***AfroCuba: Works on Paper, 1968-2003.* Indianapolis Museum of Art. February 25, 2007-June 3, 2007.**[1]

Reviewed by Edward M. Puchner

The recent traveling exhibition *AfroCuba: Works on Paper, 1968-2003* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA), organized by the San Francisco State University Art Gallery and curated by Judith Bettelheim, takes as its mission "to [re]assert the significance and importance of the production inspired by an AfroCuban cultural presence in Cuban society." The methods by which this mission is accomplished are at times impressive and at times surprisingly regressive. And these methods fall into two general categories that are illustrated by the works in the show: investigating the fluid definition of what AfroCuban means to the artists of Cuba and recuperating Cuban history and culture. A handful of artists are represented more than others, indicating the preferences that the curator Bettelheim, attaches to artists like Rafael Queneditt Morales and Rafael Zarza, but they become embedded within rich, theme-based groupings of Cuban artists, young and old. As the entrance label asserts, Bettelheim's project makes use of all of these artists to present "tradition bearers in the visual arts as spokespersons for their culture."

AfroCuba is of great importance to the people of Cuba because of its constant redefinition. Using the entrance label to cautiously discuss the term, the curator writes that it is "not exclusive in its connotations" and "not an entity based on race." It is understood as part of all Cuban life, going well beyond the limits of visual arts. AfroCuba extends to a wide range of cultural groups, such as Lucumí, Congo, Ararà, and Carabalí, all identified as distinct within Cuban society. Within them, Bettelheim writes, AfroCuba "is a reality based on a particular shifting set of historical and cultural contributions" made by Cuban artists. The works of each artist shown here are therefore all AfroCuban in how they demonstrate some distinct intersection of Cuban historical experience and African cultural belief.

Organized throughout three white-box rooms of varying size, the IMA exhibition began in an intimate space with the first theme of 'Religion.' Carefully explaining the major religions within Cuba in terms of their African bases, the label text enumerates La Regla de Ocha, or Santaría, Palo Monte Mayombe and Espiritismo. Thanks to the Cuban constitution of 1976 guaranteeing religious freedom, the artists shown here began to use religious imagery and references from these three belief systems in their printing in the 1970s—or what Cubans refer to as the "African decade." With the further rise in tourism and the waning of government restrictions in the 1980s, this religious sentiment in art only increased, also giving rise to 'folklore tourism' and the Conjunto Folklórico (National Folklore Troupe).

Many of the works on paper demonstrating these three religious beliefs were created after 1987 with the important exception of Rafael Queneditt Morales. Using a stippling effect from a technique he calls *calcographica*, his images seem like raised dots that form images of spirits or *orichas*. The artist, according to the statement provided, seeks "profound essences within our

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religions (Cubanía) as a result of African heritage [that] express *mestizaje* that is culture." These subtle works are abstract, design-oriented, patterned images that vibrate with energy. The other, more recent artists offer styles that are more powerful visually, utilizing imagery derived more clearly from the observed world. Santiago Rodriguez Olazábal and his 2002 screenprint *Madre Respóndeme* (Mother, Answer Me) looks to ancestors and family members. A direct image of a woman waving her hand, tracing white swaths of movement and dots around herself, Olazábal is here tapping into the inheritance that he feels from his family's generations of *Babalawos* and *Lyaloshas*, or Santaría religious leaders. And the lithograph *Un toque de cazuela* (A Drummer for the Pot) from 2001, by Rafael Zarza, represents ritual objects and symbols of Palo Monte Mayombe. Derived from beliefs of the Kongo, it is an image of devotion that visually demarcates a spiritual space. Much of the work in this section is powerful, both in imagery and feeling, evoking the release of years of religious restrictions and the deeply spiritual side to AfroCuban artwork.

