



Foregrounding the Ideologically Anachronistic: A Conversation by the River Tormes with Antillean Cuban Artist Alexis Esquivel

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Alexis Esquivel (La Palma, Pinar del Río Province, 1968) is one of the most distinguished graphic artists of Cuba. For the past seven years, like many of his most talented compatriots, he has been living and working abroad. *Culture & History Digital Journal* caught up with him in Salamanca, Spain, where he recently had a solo show in the Center for Contemporary Art DA2. This followed the success of his “Memorial Garden” exhibit, curated by Suset Sánchez in the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno (CAAM) in Palmas de Gran Canaria for which a precious catalogue was produced (ISBN: 978-84-92579-50-1). He sat down to speak with us on 14 July 2015 by the old mill on the shores of the Tormes River.

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JB: Your work seems to be most concerned with the weight that the past exerts on the modern experience. It may be said that you use iconography to confront official history by establishing an alternative archaeology of memory that is profound and highly suggestive. Few artists today are so explicitly political. Do you see yourself as an anti-propagandist of sorts?

AE: I do not consider myself an artist in the traditional market-defined sense but rather a person who is dedicating his life to art and who is committed to engaging official discourses and propaganda from a modest and very personal space in civic society. Art for me responds to a civic attitude and I have opted to use art to express my civic positions. On a more personal level I approach art as a tool in the search of knowledge and, consequently, as a way of trying to understand the complex society we live in. At that, of course, I am not alone. Perhaps such direct engagement is not that common these days. But I did not invent the methods I use. Rather, it is the way I approach technique and the topics I choose that give my work a particularly critical edge.

JB: Yet you are a provocateur of sorts, don't you agree?

AE: I always like to say that since art does not have a commitment to hard facts like science does, or to power as in the case of politics, art can be equidistant from both facts and power without losing depth as it seeks to produce meaning and knowledge. That is the way that I approach

my work, believing that it can promote critical and coherent thinking in interesting and constructive ways.

JB: Some of your works are intensely critical, even torturous representation of the human body and of the racialized subject. How does the colonial and post-colonial experience as a Cuban and the legacy of the slave plantation in the Antilles condition works such as “The Prophecy of the Cyclops”?

AE: Fully. They are always and completely present. The central figure in the work is that of an Afro-Cuban child from the 1920's. He is a sort of Cyclops who looks into the future. He shares in the vision of José Martí of a future Cuban republic that would be inclusive of all and structured for the common benefit of all. This is a project long overdue in Cuba, a country that, at least for the past two-hundred years has seen its hopes of social justice and majority rule systematically deferred when not altogether dismissed by a power structure that is thoroughly authoritarian and seemingly unable, as if we were dealing with a fault in its design, to be at ease with differences of all kinds, especially racial, political and sexual.

JB: On account of having only one eye the Cyclops lacks depth of field. His vision pierces into the future but he is unable to accurately judge the distance and, thereby, the time that it will take to get there. Is this what you mean when you suggest that sort of “factory defect” in postcolonial societies?



La profecía del cíclope / The Prophecy of the Cyclops
2012
Acrylic/Canvass
114 x 175 cm

AE: Yes, this work is very self-critical. It deals with the fatalist excuses that most West Indian peoples take for the truth, like the idea that the Caribbean countries lack natural resources to promote the development of prosperous and democratic nations. Several images point in that direction. There is the silhouette of the “Scarabeo 9”, the giant Spanish oil rig that failed to find oil off the coast of Pinar del Río. Lying under it, as in a deeper stratum, is the carcass of a whale spouting a jet of oil that moves through and over the silhouette of the rig. This is an allusion to the criticism made by Cuban intellectual Alberto Pedro who, in his play “Manteca” (Lard), suggested with great irony that Cuba could not have oil reserves because it had never had dinosaurs.

