

<sup>68</sup> Interview with the artist, Estevez, January 2005, Miami FL

<sup>69</sup> Interview with the artist Perez Bravo in her home in Monterey Mexico December 1995

<sup>70</sup> Villalonga interview with Olazabal

<sup>71</sup> Yuneikys Villalonga interview with the artist Rodriguez Olazabal for Gail Gelburd with her questions at the artist's studio in Havana, Cuba, August 2005, from and unpublished transcript.

<sup>72</sup> Villalonga interview with Olazabal

<sup>73</sup> Gerardo Mosquera, "Marta Maria Perez: A self portrait of the cosmos" p84-87

<sup>74</sup> Interview with the artist Marta Maria Perez Bravo in Monterey Mexico in 1995

<sup>75</sup> Interview with the artist, Perez Bravo, November 1995 in Monterey Mexico

<sup>76</sup> Edward J. Sullivan, "*Darker Visions: Recent Paintings by Luis Cruz Azaceta*", *Interview with Luis Cruz Azaceta August 5, 1998*, Exhibition at Mry-Anne Martin Fine Art, <http://www.mamfa.com/exh/azac1998/index.html>, accessed April 23, 2009

<sup>77</sup> Lucien Goldman, *Recherché Dialectiques* (Paris: 1959) p. 60.

© Gail Gelburd, 2009