

—∞— YANK TANK, YANK PAINT: THE CLASSIC AMERICAN CAR
IN PEDRO ÁLVAREZ'S PAINTINGS —∞—
TYLER STALLINGS

United States of Automobiles (U.S.A.)

The automobile is intertwined intimately into the lives of U.S. citizens. It is capable of simultaneously signifying a feeling of escape and freedom, a material symbol of the driver's prosperity, and potent statements of male prowess or female availability. Beyond its symbolic power, the automobile is also a major factor in the country's gross domestic product, the measure of a nation's economic strength. Obsessively focused on the GDP and its effects on voters' wallets, congress listens and responds to Detroit's lobbyists.

The automobile is so deeply a part of the country's symbolic landscape that it inescapably has become part of people's sense of identity: "For many, possibly most Americans, it might be impossible to distinguish between the lived experience and the media imagery associated with the automobile," writes Matthew W. Roth, director of archives at the Automobile Club of Southern California.¹ The complete integration of the auto into an American's life makes it a very personal possession, one customized incessantly—witness the exponential increase in sales of aftermarket auto accessory shops, and television shows like MTV's *Pimp My Ride* and Discovery Channel's *Monster Garage*.

The downside to this cherished relationship between blood and metal is that we now allow it to mediate our perception of the world: "...we have lost touch with a world we now experience through the windshield of our car, insulated and removed from the eternity of our environment by the incessant cinematic sweep..." writes museum curator Kevin Jon Boyle in an essay that accompanies an exhibition exploring automobile images and American identities.²

However, the American automobile's dominance in national identity is not just true for the U.S. Ironically, Cuba has similarly fetishized American cars in its own unique way. It is this "windshield outlook" that dominates Pedro Álvarez's first mature body of work, *Landscapes of Havana*, that he completed after he graduated from the art academy of San Alexander of Havana in 1985. The compositions of these works feel like snapshots from a moving car or a bus: a shot of a car parked in a garage, the tops of hills, parked delivery trucks—most unpopulated, though human artifacts—buildings and cars—remain.

These works are painted in a loose style, focusing on bold shapes, in a David Hockney-esque style. They feel like purposefully contradictory tourist paintings that you might find sold on the street, but with loaded and foreboding imagery. They are not landscapes depicting romantic and aestheticized visions of a crumbling colonial architecture or sugar cane fields that get blended into the erection of a national identity for the pleasure of dollar-toting tourists.

When I discussed this barrenness of the landscape with artist Tammy Singer, a member of the artist collective, Los Animistas, based in Cuba and the U.S., she said that this characteristic also represents Cuba's economic situation for her. When she goes back and rides in the backseat of a *máquina*, she says, "I look out the windows [and see empty streets and buildings], so I imagine Havana as a city without people. It is like a ghost town, literally and figuratively."³

The presence of the automobile, especially the classic American cars, will become a motif in Álvarez's paintings throughout his varying bodies of work until his untimely death in 2004. It will come to represent less a symbol of freedom and more an example of Cuban's complicated history with itself and with the U.S.

Yank Tank

In the 1950s, Cuba had imported, under Fulgencio Batista, more Cadillacs, Buicks, and DeSotos than any other nation. Yank tank or máquina are the words used to describe the classic cars that reside in Cuba, such as the 1951 Chevrolet, 1956 Ford, and 1957 Plymouth among others. After the Cuban Revolution in 1961, the U.S. imposed an embargo on Cuba. As a result, the 150,000 American cars that were left after the revolution were cared for, more out of practicality than an auto-fancier's obsession. Now, they are about 10% of the cars circulating on the island.

Decades later, these cars are only American in their outward appearance. Many have Soviet engines, for example, along with homemade parts welded on. Though the outer forms of the cars remain mostly the same, they have undergone a significant interior transformation that resonates with Cuba's own complicated transformation during this period.

These classic American cars of Cuba have now become tourist kitsch—they are a time capsule of sleek lines, shiny chrome, tail fins and the good ol' times as if they were part of George Lucas' *American Graffiti* (1973). Yet, this museum on the street is found in a communist country. As a hinge between the two countries, to the American eye, they represent a time of post-World War II prosperity, and Cuba as a decadent playground. To the Cuban eye today, it would seem they are ironic symbols of limited travel, both politically and geographically.

