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MADE IN HAVANA

CONTEMPORARY ART FROM CUBA

Guest curator
Charles Merewether

Art Gallery of New South Wales
7th October — 13th November 1988

Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane
15th January — 26th February 1989

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,
Melbourne
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FRONT COVER

Flavio Garciandia Oraa

Sin título 1988

Untitled 1988

spp, glitter on canvas 120 x 150



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The project is dedicated to Santa Barbara and the Cuban women and men who introduced me to yet another Cuban world.

Charles Merewether.



FOREWORD

It may be argued that Cuba is the oldest country of the New World and at the same time is the newest country of that world; it has experienced a new beginning which is manifest in its cultural life. And while Cuban literature and cinema are now universally recognised, the visual arts have made less impact. Hopefully it is within this exhibition that one will begin to experience the vitality of contemporary Cuban visual art.

Made in Havana is the first ever exhibition of art from Cuba to be presented in Australia. As organisers we are delighted to present a representative exhibition of a new generation of Cuban artists, an exhibition which communicates an energetic blend of cultural, social and visual predispositions with enormous vitality. In the Soviet Union in the years following the Revolution there was a flowering in the arts, and it will be seen that a parallel injection of enthusiasm has occurred in Cuba. One of the most exciting features is to be found in the merging of various cultural strains of Cuban culture, engendering an exuberant artistic force.

As the first exhibition to be held in the Gallery's new expanded Project Gallery, **Made in Havana** marks a new stage in our continuing programme of contemporary Project exhibitions, a programme that has been the most vital and influential of its kind in Australia.

I would like to extend my particular thanks to The Cuban Ministry of Culture and the Visual Arts and Craft Board of The Australia Council — both organisations have most generously supported the development of this exhibition. Indeed without their support the exhibition could not have taken place.

I would especially like to thank the guest curator of the exhibition, Charles Merewether.

William Wright.
Assistant Director
(Professional)

LIGHT ME ANOTHER CUBA

LATE

MODERNISM

AFTER THE

REVOLUTION



"THE DISCOVERY OF TOBACCO" 19th c. lithograph for cigarette box, Cuba

writers as Jose Lezama Lima and Eliseo Diego, drawing inspiration from European tradition, particularly Spanish baroque and symbolist poets such as Mallarme, Rilke and Valery. Lezama Lima believed that baroque was the first autochthonous artistic movement in Latin America, and therefore contained the kernel of uniqueness which constitutes the Latin American self and its culture. The significance of the baroque, as elaborated by Lima and others (especially a number of Cuban writers), was its displacement of European Renaissance aesthetics for a language without interiority, but rather excess, ornamentation and overtness. Above all the baroque stood for a public art. Such a theory resonates in the light of contemporary Cuban art.

Almost 500 years to the day (October 24, 1492)
Columbus stepping onto the island of Cuba, announced it to be the

fairest island human eyes have yet beheld... and it is certain that where there is such marvellous scenery, there must be much from which profit can be made.

The Spaniards came to get rich. Cuba was very quickly overrun by Spanish peninsulares (Spanish born) government officials, merchants and bureaucrats; followed by Criollos (creoles, Cuban-born descendants from the Spanish) some of whom were wealthy plantation-owners, while others were peasants, cattle ranchers, tobacco growers, or professionals in the city.

culture to some sliding scale of value. Their practice manifests not only a conceptual basis, but a dialectical relation to their history. The symbols used are constituted out of a kind of storehouse of images or collective memory. These symbols form a public discourse with which Cuba has both been represented and represented itself.

In these terms some artists viewed their culture as kitsch. Because it has always arrived from elsewhere, it is always a version of another's culture and never the original. The search for a single unifying Cuban identity became a false path because it is a conglomerate, a bricolage of world culture, Spanish, African, American etc.

As with Wilfredo Lam's appropriation of Picasso to paint an Afro-Caribbean world, or Raul Martinez's transposition of Andy Warhol into psychedelic communist pop by which to celebrate revolutionary heroes and the Cuban people, so these contemporary artists utilise the imposed or imported culture as a resource, and ultimately a point of departure.

What followed was that such movements as conceptualism, kitsch, primitivism and neo-expressionism all took on a local significance. They appeared as counter-movements to the earlier models of a fine art tradition, European modernism (especially surrealism), or socialist realism. (6)

The culture reflects this sense of difference, continuity and change, of individual lives intrinsically bound together with that of a community. It shows a profound desire to establish a critical relation to its history of the present.

