



Untitled, 2010, from the series *Variaciones de Oggún* (Variations of Oggún)

¹ Socialist regimes in Africa, such as Sekou Touré's New Guinea, developed demystification campaigns that sought to present African traditional religions and their orishas as obscurantist practices that helped sustain gerontocracy through fear and exploitation of the youth, and that needed to be abolished. See Jay Straker, "Stories of 'Militant Theatre' in the Guinean Forest: 'Demystifying' the Motives and Moralities of a Revolutionary Nation-State," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 19, no. 2 (2007), 207–33.

² Robin D. Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness. Afro-Cubanismo and artistic revolution in Havana, 1920–1940*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997): 220.

³ Alejandro de la Fuente, *Diago: The Past of This Afro-Cuban Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2017.

⁴ Art training began at elementary art schools established throughout Cuba. These schools prepared students for middle-level art school, or specialized academies, such as San Alejandro in Havana. Starting in 1976, the Higher Institute of Art became the only school dedicated to higher education in the arts and remains so to this day.

⁵ This essay was originally published as "In The Manner of Addressing Clouds or 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," in *ArtForum* magazine, Summer 1984. Artist and art instructor Flavio Garciandía received the issue and translated the article, which was later revised by Arturo Montoto. Garciandía and other instructors began developing activities based off of the essay. Art critic and poet Osvaldo Sánchez developed it as a full program by the beginning of the 1990s.

⁶ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 23.

⁷ *Cimarronaje* or Maroonage, derived from Maroon, is a term developed by art historians in the Caribbean to refer to the centrality of the figure of the Maroon, or runaway slave, as a symbol of freedom and resistance in the formation of a post-colonial culture in the region.

⁸ Diago quoted in Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 160.

⁹ Fernandes, 164–65.

¹⁰ Fernandes, 31.

¹¹ Gustavo E. Urrutia, "Cuba, el arte y el negro," in María Poumier, ed., *La cuestión tabú. El pensamiento negro cubano de 1840 a 1959* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Ediciones Idea, 2007), 219.

¹² Urrutia, 220.

¹³ Robin D. Moore, 3.

¹⁴ Díaz Ayala, quoted in Robin D. Moore, 218.

¹⁵ De la Fuente, *Diago*.

¹⁶ The Federation of Cuban Women, led by Vilma Espín, the wife of Fidel Castro's second in command, Raúl Castro, advocated for women's rights, from abortion to maternity leave. However, its policies also failed to tackle sexism in mainstream culture or issues like domestic violence and sexual harassment in the workplace.

¹⁷ Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks and Africa* (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, 1988).

¹⁸ I have pointed out this paradox in an unpublished manuscript on the visual culture associated with the Cuban intervention in the war in Angola from 1975 to 1991.

¹⁹ De la Fuente, *Diago*.

²⁰ Alejandro de la Fuente, *Una nación para todos: Raza, desigualdad y política en Cuba 1900–2000* (Havana: Imagen Contemporánea, 2014).

²¹ Robin D. Moore, 5.

²² De la Fuente, *Una nación para todos*, 410–411.

²³ Around the same time Diago entered Cuba's art scene, another Cuban artist, Alexis Esquivel, used a rope in two works: an installation (splitting the gallery space with it) and in a performance, *The marvelous rope* (1990–2001), which consisted of him taking a rope and tying it around his head.

All works on loan are courtesy the artist and Magnan Metz Gallery, New York.

EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday, January 19, 6:30 PM
Free and open to the public

GALLERY TALK WITH ELVIS FUENTES

Saturday, January 20, 2:00 PM
Free and open to the public

IMAGES OF CUBA

Tuesday, January 23, 6:00 PM
Free and open to the public
Join us as College faculty and students share images of the Cuba they witnessed during their travels

RACE AND SLAVERY IN CUBA:

A LECTURE BY MATTHEW PETTWAY

Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs
Tuesday, February 20, 6:00 PM
Free and open to the public

CURATOR-LED EXHIBITION TOUR FOR MEMBERS

Thursday, March 1, 6:00 PM
Open to all members

LOCATION:

161 Calhoun Street
Charleston, SC 29401

PARKING:

Available in the St. Philip St. and George St. garages

GALLERY HOURS:

Monday – Saturday, 11:00 AM – 4:00 PM
during exhibitions, or by appointment
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CONTACT:

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GUIDED GROUP TOURS BY APPOINTMENT:

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MISSION:

The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston School of the Arts provides a multidisciplinary laboratory for the production, presentation, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas by innovative visual artists from around the world. As a non-collecting museum, we create meaningful interactions between adventurous artists and diverse communities within a context that emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural importance of the art of our time.

cover: No. 5, 2012, from the series *Entre Lineas* (Between Lines)

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ROBERTO DIAGO
LA HISTORIA RECORDADA
January 19 – March 3, 2018

 HALSEY INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART
OF THE COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON



La Herida (The Wound), 2015

ABOUT ROBERTO DIAGO

Born in 1971 in Havana, Cuba, Juan Roberto Diago Durruthy has been featured in exhibitions at Cooper Gallery, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, Havana, Cuba; the 47th and 57th *Venice Biennales*; the 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th *Havana Biennials*; and more galleries and museums in Latin America and across the world. His work is included in the collections of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana; the Cisneros-Fontanals Art Foundation, Miami; and the Rubín Foundation, New York; among others. In 2002 he won the Award for National Culture from the Cuba Ministry of Culture. He graduated from the Academia de Artes Plásticas San Alejandro, in Havana in 1990. He is the grandson of Cuban artist Roberto Juan Diago Querol (1920-1955).

ROBERTO DIAGO: THE ART OF GROWING SKIN

by Elvis Fuentes



Untitled, 2014, from the series La piel que habito (The Skin that Talks)

In the large painting *Untitled*, from the series *Wounds* (2015), Roberto Diago has covered the canvas with a thick layer of black paint. The resulting flatness of the picture plane is broken only by two vertical overtures in the form of long slashes on the top left and center right sections of the painting. The cuts look like open wounds of intense red and white, as the title of the series suggests. Turned into tissues of flesh and fat, the hues create a sense of depth that transforms the painting into a massive body, which propels the black to the foreground. What seems like an exquisite exercise in the hybridization of Clyfford Still's Color Field paintings and Lucio Fontana's Spatialism is in truth a metaphor of what Ralph Ellison called the "invisible condition of blackness." The black background—or, one may be tempted to say, blackground—only becomes visible through the dramatic exposure of its wounds.

In another monumental painting, *The Wound* (2015), Diago makes this operation self-evident through title and scale. This time around there is only one vertical slash, but it is much longer and wider, running parallel along the right edge of the picture. The "cut" nears mutilation, but doesn't quite reach it. The split is incomplete. Black skins seem able to hold even the deepest wounds, like those resulting from the Middle Passage and the demystification campaigns of revolutionary socialist regimes,¹ which conceived African traditions as "markers of degeneracy, reminders of a cultural legacy most considered shameful."²

That Roberto Diago creates powerful metaphors about blackness comes as no surprise. As scholar Alejandro de la Fuente indicates, Diago has all it takes in his background as a descendant of a family of renowned Afro-Cuban intellectuals, including a prominent painter, his grandfather, also named Roberto Diago, as well as a musicologist, and musicians.³ Born in Havana in 1971, Diago studied art in the highly regarded Cuban art-school system, which was designed to detect talented kids at an early age. By the time he graduated from the Academy of San Alejandro, Havana, Diago had over a decade of academic art training.⁴ Most important, his time there coincided with the effervescence of new pedagogical programs, which focused on a conceptual approach to art making. Started in the mid-1980s at the Instituto Superior de Arte (Higher Institute of Art), the sole art academy of higher education in Cuba, the program was based on Thomas McEvilley's short essay, "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,"⁵ but soon spread to mid-level schools like San Alejandro.