There is also the postcard-like image of the Juraguá thermonuclear plant in Cienfuegos, Cuba. This was a Chernobyl-type reactor the construction of which came to a halt shortly before completion as a consequence of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The project once was heralded as the answer to Cuba’s permanent energy shortages and as the way to achieve full energy, as well as political, independence. But its inauguration could have started a war with the United States or, even worse, it could have led to an eventual meltdown with massive and devastating consequences for the entire region. Sitting atop a hill overlooking the Bay of Cienfuegos along Cuba’s southern coast and adorned with massive cranes, the plant is today a great monument to futility and to the constitutive weaknesses of all great narratives of progress and development. This is an old story in the former colonial world. I allude to it in the faint depiction of a map showing the routes of the old Spanish galleon trade, recalling the times when the treasures that sustained the imperial economies of Europe moved through Cuba leaving more violence than wealth in their path.

All of this layering of overlapping and intersecting times is happening as this child is celebrating his birthday. To me it speaks of the disenchantment with the discourse of lack of options, an experience that is still very

much at hand and informed by a post or neocolonial legacy that refuses to go away.

JB: You give yourself great freedom to combine images, both of memory, the historical record, advertising and propaganda. How do you orchestrate it all in works such as “Republique Light”?

I always have a central dominant story and I try to choose the most eloquent images that still hold certain mystery and are not overused, images that we all may know but that, by giving them a certain turn, may still provoke interesting sensations and new meanings. Then I add new layers of narrative orders, strata that make the central argument more complex, obscure it or even contradict it. My intention is to keep the process of communication between the artist and the viewer of the work open. It is my hope that every spectator may find multiple entry and exit points into and out of my paintings. Having said this I am always conscious of the need to maintain some sort of hierarchy because if you do not keep the thematic play under some control it gets dispersed and diffused.

In “Republique Light” I question the contradictions and symmetries between the colonizer and the colonized and I question the challenge, that is at once a trap and an opportunity, to be forced to defend your rights in the language of your oppressor. This may be seen as a contradiction and a dead end that condemns what some term today the “subaltern subject” to failure. I derived my inspiration by the story you tell in your book, *Undoing Empire*, concerning the Battle of Crête-à-Pierrot, a key chapter in the Revolution of Saint-Domingue in 1802. At that moment the French did not recognize the freedom fighters under Dessalines as citizens in equal standing. Yet, they trembled when they heard them sing the *Marseillaise* with great enthusiasm as they awaited certain death at the hands of the much superior force sent by Napoleon to reinstate slavery. As you say, there was a reversal of roles



Republique Light
2012
Acrylic/Canvass
78 x 10 cm

whereby the former slaves rose to become the elite troops of the revolutionary vanguards as Napoleon's soldiers realized that they had become nothing but slave catchers. You can see this play in the two figures in the foreground of the work where the bilateral symmetry is informed by a full reversal of the racial and colonial chiaroscuro.

JB: Such great achievements and yet the colonial heritage seemingly continues to trump all possibilities for breaking away from the terror-filled legacy of racialism and other evils of the past. Do you see a sort of curse hanging over that other side of the modern experience that some refer to as coloniality?

AE: In "Republique Light" I also explore the fatalism of Haiti and of the projects for decolonization. You can see the ruins of the Presidential Palace in Port-au-Prince and perhaps hear the voices of all those who, even inside Haiti, believed that the earthquake of 2010 was yet one more proof of the wrath of History and of the gods of "civilization" against the daring deeds of the Haitians in their long pursuit of freedom and equality.

Among many other images there is a pedestal referencing a public monument in Havana that was left without a statue. Apparently the pedestal had become a place that the followers of the Afro-Cuban religious traditions had been using to deposit offerings to the *orisha* deities. At some point a warning reading "No dumpin of witchcraft" was painted on it and signed by the "PNR", or National Revolutionary Police. I decided to place a new statue on the empty pedestal. It is a bust of Ota Benga (1883-1916) the Mbuti Pygmy who was exhibited in the United States, most notably after 1906 in the Monkey House of the Bronx Zoo in New York City. Spectators may draw their own conclusions from this juxtaposition.