- (9) Gerardo Mosquera, 'Bad Taste in Good Form', *Social Text* 15, Fall 1986: 54. For a further discussion of kitsch or 'picuo' in Cuba, see Eva Sperling Cockcroft, 'Kitsch in Cuba', *Artforum*, vol. 23, No. 10, Summer 1985 and Lucy Lippard, 'Made in the U.S.A.: New Art from Cuba', *Art in America* April 1986: 27-35.
- (10) Flavio Garcíandia, Artist's statement, *Sixth Biennale of Sydney*, Catalogue, 1986, pp. 124.
- (11) See *Lam: Oleos y Aguafuertes*, Palacio de Bellas Artes, La Habana, 1966.
- (12) Peter Wollen, 'Painting History' Catalogue Essay, *The Fruitmarket Gallery*, Edinburgh 1985: 40. My remarks on the subject of parody has drawn extensively on this superb essay, written as an introduction to the work of the Soviet emigre artists, Komar and Melamid. Also see another essay on these artists written by Michiel Dolk for the Exhibition 'Komar and Melamid: Painting History,' *ARTSPACE*, Sydney, 1987.
- (13) Michael Chanan, *The Cuban Image: Cinema and Cultural Politics in Cuba*, B.F.I. Publishing, London, 1985. There is very little on Cuban photography in English, except general reviews appearing in *Afterimage*. Otherwise see my 'Portrait of a Distant Land: Contemporary Photography in Latin America', *The Australian Centre for Photography* 1984; and Johnnetta B. Cole, *Cuba: A View from Inside: 40 Years of Cuban Life in the Work and Words of 20 Photographers*, New York: Center for Cuban Studies, 1985. Douglas Sterner, *The Art of Revolution: 96 posters from Cuba*, (with introductory essay by Susan Sontag), London, Pall Mall Press, 1970.
- (14) See Adelaide de Juan, *Pintura Cubana: Temas y Variaciones*, La Habana, Contemporane



RUBEN TORRES LLORCA

Con mi enemigo bajo el mismo techo 1988
With my enemy under the same roof 1988
mixed media 50 x 80 x 50

JOSE BEDIA VALDES

ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

My work is the result of a very personal interpretation of the primitive world in general. I believe that there are still many useful things, not only from the art of a specific culture, but from "all" the diverse manifestations and productions of those cultures which have been designated as 'primitive', that we can assimilate with great benefit to the enrichment of our own cultural heritage.

Those cultures of which I speak are currently, almost without exception, passing through a period of strong external influences of a transcultural nature, consequent upon their encounter (neither sought nor voluntary) with Western civilization. My personal situation reflects this, but inversely. I am a person with a Western background who, through a voluntary, conscious and premeditated intellectual system, attempts to approach primitive cultures and to experience their influence also in a transcultural manner.

In this way I wish to relate myself at an experiential level (not, I realise, without certain disadvantages) to 'the indigene', in a situation of possible similarity. We are both half way along the road, but in opposite directions and situations, between the modern and the primitive, between the civilized and the savage, between the West and the non-West. From this recognition and at this frontier, which is being constantly broken down, my work emerges.

COMENTARIO ARTÍSTICO:

MARIA MAGDALENA CAMPOS PONS

ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

I handle the supposed criterion of prohibition or perscription on the erotic life of individuals, a concept which has apparently been overcome by Modern Man, but which in my personal experience appears as a historical element in permanent contradiction.

To this end I select different cultural representations related to this issue, pointing my research and therefore my artistic intentions towards the analysis of the perspectives of artistic and social language, based upon the belief that life cannot be separated from art, since it is intrinsic to its very nature and its goals.

In my work I propose and confront myself with a reflection on erotic life, its meaning and its expression through the development of art.

All that iconography, handled as much in the sense of historical recuperation of other cultural representations (pre-Columbian or European art) as that of the introduction of sign elements emerging from my metaphorical speculation, magnifies or detracts from specific aspects of this reflection.

COMENTARIO ARTÍSTICO:

Manipulo el supuesto criterio de prohibición o prescripción en la vida erótica de los individuos, concepto que aparentemente ha sido superado por el hombre moderno, pero que en mi experiencia vital aparece como elemento histórico en contradicción permanente.