This pedagogical program proposed self-reflectivity of the art-making process beyond traditional subject matter and genre, thus emphasizing not only the symbolic possibilities of materials and techniques, but also social relations as crucial elements of the discourse with which artists would frame their work. The approach encouraged an understanding of artist as agent in the sense that Alfred Gell discusses in his anthropological theory of art: "The concept of agency implies the overcoming of resistance, difficulty, inertia, etc. Art objects are characteristically 'difficult.' They are difficult to make, difficult to 'think,' and difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator. Their peculiarity, intransigence, and oddness is a key factor in their efficacy as social instruments."⁶ The "difficult" peculiarity in Diago's work is his understanding that inevitably viewers look at the artist's skin as much as they look at his art. In turn, Diago came to think of his art as his own, self-made skin.

SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Diago began exploring issues of racial discrimination early in his career, relying on graffiti to express anger and pain. For instance, in the early 2000s, some of his mixed-media paintings included texts like, "Cuba Si! Fucked, Black 100% My history." To him this "history" did not refer to personal, autobiographical accounts, but rather to the untold stories of black communities in Cuba, including his neighborhood of Pogolotti, whose near-marginal status resembled living like a Maroon, free yet outcast from society. In Diago's own words, "What many of us do via the arts is cultural cimarronaje (Maroonage).⁷ When [Alberto] Tosca sings, it is not a song, it is a cry; when Nancy Morejón recites with high lyricism, it is an arrow launched by the wind; when [Manuel] Mendive with his painting depicts a figure like Oggún, it is also a way of saying, 'We are here'; when Chucho Valdés calls his disc *Yemayá*, it's a way of saying, 'We are here.' What I am doing is something similar to a painting or a rap song."⁸



Untitled, 2012

in the new revolutionary socialist discourse was "interpreted mainly as economic equality." New policies focused on state ownership, and the goal of keeping wealth differentials from increasing by paying public-sector workers similar wages (public-sector workers amount to nearly 100 percent of the labor force in Cuba). Designed from the perspective of an elite white bourgeoisie, Castro, et al., these policies barely scratched the surface of deep-rooted racism in Cuba's mainstream culture because, "The political leadership assumed that by addressing what they perceived to be the material bases of exploitation, they could eliminate discrimination by sex and race from Cuban society."¹⁰

The rejection of African-based cultural forms has a long history in Cuban national culture. Already in the 1930s, Gustavo E. Urrutia warned about the "inferiority complex" that had led Cuban artists to reject the aesthetic and plastic possibilities of popular sculpture linked to Afro-Cuban religious practices. In his article, "Cuba, art and the black," Urrutia argued, "We certainly have in Cuba some worthwhile representation of African sculpture, but, what artist, either white or black, has enough courage and mastery to dare proclaim the richness of plasticity and rhythm found in Changó, in the Twins (Ibeyi), and in other idols of the African regions that surround us?" After underscoring the similarities of Afro-Cuban sculptures and those promoted by Paul Guillaume in Paris, Urrutia ironically asserts that "our unique Guillaume, besides being as knowledgeable as the French, should also be insensitive to the nickname of 'brujo' that he would receive due to the religious discredit that these figures carry."¹¹ The critic identified the colonial nature of this inferiority complex in which African sculpture came to be accepted "slowly and surreptitiously, masked as avant-gardism and protected by the masterful prestige of the French as a new dogma."¹² Robin D. Moore would concur: "Cuban artists did not decide on their own to associate black street culture with a revised sense of *cubanidad* [Cubanness]. On the contrary, their interests derived from international artistic trends, assimilated in many cases while studying abroad in Madrid, Paris, or New York."¹³ In other words, the visibility of Afro-Cuban art would come at the expense of its creators. As Cuban musicologist Cristóbal Díaz Ayala sarcastically exclaims, "We buy the product, but abhor the producer. Long live the conga, the mulata, and fried plantain, but down with the Negro!"¹⁴

