

— ∞ — PEDRO ÁLVAREZ: A TELLER OF CUBAN TALES — ∞ —
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When we have gone the stone will stop singing

*April April
Sinks through the sand of names*

W.S. Merwin

Pedro Álvarez's death has meant the loss of a close friend—amusing, vital, and intelligent—and the loss of an artist whose work occupied a significant place in the context of Cuban art in the nineties. Álvarez was part of the generation that Gerardo Mosquera has referred to as *mala hierba* (weeds) that can grow and flourish on any ground and also, less imaginatively, as *the New Cuban art*. This new art sought strategically to re-situate itself, adopting positions that would allow the artists to distinguish themselves from the preceding generation. These included a certain distancing from the anthropological and the ethnological. It was a new situation where the artists found themselves faced by a growing invasion of critics and curators from the international art world who saw in Cuba the last jewel in the tarnished diadem of the fast-fading ideologies of utopia as well as an art that might possibly provide a fresh injection of energy to counter American hegemony. In short, the rules of the game changed radically in the nineties, and the art world greedily set about readjusting the closed paradigms of art history, recognizing that globalization of the economy implied a globalization of the art market where the introduction of artists from the periphery and the Third World would not only be politically correct but also highly profitable.

The majority of these young nineties artists were informed and intellectually sharp as a result of their ISA training¹ (although Álvarez, in fact, came from San Alejandro, the other art school in Havana). They were also politically disenchanting. During the nineties, they traveled extensively and gained access to critical texts and galleries. They wised up in a hurry! These artists came from families who were mostly believers in the revolution—especially in the educational system from which their offspring had so clearly benefited—but the artists themselves were disbelievers whose critical irony in the midst of the erosion of the *Periodo Especial*² often slid towards cynicism. This traumatic period started in the late eighties and continues until today uninterrupted, although with notable fluctuations in its behavioral patterns. It has been a corrosive, exhausting process that has given rise to a *nouveau riche* class that has dramatically emphasized the differences between those who “have” and “have not.” The *Periodo Especial*³ has been a constant “compañero” for these artists who have confronted on a daily basis the problems of having to “resolver” (find a solution for anything and everything).⁴

Pedro Álvarez—along with Carlos Garaicoa, Tania Bruguera, Henry Eric. Douglas Pérez, Saidel Brito, Toirac, Ezequiel Suárez, Los Carpinteros, Luís Gómez, Fernando Rodríguez, and Sandra Ceballos—was a key player in this new set of circumstances. This generation of artists stayed put (more or less, although Álvarez moved to Spain at the end of the nineties), whereas the previous generation had emigrated to Mexico or Miami in a desperate and claustrophobic hurry (Bedia, Esson, Castaneda). Álvarez's generation remained for a mixture of reasons, turning art back towards society as a critical act and deconstructing the ideological, social, and cultural occasions. Contemporary art was alone in this engagement since all other official channels of communication were controlled: the press, journals, literature etc. This resulted in a paradoxical situation where the government floundered, erratically changing its position, unsure of what to do about the achievements of these new artists. On the one hand, the New Cuban art brought attention to the cultural achievements of the regime and to its much vaunted educational system. Yet, on the other hand, what it produced was radically critical of the system that had fathered it.

Pedro Álvarez's work fuses cultural, sociological, and ideological history. It is an ironic running commentary that deflates dominant clichés and national myths. He opts for a collage technique – sometimes as a medium but above all as an assemblage of images from diverse sources within the space of a single painting. Robert Duncan has pointed out that collage is the major language of the last half of the 20th Century in that it proposes a way of bringing diverse referents together and creating a new intertextual webbing. It provides a register of the way we filter experience and accumulate attitudes. Cuban social history itself can indeed be read as a collage of overlapping presences: the American, the Revolution, and the Russian. Álvarez's work can be seen as a concentrated wandering through the ebbing tides of life around him—a piecing together and staging of an ironic, parodic narrative that involves race, national identity, and ideology. In a country where the political has always had priority over the economic, the problems have become chronic. Álvarez provides an acid tongue-in-cheek assemblage where each element has been carefully chosen in order to produce an interrelationship of tensions between placement, color, and meaning: the revolutionary slogans, the American advertising, the Cadillacs and convertibles that speak of a lost life-style and, at the same time, symbolically represent the change of the regime, the disasters of Soviet architecture, and the vast panorama of Cuban culture ranging from 19th century literature to its seductive and highly particular art history. These are the fragmentary *bagatelles* that build a life and constitute his visual context.