A further layer in this palimpsest is the faint image of the Basilica of San Esteban, the mother church of the Dominican Order in Salamanca, Spain. The Dominicans are known for their defense of native rights during the early stages of the Columbian slave-colonial venture. But few remember today that it was the same Dominicans, led by Bartolomé de las Casas, who first championed the introduction of Africans as slave laborers in the New World. There are silhouettes of tobacco and sugarcane, as well as the modern icons of sugar and coffee cultivation. You can also find a Vodou offering. Once again the spectator is invited to play with these images, combining them to find new possibilities of meaning, critique and even perhaps, liberation.

Then there is an Afro-Caribbean subject with an umbrella. He is wearing red and white, the colors of the Yoruba *orisha* Changó, or Shango. I see him as an anonymous modern character assuming a posture of virility and ostentation that drifts between self-exaltation and a sort of narcissism that "Black" men assume out of pride and perhaps also as a measure of a certain lack of self-criticism. In this sense, it is a picture of the ever present choice between playing along or betting against the system, the weight of which is rather unbearable and often moves the male subject to overcompensate in hiding a most painful sense of impotence.

JB: Your work is in constant discussion with that of a broad group of artists, historians and theorist. Yet you seem capable of suggesting and indeed making certain connections, as in "The Death of the Gulliver", that are seldom made by other intellectuals and indeed rather difficult to enunciate in written form. Do you think that visual art can still transmit a coherent message?

I am not sure I would speak of coherence. Art is polysemic by definition. That is both its virtue and its problem. The messages that it emits have the good fortune of loosing some, if not most, or all, of their intended meaning as they get representatively reconfigured by the viewer who is also a sort of interlocutor. But the important thing to me is that some significant part of the main message gets through. I take great care of this and work hard to protect, nurture and sustain that possibility.

Narrative painting is readable by one and all because we are all inserted into a culture that favors the visual above all other senses. When you use those communicative tools, cues or archetypes that we all know, you can transmit an important part of your idea or message. But it is impossible and unwise to believe in the idea of communication without filters and corruption of the message. Still, I do believe that narrative painting, with all the difficulties and the magic of visual language, is still capable of transmitting ideas with a high degree of efficiency. Painting as an art form is still not exhausted.

Then there is the question of social responsibility of the artist. I never approach a canvass unless I have the sense that I understand sufficiently the subject I want to paint.

In the "The Death of Gulliver" I deal with the colonial heritage and the way it influences modern movements for self-determination as well as nationalist claims. I find Jonathan Swift's vision as an Irishman to have been quite



La muerte de Gulliver / The Death of Gulliver
2015
Acrylic/Canvass
190 x 240 cm

vanguardist and sharp for his age. I think he said things that took others a great deal of time to repeat and consider. As such it is still current and, as in this work, quite applicable to the questions regarding the limits of plurality in the Spanish State.

Until recently one of the things that used to surprise me since I first came to Spain more than seven years ago was the way in which many people spoke against regional nationalisms without recognizing that there was also a very strong Castilian-centered ideology that is often taken for the only acceptable vision for the entire country and its central government. As a Cuban this could not be more evident because in the Caribbean we were subjected to this unitary vision of Spain that was part of its failed imperial dream and its terror-filled colonial legacy. The work is my reflection on how the downfall of the Spanish colonial system at the end of the 19th Century had a major impact on the development and formation of Spain on the 20th. I see important connections between these nationalist traditions on both sides of the ocean.

JB: Do you also see the permanence of colonial and imperial structures and memories throughout the political imaginary of what, for lack of a better term, we still call the Hispanic world?

Indeed I do. I have seen and read everything I have been able to find on this and I have never seen anyone in Spain dare to make real, substantive and brave argument in this direction. The image of my modern day Gulliver is taken from Manet, whose work, as we know, was heavily influenced by his sojourn in Spain when he studied Velázquez and bullfighters. Of course my intention was to give the sense of the image of “The Dead Toreador” and not to reproduce his unrivalled *scorzo*. On a critical level my interest was to give an image of Spain from the perspective of a sort of outsider who, as Manet and others like Washington Irving, Francis Bacon and Yves Klein, have had a strong attachment to what makes Spain at both very different and familiar. As an Afro-Caribbean male from a former Spanish colony I think I am particularly entitled and well equipped to assume that vantage point with authority.