Untitled, 2013, from the series El poder de tu alma (The Power of Your Soul)



The Revolution of 1959 failed to change this predicament. Cuban historian and Harvard professor Alejandro de la Fuente, whose work has focused on race relations in the Caribbean, highlights the "ambivalent and contradictory approach to Afro-Cuban popular culture." He states, "On the one hand, as the culture of a large portion of the Cuban working class and the poor, African-based cultural forms were seen as key and valuable contributions to national culture.... On the other hand, many of these cultural expressions were conceptualized as valuable, but only in terms of their contributions to national folklore."¹⁵ The revolutionary government didn't allow Afro-Cubans to form advocacy groups, as opposed to women, who found support in the highest ranks.¹⁶ Black activists

were prosecuted and jailed for advocating for their rights, including improving conditions for social mobility and freedom of religious practice.¹⁷

The renowned political posters produced by the propaganda arm of Cuba's Communist Party (PCC) for the Organization for the Solidarity with Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL), in support of liberation movements in Africa and elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s, may offer a case in point. A common denominator of these designs is the appropriation of elements of African traditional cultures (such as a mask, fetish, or a human figure wearing indigenous clothing), in combination with modern weaponry (ever-present Soviet-manufactured Kalashnikov machine-gun and anti-aircraft artillery, rifles, and grenades). Here the traditional motifs are featured in a dignified way, proudly announcing the effective coexistence of the old and the new. And yet this proud borrowing of images of ancestral power occurred at the same time that the communist authorities were cracking down and actively prosecuting Afro-Cuban religious practices.¹⁸

Thus, as De la Fuente concludes, official cultural appropriation only sought to reaffirm the imminent death of this nearly underground heritage: "The very creation of museum and research institutions betrayed the belief that Afro-Cuban popular cultural forms would quickly disappear under the impact of socialist culture—a culture that was firmly anchored in Western development paradigms, technology, and modernity."¹⁹ What's more, the imposition of socialist culture implied a complete disregard for expressions of spirituality that were defined as means of exploitation by means of ignorance and obscurantism.²⁰ As Robin D. Moore argues, "African-derived culture in an abstract sense may have been essential to dominant conceptions of *cubanidad* beginning in the 1930s, but in many of its traditional forms it was condemned as backward, lewd, or primitive, as it sometimes continues to be even today."²¹

GROWING NEW SKIN THROUGH ART

The exhibition *Queloides I* (House of Africa, Havana, 1997) was a turning point for artists of African descent. "Queloides" is the word that in Cuba designates raised scars of whipped slaves, and by extension the protuberances of scarred or burned skin, mostly among black people. Organized by artist Alexis Esquivel and curator Omar-Pascual Castillo, it was the first exhibition to address the issue of racism in the context of a social revolution that claimed to have solved it. Here was a generation of black artists who felt disenfranchised, not necessarily by the lack of institutional support but rather by their inability to speak their minds. Harsher living conditions precipitated by the economic crisis brought on by the breakup of the Soviet Union, which had provided a financial lifeline to the Castro regime for nearly a decade, came to highlight that the socialist doctrine only produced cosmetic changes to centuries-old racism. Open racial discrimination returned in the form of hiring practices for the growing tourism industry, where managers prefer people with "good presence and manners;" this is a typical racist expression, commonly used in Cuba, "based on the belief that blackness is synonym with ugliness, and that black people—regardless of their education—lacks proper manners"²² and an ever-increasing economic and social inequality.