In the next, much larger room, the exhibition turned to politicized groups that, more or less, develop themes of national pride. The first theme is 'Angola,' a nation in Africa that many Cubans have close ties to and, beginning in 1975, drew sizable numbers of troops from Cuba. Artists like Zarza and Choco (Eduardo Roca Salasar) traveled to Angola during the late 1970s to administer arts programs. During this time, they each brought much Angolan imagery, from hairstyles to gun-laden men, into their work. Simultaneously, in 1977, Cuba saw the genesis of the 'Grupo Antillano.' The next theme in the exhibition, it was a black consciousness movement that sought to bring more visibility to Cuban artists. Rafael Queneditt Morales and Ramón Haití Eduardo, two founding members, wanted to express solidarity simply by exhibiting together and demonstrating to the world that a specifically Cuban artistic tradition was alive and well. While other examples of their work express religious beliefs, the works included in this group show a profound interest in exploring movement and color as seen in the fascinating work of Ramón Haití Eduardo. This group of works, however, only uses 1977 as a pivot and includes earlier works from the late sixties and early seventies by Eduardo and Morales in order to contrast them against a later developing sense of exploration. Eduardo's ink on paper drawing *Untitled* from 1970 is very sculptural, pooling ink at the edges. After 1977, his drawing bursts forth with expression. What were nuanced, static forms before, evolve into an embroiled, horizontal explosion of limbs in *Untitled* of 1980 that are cartoonish and modernist at the same time. Its penetrating line evokes conflict and steadfast precision.

Indeed, modernist sentiments from Western art creep into many works included in the show. Yet one unfortunate manifestation of this is the 'Idealized Women of Santiago' group shown (in the IMA presentation) across from the 'Grupo Antillano.' The discussion of this topic centers around Carnival and implies that, among Santiago de Cuba's many attributes, is its "beautiful, sensual women." What would elsewhere be a discussion of misogyny and objectification, here is a celebration of the dancers clothed in cabaret-style clothes, none of which are pictured in the works shown. Instead, Bettelheim chooses woodcuts by Jorge Knight Vera, like *Venús tropical* consisting of a single black form that simplifies the woman down to breasts and buttocks, calling upon the influence of Picasso and his endless nudes. While I understand that Cuban women can be seen in art as a "powerful, controversial, social and economic force," the exhibition fails to create any sense of complexity within these works. It brings in the questionable legacy of Picasso's appropriation of African forms that, in light of the African heritage that Bettelheim is

attempting to tease out from these works, implies that Cuban artists look to Picasso's works in order to understand the culture that Cubans should already be familiar with, according to the exhibition text.

The final room offered individual looks at contemporary artists who have ostensibly broken out onto the international scene, like Belkis Ayón and Ibrahim Miranda. The monumental six foot tall collagraphs by Ayón, who died in 1999, are stunning examples of where Cuban artistic expression is moving—more audacious and more deeply examining the roots of their religions. His work was largely based on stories of the Abakuà society that Ayón was a part of and which descends from a brotherhood with origins in Nigeria's Cross River area. They are dark works that envelop the viewer and peer out with bright eyes surrounded by objects that are themselves barely seen. Moving out of the spiritual into a reality-based world, Ibrahim Miranda visually maps the land of Cuba, effacing the image of his native land to "blot out the physical image we are accustomed to" and to create something visually new at the same time.

As an endpoint, Miranda's work is almost too succinct. The exhibition does offer a comprehensive exploration of what is visually new, based on the religions and history of Cuba. But it also upholds a sinister past of demarcating the Other through the objectification of Cuban festival dancers. A topic that clearly should have been more intensely explained visually than it was, I wish I could blot it out. Describing a rich history of politics, religious belief and artistic development, there is much to commend in *AfroCuba*, illustrating as it does much of the young talent that is now emerging and the forebears who made it possible. It is just a pity that the show's controversy had to come from a Carnival that is so festive and so inherently Cuban.

The exhibition, beginning at the San Francisco State University Gallery in 2006, was accompanied by an 88 page full color catalog (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005) and, after closing in Indianapolis, continues on at the Sturgis Library Gallery of Kennesaw State University in Georgia and the Lowe Art Museum in South Miami, Florida.

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