His work is a web of references, allegorical in nature opposing the pure sign of late-modernist art and playing with the distance that separates sign from meaning. Álvarez deals in confiscated images, in an appropriation that is critical both of the social situation and of an art based on originality. I say allegorical in the sense that Craig Owens has defined it in his essay “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism”⁵: “Allegory first emerges in response to a similar sense of estrangement. Throughout its history it functioned in the gap between the present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation might have remained foreclosed. A conviction of the remoteness of the past and a desire to redeem it for the present—these are its two most fundamental impulses.” Álvarez, however, scans immediate history with a roguish smile!

Let me take the lens up closer to look at the play of paradoxes and eccentricities, of fluxes and displacements that for Álvarez constitute the fabric of the Caribbean, engaging the inconclusive instability and uncertainty that profoundly mark it, the order and disorder that appear everywhere as mutually generative phenomena. In *Las dos partes de nuestra cultura cuestionan Occidente* (1993), we can see a small Afro-Cuban devil and a Galician sitting on the seashore with their picnic lunch and a 1958 Studebaker. The natural setting looks as if it has been lifted from one of Albert Bierstadt's American landscapes.⁶ The characters appear to be discussing in a highly Spenglerian manner the decline of the West. Their identities are fixed forever as clichés. The *Gallego* represents the emigrant Spaniard, and the devil is the *ireme* who, in Afro-cuban folklore, appears dressed in thick sack-cloth or multicolored materials printed with geometric designs and a pointed cap with embroidered sets of eyes. He wears bells around his waist and ankles to frighten whomever he meets, and he usually carries a piece of a bitter plant in his hands. Within a language that has been determined by different historical processes, Álvarez insists that Cuban culture here reaches its limit surviving as a beautiful sunset on a tropical beach. The two men ironically seem to be suggesting that their African and European ancestors were responsible for this situation, yet they appear to be happy, and why not since their vehicle affirms both their status and their safe return! *Cecilia Valdes y la lucha de clases* (1995) turns to race and class—almost taboo themes in the ideology of the revolution—with the cigar-smoking Cecilia, heroine of the 19th century novel, and the two dancing gnome-like figures, representing worker and capitalist, drawn from the work of Marcelo Pogolotti!

Álvarez's sense of collage is not merely aesthetic in its function but is also mordantly critical. In *On Vacation* (1995), he paints over reproductions of artworks torn out of catalogues—mechanically produced images that in Álvarez's eyes have come to represent success and status. It is the act of infinite repetition that gives the work its reality. These images are arranged formally, exploiting color and dynamic values to create an overall rhythm. He paints the surface with transparent pigments

to assure that the collage remains visible and that the reproductions retain a value equal to that of the surface image. Similarly in *A Brief History of Cuban Painting* (1999), the painted scenes, taken from lithographic images from the mid-19th century⁷ that were printed on cigar labels or boxes, are superimposed on top of the collage elements. In other words, there is a deliberate inversion where the painted images drawn from art history are printed reproductions and the lithographic reproductions hand-painted! These scenes codify the power relationships in Cuban society—economical, political, and racial—and they also reveal behavior patterns that remain constant in contemporary society: an ironic commentary on social mores that foregrounds ingrained racism.

Álvarez appropriates fragments to construct his argument but never overlooks the pleasures of painting. In his acid but colorful rendering of an ideological catch-phrase—rhetorically mined by interpretative difference—*The End of the U.S. Embargo* (1999), he rereads Víctor Patricio Landaluze's *Día de reyes en la Habana* and confronts it with a child driving a coca-cola truck, willing as it were to fund the fiesta! The “Día de los reyes” was the only day when black Habana slaves could parade in front of the governor. Álvarez resets the scene with two black women in a Chevrolet as queens of this garrulous and comic celebration. It is worth recalling that Landaluze was not only the first artist to represent black men and women in his painting but also an ironic caricaturist. Both of these attributes make him a central figure as far as Álvarez is concerned. In his *Cinderella Series* (1999), he again makes use of this 19th century *costumbrista*, mixing scenes from his work with Disney-style backdrops. He frequently quotes Landaluze's work: *En la ausencia*, relocating the black maid in a Disney palace; *El mayoral* that shows an overseer on a sugar plantation; *La llegada al baile*⁸ where he retains the title but redirects it to the fairy story, showing the protagonists taking their places at Cinderella's ball as the wrong people invading the party!