In regard to one's point of view, it's important to acknowledge my limitations as a curator who has not visited Cuba yet, and that I am deciphering Álvarez's paintings from a U.S. perspective. However, the different ways in which his paintings function for both the U.S. and Cuba, like two sides of a coin, is what makes his work so evocative and interesting.

In her catalogue essay for the book that accompanied the 1998 exhibition of the same name, *Contemporary Art from Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island*, museum curator Marilyn A. Zeitlin identifies three ideas that she views as threads weaving through the works of the artists in the exhibition and, in general, of the "Special Period" in the 1990s during which they established themselves: "...the special condition of being an island; *inventando*, or making do in a place where shortages are virtually normalized; and the rhetoric of history."⁴

She writes that *inventando* "is a strategy for survival seen everywhere as parts for cars become collector's items and the need to make something that is no longer available demands ingenuity on a daily basis."⁵ This approach to life is an aspect of Cuba's island condition. Zeitlin elucidates, "Isolation in Cuba is reality and metaphor, a national condition imposed upon it and upon itself. The attempt by the United States to quarantine this socialist island in a capitalist sea has created a perverted relationship between the two countries.... Thirty years of Soviet patronage isolated the island further."⁶ But for the most part, it is the U.S. government that has chosen to isolate itself from Cuba. Even though it is an island and a last holdout for communism, it has had regular contact with many other countries that surround the U.S., for example, and a regular and vibrant cultural life. It is the U.S. obsession with imposing an isolationist embargo for so long that has created a "perverted relationship."

So under these conditions, the yank tank can be viewed as a symbol that embodies Zeitlin's third idea that she sees in the works of these artists: "the rhetoric of history."

In the context of the automobile as metaphor and a symbol of U.S.-Cuban relations, the artist and art critic Tonel, writing on the artists of the 1990s who matured in the "Special Period," or *Periodo Especial*, when living conditions became grim because Cuba was without Soviet patronage, points out that "In these and other works, the advance toward the past is an escape from the present and thus a

conversion of the future into something deceptive, ignored—something seen in the rearview mirror. This is not strange if we consider where this art is coming from: a country announcing its advance toward a socialist future while at the same time slowly yet steadfastly incorporating itself into the globalizing, inexorable network of the marketplace—in other words, reverting to its capitalist past.”⁷

Álvarez’s Automobile

The automobile, or more specifically, the yank tank, is a motif in Álvarez’s work that I have noticed only after an opportunity to review the full body of his work, ranging from his post-graduation work in 1985, all the way through his last, full bodies of work in 2003, *The Mirror Series* and *The Romantic Dollarscape Series*.

It has been noted by several art critics and historians writing on the artists living in Cuba in the 1990s that they embraced and referenced popular culture in their work more than the preceding generations of Cuban artists. Art critic Kevin Power writes: “Cuban critics have consistently argued that this generation’s work has been marked by a profound revision of the topical idea of the Latin American, by an immersion into popular culture, and by an appropriation of the various linguistic gains of ‘Western art.’”⁸

In other words, this second generation of artists who have come of age after the revolution, and who remained in Cuba—as opposed to the mass emigration in the 1980s of artists and Cubans, in general—are less focused on generating a Latin American identity per se, but instead acknowledge the complicated and messy histories in which they live. The epitome of capitalism, the sleek American cars on the streets of Havana, surreptitiously powered and maintained by foreign parts and improvised constructions in their interiors, are perfect vehicles to represent these complicated and messy histories.

Their attitude may also be a form of resistance to creating a Latin American and/or Cuban identity via *différence*. As both Kevin Power and Tonel, and the noted writer on Cuban art, Gerardo Mosquera, have all pointed out, this is the quandary for an artist who is celebrated by the art world as a representative of the *local* aesthetic, and then must come to terms with how long they continue to produce such work, that is, fulfilling the global appetite for an exotic-authentic. Power describes this condition succinctly and elegantly when he writes, “There is clearly a danger in role-playing whereby the Cuban Other represents himself to his other as that other wishes in fact to see him.”⁹

Álvarez represents this state of uncertainty in *The Mirror Series* from 2003. In paintings such as *Ponce de León in Memoria*, *A Trip to Heaven*, and *Vital Circa 1961*, the imaginary viewer of the artwork is a bystander to history. A tourist ship, ostensibly named the *Ponce de León* enters the harbor, but instead of European conquest by Spanish conquistadors, it is conquest by tourism, now Cuba’s main industry—again, a return to pre-Revolutionary days of Ernest Hemingway and Frank Sinatra. The painting style of these works is reminiscent of the *Landscapes of Havana* series from 1985. Again, he is appropriating the kitsch-mannerisms adopted for the tourist trade.