The change in scale is of course taken from Swift’s narrative suggestions. But it also speaks to the legacy of European nations and their mythical origins in Medieval lore and Romanesque religious art. Spain lies dead in the middle of a plaza that is not a representation of a bullfighting ring but rather of the Plaza Mayor or main square in Salamanca. To take the Plaza Mayor of Salamanca as a setting for the scene is partly autobiographic, as I have lived here for almost a decade. But it is also very much tied to the conservative side of Spain. So I did not have to travel great distances to look for the scene. Here, in this square built under the patronage of the first king of Spain from the current ruling dynasty, the dictator Francisco Franco ordered the raising of Hitler’s National Socialist Party flag on 18 November 1936. Franco’s likeness is still sculpted in one of the medallions that adorn the arcades.

The dead bullfighter’s chest is pierced by the small flags of various regions, including Andalusia, Aragón, Asturias, Castile, Extremadura, Galicia and Valencia.

There is also the Ikurriña, or Basque national flag, the Estelada or ensign flown by the supporters of Catalan independence, as well as the flags of Spain’s last colonies in America: Cuba and Puerto Rico. Here the shifting of scale is also a play with the term “banderillas”, literally meaning “small flags”, with which the bull is both bled and adorned during the second part of the bullfight. All sorts of connections can be made here, from the most ridiculous, to the most debatable and the most regrettable. Imagine, for example the connections between Galician nationalism and the Castro brothers through the figure of Manuel Fraga, a Franco supporter and minister who, after the dictator’s death, went on to stand as a “born again” democrat of sorts and a proud regionalist. Nobody ever questioned the trips to Cuba of this former fascist and his business dealing there. There was no polemic. As we say in the Caribbean “they understood each other on account of being Whites”.

JB: Again you make a reference to the plantation order in connection with historical memory in Spain. It could be argued that, Franco treated his country like his country had treated its colonies a century earlier. But most in Spain would deny the connections you are making, especially perhaps the most nationalist among them be they Basques, Castilians or Catalans. How does your understanding and vision as an outsider of sorts come to rewrite the dominant narratives, even those of civilization/barbarity?

Well look at the silhouette of the statue in downtown Madrid to Eloy Gonzalo, the so-called “Hero of Cascorro”, that towers above the body of the dead bullfighter. Gonzalo was a nobody in Spain who went to fight in the colonial war in Cuba distinguishing himself in a small action that is remembered as disproportionately heroic in Spain while being all but forgotten in Cuba. Apparently, in order to deactivate a focus of Cuban resistance, Gonzalo walked into a building where Cuban snipers were positioned holding a can of fuel under one arm and a torch in the other hand. Before doing this he strapped himself to a rope so that, should he fall, his comrades could retrieve his body. Apparently Gonzalo did not want his body to be desecrated by those he saw as “savages”.

I am not sure if Gonzalo’s specter is protecting or walking over the cadaver of this Hispanic Gulliver. I know he needed to be there but I do not know exactly what he is doing in the picture. Maybe we would need to ask him. But the rope that tied him to us was broken somewhere along the way because in this exercise of producing meaning and knowledge something always must escape our grasp. Perhaps I cut him free from this obligation, or maybe he finally fell into the hands of the Cuban “savages”.

JB: I see the piece as having something of de Chirico. Are you making allusions to his work and to the weight and role of memory in his early paintings?

AE: This is true, particularly in the color and depth of the sky, the arcades, the play with scale and the urban furniture. Yes, there is something here about the anguish of departure and the burden of memory, as well as a great deal of apprehension about the futility of human action.

