



On the Horizon

CONTEMPORARY CUBAN ART
from the Pérez Art Museum Miami

This exhibition includes paintings, sculptures, photographs, and video from Cuba and the Cuban diaspora—people who have left the island to seek political freedom, economic opportunity, and career advancement in a global arena, among other reasons. Because of the strained history of Cuba-US relations and current unrest in Cuba, especially in its artistic and intellectual circles, the exhibition's timeliness cannot be overstated. In *On the Horizon*, we see hardship and humor, despair and hopefulness, spirituality and political critique. Individually compelling, these works together underscore the precarity of artistic life in an authoritarian regime. Those artists who are working in exile articulate an “inside-outside” perspective, exploring memories, political contrasts, and personal identity through the lens of displacement.

On the Horizon is presented in three sections, each treating the horizon as a destination that is alluring yet unreachable. It begins with Internal Landscapes, in which artists turn to sources such as nature, politics, and religion to evoke emotions and memories. In Yoan Capote's painting *Island (see-escape)* (cover), a sea made of fishhooks appears to recede horizontally into space while also rising vertically like a prison wall—whether a sea or wall, it is dangerous to cross. *Island* was inspired by the Iron Curtain. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, the term is a reminder of the ideological barrier separating communist Cuba and the US. This work is an iron sea made of materials that tear flesh like the barbed wire that separated East and West Germany.



Fig. 1: Luis Cruz Azaceta. *Caught*, 1993. Acrylic on paper, 48 x 42 in. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jorge M. Pérez. © Luis Cruz Azaceta

With that image firmly in mind, we might imagine ourselves to be on the Cuban shore looking to the horizon. Ideology falls away and there is only the desire to float ninety miles to reach the United States. It is not only the rough water we fear—the Cuban government may jail us if we are caught trying to leave, and the US will try to intercept us before we reach land. Luis Cruz Azaceta's *Caught* (fig. 1) shows this dilemma. On a boat, a terrified man with his hands in the air has a devil's face, as if his choice to flee the island for the US has caused him to be demonized by his captors, whichever side they are on. This was painted in the early 1990s, a time when there was a dramatic increase in the number of people who risked their lives to migrate. The American “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy stated that Cuban immigrants found on US shores would be allowed to stay. Those caught at sea would be returned, which may indeed be the fate of this poor soul.

In Cuba, oppression did not start in the twentieth century. For hundreds of years, Spanish colonizers, rulers, and landowners forced enslaved Indigenous people and Africans to work on sugar plantations and in other grueling occupations. Images of racial exploitation and cultural fusion appear in works by José Bedia and others. Bedia's *The Poor Bewildered Cuban on Arriving in a Strange Land* (*Estupor del cubano en territorio ajeno*) (fig. 2) illustrates this synthesis. The man's shoulders resemble the dome of a church containing the three crosses of Christian crucifixion. He holds two suitcases—on each are references to the Afro-Christian beliefs of Santería and Palo Monte, mingling the influence of Spain and the Yoruba and Kongo people of Africa.



Fig. 2: José Bedia. *The Poor Bewildered Cuban on Arriving in a Strange Land*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 94 in. diameter. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jorge M. Pérez. Photo: Mariela Pascual, courtesy the artist



Fig. 3: Zilia Sánchez. *Untitled*, from the series *Erotic Topology*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 72 3/4 x 97 3/4 in. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds provided by Jorge M. Pérez. Photo: Oriol Tarridas

Another type of cultural infusion marks the second section of the exhibition, *Abstracting History*. This begins with hard-edged geometric abstraction, which shows cosmopolitan Cubans of the 1950s embracing modernist European styles such as Neoplasticism, Constructivism, and Suprematism. These artistic movements had been conceived early in the twentieth century to propose a more harmonious world through the universal language of geometry. While these aspirations might seem compatible with the egalitarianism of the Cuban Revolution, the style quickly fell from favor in the early years of the Castro regime, when art with a clear social message was officially preferred, as it had been in the Soviet Union since the rule of Josef Stalin.

Despite the government's position, many artists continued to develop personal approaches, forgoing social or political expressions in favor of poetic abstractions. Zilia Sanchez has devised a unique marriage of painting and sculpture in wall-

mounted three-dimensional works such as *Untitled (Sin título)*, from the series *Erotic Topology (Topología erótica)* (fig. 3), which explores the relationship between the feminine and masculine. In this graceful construction, the split oval shape in the center simultaneously evokes female erogenous anatomy and the top of a volcano. Horizontally bisected by a hard phallic shape, the two halves appear to be pressed together in a kiss. The ambiguity in Sanchez's work recalls the surrealists' use of veiled imagery to convey sexual obsession.