I do not want to suggest that Álvarez is embracing the Cadillac, Ford, or Buick, not even in an ironic manner like American Pop Art from the 1960s that was seemingly both a celebration and critique of consumer culture. For Álvarez, he clearly depicts it as a symbol that embodies “the rhetoric of history.” But the difference is that he has chosen a particular symbol that speaks to a complicated history through a highly fetishized object of the twentieth century, and that is so particularly American, one that could be described as representing a kind of *local aesthetic* of the U.S.A. Álvarez is simply claiming that these cars are a part of Cuban history now.

Additionally, in spite of any romantic notion that might be attached to Zeitlin's concept of *inventando*, the people who usually drive the *máquina* are, as Tammy Singer again recalls, "the fortunate ones who have money, or a little money. Many international artists, other artists, brilliant professors who travel, dancers, performers, doctors, and others who sell things or work in tourism."¹⁰

As a side note, the only other Cuban artist that I can recall who has utilized a ubiquitous symbol of transportation, and to an even higher degree, is Kcho's employment of the boat theme. For Álvarez and Kcho, the automobile and the boat can be associated with a desire for escape and a sense of isolation by being on an island. In other words, travel, a journey, the voyage to elsewhere or to other possibilities, is foregrounded in their work.

Interior of History

In a series of works from 1999, Álvarez shifts his focus from the exterior of the cars to their interiors. However, there are no drivers or passengers. In fact, the cars in all of his work since the 1980s do not reveal any occupants. It is as though they have a life of their own and are active participants in Cuban culture.

But what we do see are references to historical figures that hover inside, buoyant and painted in color. In *El telegrama*, *Souvenir*, and *The Historic Moment II*, all from 1999, each interior is occupied by a lively symbol of the revolution: lady liberty, cherubs, and an eagle, each carrying a flag or map of Cuba. Álvarez suggests that the driver for all these cars is History. But he's also saying that Cuba's history is complicated and topsy-turvy, which the artist embodies, literally, by signing his name upside down on the front of the canvas.

One of the very few times that Álvarez ever depicts an actual driver in one of his cars is in *The End of the U.S. Embargo* (1999). He has appropriated an image from a Coca-Cola advertisement that depicts a young boy peddling a toy car pretending to deliver Coca-Cola for his father, while the history of African influence through the years dances behind them. This work is incredibly complicated because it references an issue palpable in both countries—racism towards blacks and their ancestors.

Both countries imported slaves from Africa. Both countries have treated them as second-class citizens. Álvarez is specifically quoting the paintings of Víctor Patricio Landaluze, a Spanish-born Colonial period painter from the 1800s in Cuba, who was known in part for depicting Cuba's African heritage, though usually with an air of quiet domination.

This point by Álvarez is best exemplified in the triptych painting from 1994, *The Aim of History*. Three different panels each have a classic American car, or yank tank, at its center, with each attended by a black in African tribal costume, but washing their respective car. A banner hangs behind each. The left, sagging banner reads, "Socialismo..." and the right, sagging banner reads, "...Muerte." So, in a twist on Fidel's motto, "*socialismo o muerte*," (Socialism or Death), Álvarez's broken banner reads as "socialism is dead." It has been replaced by a crisp, central banner that reads, "United Colors of Benetton." On one hand, Álvarez suggests that capitalism has trumped communism. On the other hand, the banners contradict one another, pointing to the false utopias of both American capitalist democracy and Cuban communist socialism: both claim equal rights, both claim salvation through their parties, and both expect strict adherence, but despite these claims, their realities are different.