Álvarez recognizes that Cuban art has largely been built on the popular, the kitsch, and the vernacular. He is a kind of Hogarthian ironist, as can be seen in his series *High, Low, Left, and Right* (1997) where he ironically comments on the way Cuban families, after the Revolution, turned American middle class homes in Miramar or Playa into Cuban kitsch. These quirks and anomalies were Pedro's playground. His preferred rhetorics are postmodern irony and parody. *How Havana Stole from N.Y. the Idea of Cuban Art*⁹ mocks a title from a critical text of the time.¹⁰ In this booklet, Álvarez collages materials, often drawn from his own work, some using 60s American advertising, others using art history (incorporating figures from Cuban folklore drawn from the works of Landaluze, such as the *Diablo Mongo* or the beggar woman who finds herself relocated before a contemporary female member of the Cuban police force) or popular scenes on cigar labels. Álvarez insists that art history is a constant cutting out and pasting over.

Another of Pedro's obsessions, both with regards to the antics around Cuban art and the economy as a whole, was the absurdity of how value was created. The dollar became a theme in his work with the *Havana Dollarscapes* (1995) that were inhabited by characters from American and Cuban culture, grouped together on the same bill as if through the artifice and artificiality of a broken economy and the bitter tragedies of real life situations. Pedro experienced the absurdities—traumatic in their consequences—of the Cuban economy: the national dollar that could not be exchanged outside the country, the all powerful greenback, and the devalued peso. When he moved to Europe, he extended his focus to take a look at the banknotes of African countries that happily portrayed illustrations of idyllic landscapes and dancing Africans that seemed to have been lifted from tourist brochures!! Banal banknotes from a world dying of hunger. His *African Abstract* (2002) consists of six panels. Each work depicts a different currency (Somalia, Guinea, Senegal), and through them we can see the image traces of *Tintin in the Congo*, the classic colonial presence that lies behind everything. The superimposed scenes adopt a comic-style language, a kind of African national Pop. He also produced in this same year a globalized version of the *Dollarscapes*, *The Romantic Dollarscape*, where, as he told me in a conversation, “the titles have an illustrative role: *Ten, Twenty, Fifty*. The icon on the reverse side of the note, whether the White House or the Treasury Department, becomes the architectural centerpiece and is set within an almost romantic

landscape where the American heroes, corresponding to each of the notes, live together with numerous figures of exotic appearance, Africans, Asians, and Americans in national costumes from the end of the 19th or early 20th centuries” to create a green and fertile image of neo-colonialism!

Álvarez is a key painter in this problematic and turbulent period in Cuban Art where the need to define critical distance from an ethically weak but omnipotent regime had become paramount as an inner-driven necessity. His work in the midst of the baubles and beads of contemporary art chatter stands as the laconic, deeply committed statement of a vulnerable man. Álvarez’s “historical narratives” ascribe meanings to the immediate past rather than discover any inherent meaning. He is engaged with rethinking how we know our history. What he sees outside himself is perhaps only a mental representation of what he experiences within. His work gives a design—an inclusive shaping—to what he has before his eyes, underpinned by and tightly tuned to the multiple woven tensions of his time. I can only say—and I am not alone in such a saying—that I deeply miss both him and it.

¹The Instituto Superior de Artes where gifted students in dance, music, art, and theatre were trained.

²A euphemism for the shortage of everything—from gas to electricity, from toilet paper to toothpaste, from food to cement—except in the case of those in a position to benefit from the omnipresent black market economy.

³ *While Cuba Waits: Art from the Nineties*, ed. Kevin Power (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1999); and the exhibition *Cuba: Una Isla Mental. Un Paseo por el Malecón*, curated by Torreveija, 2007.

⁴I should also note that in the labyrinth of the Cuban economy the artist occupies a privileged position since he has access to the omnipotent dollar market.

⁵Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1992), 53.

⁶Antonio Eligio Fernández (Tonel) has talked of Álvarez’s sense of landscape painting as the tropical psychology of contemporary Cuba.

⁷Drawn from a copy of the *Maquilleras Cigarreras Cubanas*.

⁸Landaluze’s work was produced in a high moment of Cuban culture. He was the first to introduce the negro into Cuban art, but this figure was already present in the theatre as a passive character who served Colonial interests and stood as an enemy of independence. As such he was fodder for the canon of Álvarez’s irony.

⁹*Pinspot #7: Pedro Álvarez. (How Havana Stole from New York the Idea of Cuban Art)* (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 2000).

¹⁰Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).