Para ello selecciono diferentes representaciones culturales alrededor de esta problemática, dirigiendo mi investigación y por tanto mis propósitos artísticos hacia el análisis de los enfoques de lenguaje artístico y social desde la creencia de que la vida no puede separarse del arte, pues está en su género y en su finalidad.

En mi obra propongo y me planteo una reflexión alrededor

TOMAS ESSON REID

ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

Sex, the grotesque and the humorous are present as basic elements in the work, conjugated with anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and phytomorphic components of a particularly sensual morphology. This sensuality is depicted ambiguously, to achieve an inexact definition of sex and to suggest totally different aspects to those apparently depicted.

I have also been interested in aspects related to sexual prejudices which sometimes exist and which can lead us to reject outright, without thorough analysis, certain works of true artistic worth.

I am concerned to treat these themes in a form which rejects the affected, the cosy, superficial beauty. To this end I choose a powerfully expressive mode, which brings out the grotesque aspects of my characters.

At times I employ irony and humour, in order to give a "harmonious", "idealized" vision of certain social phenomena or individual attitudes, and at other times to reaffirm or accentuate their existence in our reality. In this way I confront those hollow, hypocritical perspectives which sweeten or decorate reality excessively.

In the majority of my works, the titles play an inseparable conceptual role; for example *The canon of the mambises* (which comes from my latest work) in which, as in other recent works, my interest is in overlaying all that which

FLAVIO GARCIANDIA ORAA

ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

Generally I am interested in the infinite complexity of syncretic processes and transculturation.

And specifically, in the confrontation on the same stage (the work) of conflicting and paradoxical elements, such as: the vulgar and the sophisticated, the kitsch and the authentic, the local and the universal, the figurative and the abstract, the popular and the elitist, the banal and the transcendental.

In the series upon which I am currently engaged I use the dialectic tension which results from the clash between provocative sexual and political symbols and a perverse decorativism.

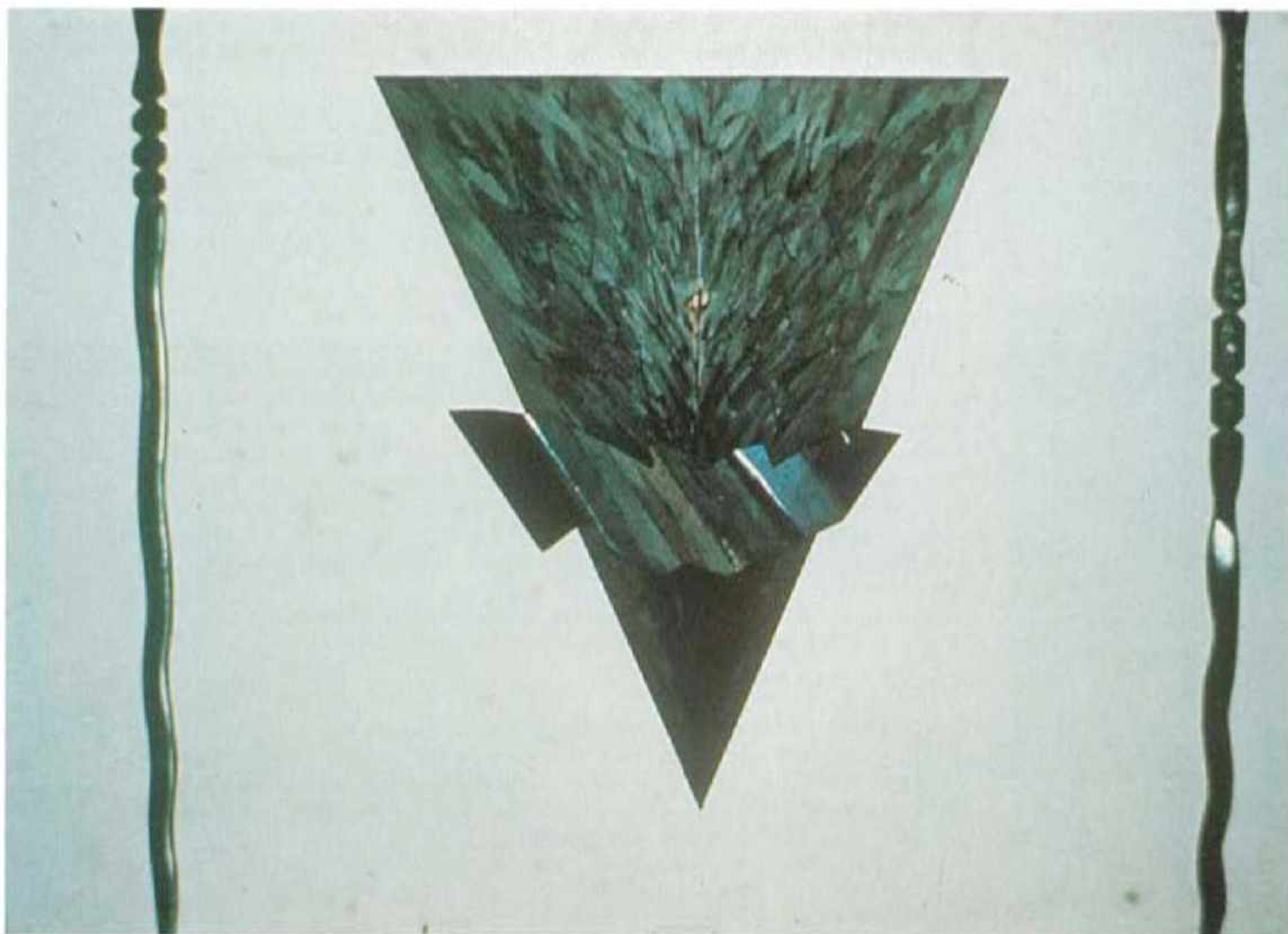
COMENTARIO ARTÍSTICO:

Me interesan, en general, la infinita complejidad de los procesos sincréticos y de transculturación.

Y en lo particular, la confrontación en un mismo escenario, (la obra), de elementos opuestos o paradójicos como pudieran ser; lo vulgar y lo sofisticado, lo Kitsch y lo auténtico, lo local y lo universal, lo figurativo y lo abstracto, lo popular y lo elitista, lo banal y lo transcendental.

En la serie que me ocupa actualmente utilizo la tensión dialéctica que se origina del choque entre símbolos sexuales y políticos provocativos y un decorativismo perverso.





MARIA MAGDALENA CAMPOS PONS

Cinturon de castidad 1985

Chastity belt 1985

spp on canvas on hardboard 200 x 200

RICARDO RODRIGUEZ BREY

ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

Since 1980 my work has been aimed at analysing the history of Latin America.

So, taking as pretexts the voyages of naturalists such as Humboldt and Darwin, I created works whose principal interest was founded upon that amazement which characterises the foreigners' approach to the New World.

Fragments from their diaries and notebooks became points of departure for an analysis of the nature, sociology and ethnology of these lands.

These works were expressed in paintings, sketches and installations.

Since 1985 I have been contrasting historical compilation with mythic reflection (non-history).

The piece I am presenting here is a kind of 'ready-made' myth. The utilisation of objects of varying origins and uses within Afro-Cuban religions is one of its main features.

Thus an object removed from its original context takes on other functions and is controlled by other laws.

COMENTARIO ARTÍSTICO:



RICARDO RODRIGUEZ BREY

Un objeto inocente 1988
An innocent object 1988
mixed media installation 200 x 600