The exhibition's final section, *Domestic Anxieties*, relates to the insecurities and stresses felt by many Cubans today, both on the island and elsewhere. René Francisco's seemingly utopian image *Heaven* (fig. 4) offers ironic

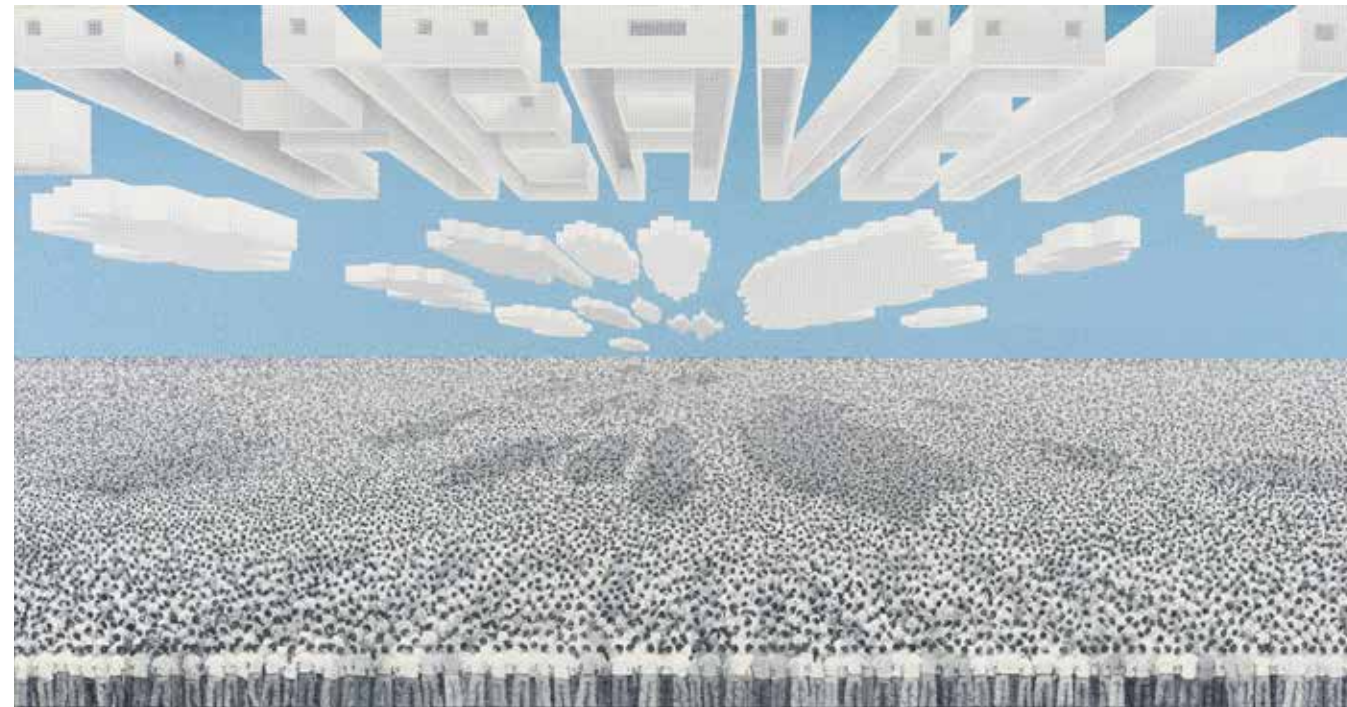


Fig. 4: René Francisco. *Heaven*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 49 x 95 in. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jorge M. Pérez. © René Francisco



Fig. 5: María Magdalena Campos-Pons. *Butterfly Eyes (for Breonna Taylor)*, 2021. Mixed media, watercolor, ink, gouache, and digital print on archival paper, three parts: 41 x 29 1/2 in. each. Collection of the Speed Art Museum. Image courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

commentary on collectivism, in which individuality and personal freedoms are subordinated to the greater dictates of society. A crowd of people with their backs to the viewer looks toward a distant horizon. The word *heaven* hovers overhead like giant propaganda, meant to convince them that they live in a paradise on earth. However, the letters are also buildings featuring prison bars, suggesting that if the masses do not accept this vision of communal bliss, they may face imprisonment.

As a postscript and complement to the exhibition, we have borrowed Vanderbilt art professor María Magdalena Campos-Pons's *Butterfly Eyes (for Breonna Taylor)* (fig. 5) from the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky. A Cuban artist who has other work in the Pérez collection, Campos-Pons won the prestigious Pérez Prize in 2021 in honor of her powerful explorations of history, race, and culture. She created this luminous triptych in response to the news that Breonna Taylor, a Black woman, had been shot to death in her own apartment by Louisville police officers. The panel at center shows the eyelike markings on the wings of butterflies, insects that often symbolize rebirth or resurrection. On the side panels, luminous flowers offer solace in the face of grief, underscoring the beauty and transitory nature of life. The warm colors capture Taylor's joyful spirit, making this work as much a celebration as it is a memorial. *Butterfly Eyes* was featured in the Speed Museum's 2021 exhibition *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*, a tribute to Taylor that conveyed the anguish felt by artists across the United States in response to the scourge of white supremacy.

While *Butterfly Eyes* does not relate directly to Cuba, it underscores the hard truth that injustice and trauma can occur under any political system that uses force to maintain authority. In this call to empathy, Campos-Pons joins the other artists in *On the Horizon* to affirm the capacity of art to heal the divisions that tear us apart.

Mark Scala
Chief curator

Ingram Gallery

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COVER: Yoan Capote. *Island (see-escape)*, 2010. Oil, nails, and fishhooks on jute mounted on plywood, 106 x 315 x 4 in.
Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds provided by Jorge M. Pérez. Photo: Oriol Tarridas