JB: There are forbidden topics. As a Cuban you know this well. In fact, you have battled censorship and spoken to power rather directly in your own land. Yet, in works such as “Notes for the Battle of Madrid” you enter into a subject that is quite sensitive to the Spaniards: the weight of what they call today the “historical memory” of the Civil War and the ensuing dictatorship. The piece was exhibited for the first time in Salamanca which, as you have pointed out, is an enclave of conservatism and perhaps also of more extreme positions. Where do you draw the courage to fight such monsters?

AE: Let me say, first of all, that I produce works because I find the topics seductive and I feel a commitment to the ideas and to the message I want to transmit. So I do it and I do not worry about the way the piece could be received by institutions. Of course one always conducts a certain amount of self-censorship. In my case it relates to my knowledge of the subject or lack thereof. It hurts me to say things I cannot think through due to my lack of understanding of a topic, even when I find it seductive. I may not feel ready because I cannot fully trust what I would wish to say. Because of that I have many ideas I am working through. Some of them will end up being realized. Others will not.

I think that I have approached forbidden topics in Spain in a different way than others. I know that there was preoccupation before this piece was exhibited because they knew that I was working with an image of the dictator. Here Franco’s family has sued artists for depicting his image in a way that compromises his honor or that of his family. Strangely, there is such legal recourse in Spain, even for a man who has been dead for decades and who sent thousands of innocent people to their graves. But that may be the subject of another work.



Apuntes para la Batalla de Madrid / Notes for the Battle of Madrid
2015
Acrylic/Canvass
190 x 240 cm

I used a known image of Franco and I did not think about it much as I liked its evocative value. Can you imagine what an opportunity it is for an artist who is dedicated to narrative painting and to a critique of ideology to find a figure so tied to power that had a vocation for the art? This presents great possibilities for ironizing and for reflecting on the social construction, as well as obstruction, of memory as History.

Precisely at a moment when the Castilian-lead tradition of Spanish centralism is under fire from the so-called regional or peripheral nationalisms, there seems to be a renewed interest at the official level for historical portraiture and painting connected to the 19th Century construction of Spain’s national narrative, more specifically for the monumental works on the history of the nation state that have been reinstated in the Prado Museum, like Gisbert’s “Fusilamiento de Torrijos” or Hiráldez’s “Jura de Santa Gadea”. I make a reference to this in the image of the castle behind the likeness of the dictator that recalls the “Castillos en la costa” by Pérez Villamil. The French have their Davids in the Louvre but until recently historical painting in Spain had been seen as problematic and tended to be dismissed if not hidden from view. The painters were quite conservative but had great technique. Their work was closely inspected and regulated.

Then you think about Franco being one of the most important figures of Spain in the 20th Century. His regime was the veritable *non plus ultra* of inspection and regulation. He was obsessed with rewriting the history of the country and molding it to his image. When he took hold of the brush it was as if power itself was painting and Spain was its canvass. Therein is the irony and the terror of the enterprise.

To me this presented a challenge. Could I approach power without making a mockery that would dismiss or minimize the weight of the actors and events in question? A current image of Madrid is under attack from above. The bombs are not thrown by Hitler’s Luftwaffe, as when the city resisted heroically the advance of the fascist and colonial armies. They come from an image that shows how to quarter a pig. It is taken from Dalí who was, as some might recall, rather comfortable with the dictatorship. In Dalí’s depiction the pig drifts towards a *plus ultra*, a symbol of Spanish imperialism because, as Dalí used to say, the pig never walks back, it always goes forward...

JB: Soft colors seem to predominate in your most recent works, going back a few years. The same is true of a texture that speaks of multiple layers, stains that suggest accidents or errors, and inscriptions that point to partial texts or narratives. What are you trying to suggest through these elements and techniques?

AE: I want my works to develop a patina, suggesting that they also have a history of their own. I think that the accidents and stains serve the same purpose. Moreover they also convey a sense that history, as a record of human activity, is a process of sedimentation and erosion. As for the pastel colors I labor under the assumption that they work to reactivate memory in the spectator, in the people and stories that transit through my work. .