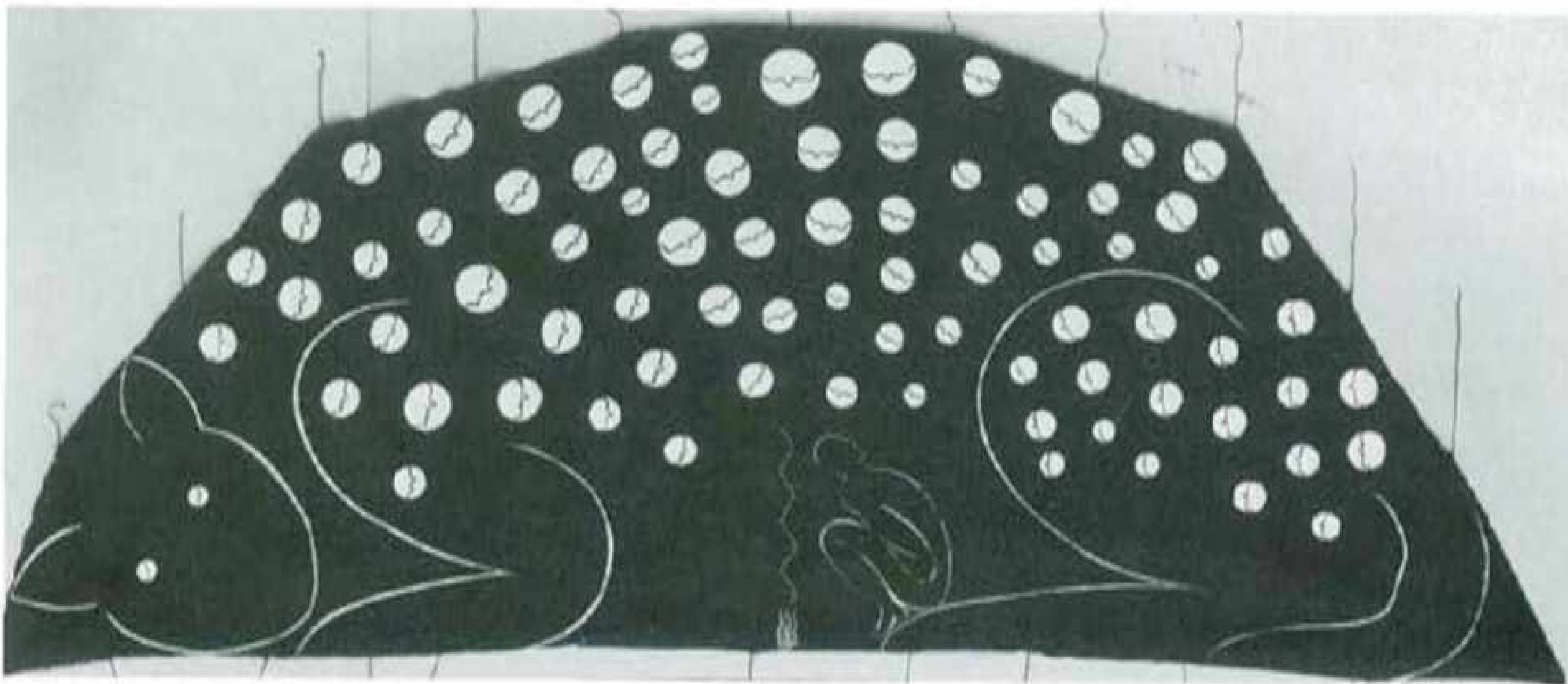
ROGELIO LÓPEZ MARÍN

1836-1936-1984 1988

hand coloured gelatin silver photographs, 70 x 55 (sheet) 40 x 27 (image)



*Antiguamente la gente se iba a
aprovechar de la playa para
el agua y para ver el mar y no
para ver el mar y no para ver el mar*