Kevin Power articulates this contradiction as viewed through these classic cars when he quotes Álvarez discussing another work in a humorous and biting manner: "...the Cuban culture—has reached its

limit, surviving as a beautiful sunset on a tropical beach, within a language that has been determined by different historical processes.... What more can you ask for? To reach Utopia in a large and powerful car, and thank god, have the return trip guaranteed in the same vehicle.”¹¹

Used Cars for Sale

In general, the car has become an ironic symbol of freedom in Cuba. How far can one really go on an island? Just how inventive can one really be to keep it running? The classic American cars are like time machines in Álvarez’s paintings. They provide a point to bring layers of history to the surface, like Mark Tansey’s paintings that Álvarez first admired while a student in the early 1980s. He does so through his references to Landaluze’s paintings, to Coca-Cola ads, to American popular culture, to Cuba’s revolution, and so on. It is his process of reclamation in which the outward appearance of the American car, of Cuba, covers a complex engine of history. Like many artists who employ appropriation, he suggests that one country’s *différence* can be another country’s too, and that both can share the same kitsch, even if one figurine sells for \$100 in one country and \$5 in the other.

It is this *la même différence* that Álvarez alludes to in his *The Romantic Dollarscape* series from 2003. All of these works are painted the green of U.S. dollars, juxtaposing America’s layers of sociopolitical history within one single time, all the historical figures standing around a yank tank, ignoring one another, as if it’s possible to ignore History. By the time that Álvarez painted the works, he had moved to Spain. But they were completed only ten years after the Cuban government legalized the U.S. dollar and, thus, generated conflicted feelings—it provided the possibility for artists to make a living, but also reintroduced the presence of the tourist.

Gerardo Mosquera has written that what made artists remain in Cuba in the 1990s is the Cuban government’s “approval of sales in dollars sometime later is the basic reason why the artistic diaspora has almost completely ended,” and adds, “Here, despite restrictions, one can live cheaply if one has dollars. Cubans do not have an emigrant mentality, even though massive emigration has occurred since 1959 for political reasons—and economic reasons owing to politics.... The benefits of living here, going outside to fish and refresh oneself, are turning out to be so successful for artists that there are almost no exceptions.”¹²

So, just as American cars were imported en masse in the 1950s and became a singular symbol of Cuban identity through a transnational mixing of parts and technologies through *inventando*, Cuban art today is being exported en masse to the art world, hungry for examples of utopic, socialist idealism. Despite its isolation—again, one more self-imposed by the U.S.—this seems completely appropriate. Truly, hasn’t it been the case that island countries and cultures have always been transnational? Sometimes by way of island inhabitants emigrating and reaching out by necessity. Other times, colonialism created circuits of exchange across the Atlantic, with islands as key points in this circuit making the exchange possible.

The layering of history is nothing new, nor exotic, nor post-modern—it is this sense of renewed cultural excavation that Álvarez and his fellow artists from Cuba’s “Special Period” in the nineties acknowledged and saw as a source of inspiration.

¹ Matthew W. Roth, "Automobile Images and American Identities," *RearView Mirror: Automobile Images and American Identities*, ed. Kevin Jon Boyle (Riverside, CA: UCR/California Museum of Photography, 2000), 10.

² Kevin Jon Boyle, "Modernity and the Mythology of the Open Road," *RearView Mirror: Automobile Images and American Identities*, ed. Kevin Jon Boyle (Riverside, CA: UCR/California Museum of Photography, 2000), 23.

³ From email correspondence with the artist, July 20, 2007.

⁴ Marilyn A. Zeitlin, "Luz Brillante," *Contemporary Art from Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island*, ed. Marilyn A. Zeitlin (Tempe, AZ and New York: Arizona State University Art Museum and Delano Greenbridge Editions, 1999), 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁷ Tonel (Antonio Eligio Fernández), "Tree of Many Beaches: Cuban Art in Motion (1980s-1990s)," *Contemporary Art from Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island*, ed. Marilyn A. Zeitlin (Tempe, AZ and New York: Arizona State University Art Museum and Delano Greenbridge Editions, 1999), 45.

⁸ Kevin Power, "Cuba: One Story After Another," *While Cuba Waits: Art from the Nineties*, ed. Kevin Power (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1999), 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ From email correspondence with the artist, July 20, 2007.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹² Gerardo Mosquera, "New Cuban Art Y2K," *Art Cuba: The New Generation*, ed. Holly Block (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 14.



Standing in front of a Mark Tansey painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000
Ante una obra de Tansey en el Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2000