In the exhibition this frustration resonated through a number of works by artists like René Peña, Elio Rodríguez, and the aforementioned Esquivel. Peña's photographs dwelled in the depiction of the black body (his own) as a strenuous exercise in travesty, a metaphor of having to behave as white bodies do for social acceptance. For instance, in the series *White Things*, he uses white objects (pearl necklace, teapot, cigarette) as props to create images of desire that go against his own, undermining the notion of self portrait. Rodríguez had a more humorous take on sexploitation in relation to tourism, using his self-portrait as receptacle of myths of black hyper-masculinity in movie posters and cigar-box stamps. As for Esquivel, trained as a pedagogue as well as an artist, his work dug onto the troubled and silenced history of race in Cuba, including the hateful massacre by Cuban troops of several thousand members of the Independent Party of Color in 1912. *Queloides I* sent shockwaves throughout Cuba's cultural world, underlining the urgency of addressing racism from a comprehensive point of view.

Roberto Diago was an important presence in the *Queloides I* exhibition. Younger than most artists included it, he carried name recognition due to his famed grandfather, and some of his own, having at the age of twenty-four won a Third Prize in Painting at Cuba's National Salon of Contemporary Art two years prior. His work, however, avoided representational images, instead focusing on gesture, technique, and materiality to reflect on the dynamics of memory and oblivion in relation to race. Early on, he had decided to work in the realm of language, employing formal and metaphorical means to insert historical references. This has been his modus operandi to this day. For instance, in the painting *Untitled* (2013), Diago vertically places a rope



Yo, tu el mar, 2013



Tu luz en la noche, 2012, from the series Entre Lineas (Between Lines)

in the middle of the picture, virtually splitting it in two. The rope is a motif loaded with historical connotations of racism as it was used traditionally to separate whites from blacks in public ballrooms. In other works the rope appears cut or loose, as if to render it useless.²³

However, it is Diago's sensibility toward the materiality of painting that provides a deeper understanding of his work. In *Untitled*, from the series *The Power of Your Soul* (2013), he meticulously glues patches of fabric onto the canvas or linen. He repeats the same procedure in many other works. Patches are irregular, and sometimes they become strips ranging from wide to slender, even to threads. On these picture planes, Diago arranges them in regular orders, such as grids or stacks. But what stands out from these compositions is the glue, which pushes onto the foreground after trespassing the fabric. By doing this, Diago equates the porosity of fabric to that of a skin.

In another series, *The Skin that Talks* (2014), Diago uses patches in black, white, or both; this time around they are sewn to one another but never fully integrated into one piece. Knotted threads and ropes are here visible. Yet here too Diago refers to the black skin through the notion of the *queloides*. In Africa, this peculiar characteristic gave birth to rich traditions of scarification for ritualistic and aesthetic purposes. After Europeans used them to mark enslaved people as property, these protuberances became markers of race, and Cuban people hid them out of shame.

Depicted in Diago's paintings through knotted threads and ropes, *queloides* also appear in his metal works in the form of welding and the resulting seams. Metal is Oggún's skin, a powerful orisha, or deity, in Cuban Santería. In the series *Variations of Oggún*, Diago welds plates of scrap metal from containers to assemble pieces reminiscent of colorful patchwork. As a metaphor, welding implies the pain of scarification through the transformation of metal. Rough surfaces undergo a process of melting through fire. Forging is pain, yet it also yields beauty. Using a different approach in *Ascending City* (2010), Diago fills the gallery space with a sprawling installation of burned wooden boxes, forming mounts of varying heights that clutter the floor or climb up the antiseptic white walls. Evoking ghostly African villages burned by radical Boko Haram, or abandoned shantytowns in Cuba or the United States or elsewhere, the installation is a metaphor of living communities made unlivable. Fire makes them all look the same, black, which is to say, poignantly beautiful in their difficult peculiarity.

Elvis Fuentes, a specialist in the art of Latin America, has worked as a curator at the Ludwig Foundation of Cuba (Havana, 1999-2002), the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (San Juan, 2004-2006) and El Museo del Barrio (New York, 2006-2013). While at El Museo del Barrio, he curated many exhibitions, including The Caribbean: Crossroads of the World, which was presented at three museums in New York in 2012 and at the Perez Art Museum in Miami, in 2014.