JOSE BEDIA VALDES

El frío de la noche 1987/88

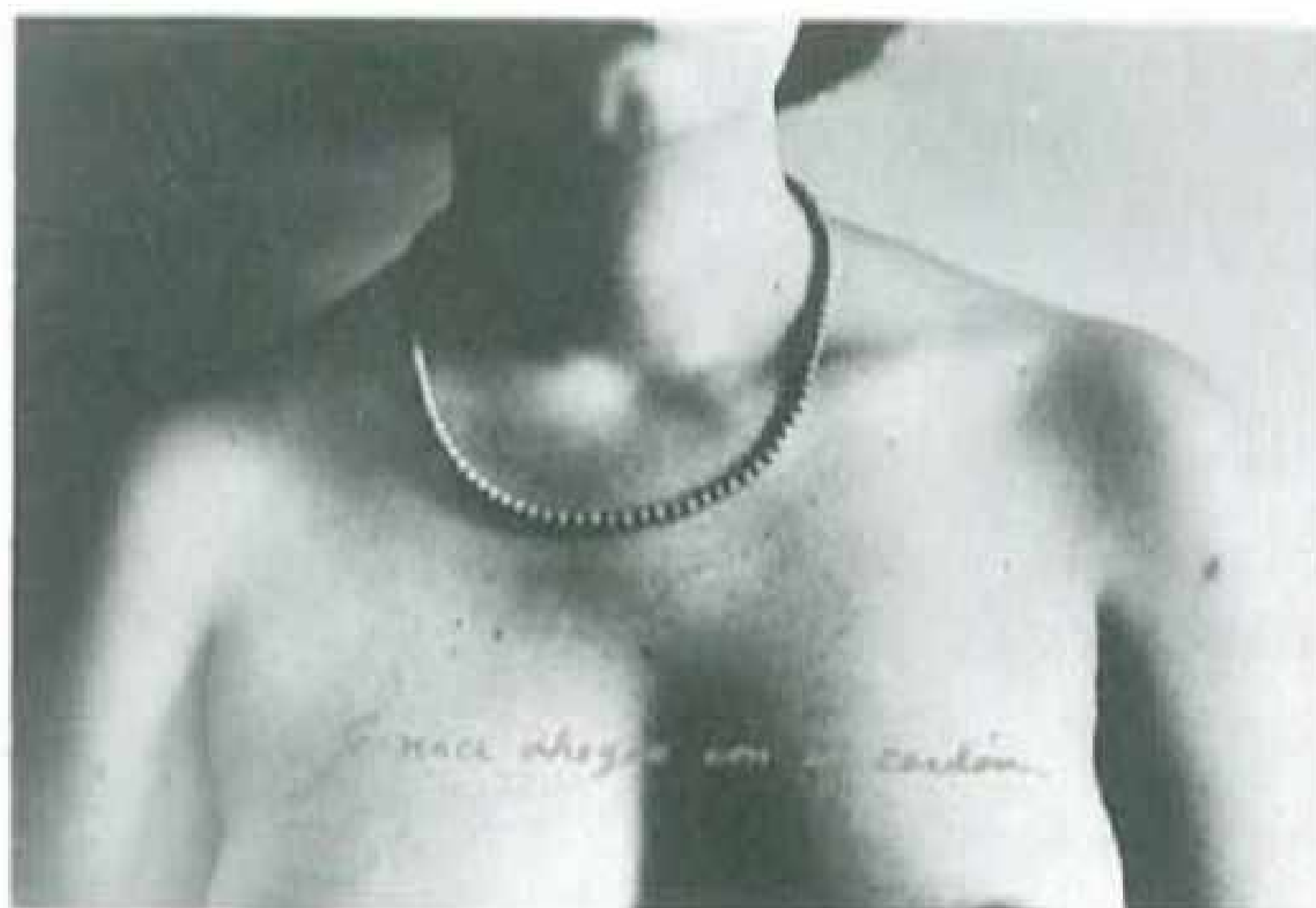
The cold of the night

mixed media, cloth installation 430 x 160

Estos cuatro puntos -tan interpenetrados- son abstracciones ideales y un poco retóricas de las perspectivas apuntadas en líneas de trabajo de los artistas cubanos. Ellos sólo comienzan a abrirlas. Y aún si se realizaran a plenitud, no estaríamos más que en una fase del proceso de total definición y autosuficiencia de la cultura latinoamericana.

Tal meta no se alcanzará hasta que nuestro continente haga la cultura contemporánea completamente por sí mismo. Es decir, cuando produzca su propia cultura actual como lineamiento activo en el mundo de hoy. Y esto será en el momento en que, por paradoja, nosotros los del Tercer Mundo hagamos la cultura occidental, lo que es igual a que deseuropeicemos la cultura de hoy. Porque a estas alturas no puede apartarse la cultura de base europea. La cuestión sobrepasa el problema étnico: la cultura occidental fue la del auge y expansión planetaria del capitalismo industrial, y, por lo tanto, aquella que desarrolló los instrumentos capaces de acción en esta época.

Nuestro dilema no se resuelve tirándola al basurero para regresar a opciones precapitalistas. Pero no es asunto tampoco de llegar al tercer milenio siguiéndola, adaptándola, ni siquiera nacionalizándola, lo cual no deja de ser una solución de tránsito. El asunto es hacerla nosotros mismos según nuestros propios criterios, o por lo menos participar activamente en su evolución. Poco a poco, cada vez más. Y, cuando esto ocurra, habrá dejado ya



MARTA MARIA PEREZ BRAVO

Para concebir 1985

To conceive 1985



Social Text No. 15, (Fall 1986), Special Section on Contemporary Cuban Culture.

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