

Introduction

Cuba, a Moveable Nation

JORGE DUANY

Since the late eighteenth century, prominent Cuban intellectuals have portrayed their country as a fatherland (*patria*) or nation with a distinctive character. Indeed, patriotism—as a sense of emotional attachment and devotion to the island, its people and its culture—emerged well before the establishment of an independent Cuban nation in 1902. One of the recurring themes in Cuban thought has been interpreting the island’s cultural identity out of a troubled colonial and slave past, characterized by mass immigration of Spanish, African, and other peoples, as well as the more recent exodus to the United States and other countries. As the Cuban-American literary and art critic Andrea O’Reilly Herrera writes, “Just as Cuba and its people have absorbed and been transformed by diverse presences and cultural elements, it has also become a moveable nation, a traveling, prismatic site of rupture and continuity resulting from continuous out-migrations and scatterings.”¹

Several generations of Cuban writers and artists on the island and abroad have drawn the contours of their “moveable nation,” according to different historical junctures, geographic locations, and ideological perspectives. Expressions of Cuban patriotism became stronger during the early 1800s, both in Cuba and in its incipient diaspora in the United States. An iconic moment was the publication of José María Heredia’s romantic ode, “Niagara” (1825), in which the exiled poet contemplates the

beauty of the falls while reminiscing about “the delicious palms” on the plains of his “ardent fatherland.”

Throughout the nineteenth century, the island’s native elite articulated a growing sense of “Cubanness” (*cubanía*), as opposed to an identification with peninsular Spain. Initially, most authors limited their purview of the nation to the descendants of Spanish immigrants in Cuba (especially the white Creole elite). The concept of the nation eventually embraced blacks and *mulatos*,² as well as the working classes. During the first half of the twentieth century, essayists often pondered the failure of the Cuban republic to achieve national sovereignty, social justice, and racial equality. Cuba’s dependence on the United States was also a constant concern for the island’s intellectuals. Asserting a separate cultural identity became an even more pressing demand for Cuban and Cuban-American writers and artists after the 1959 Revolution.³

The search for and affirmation of Cuba’s national identity molded the visual arts, as well as literature, music, and other cultural expressions. According to several historians, the sense of belonging to the island evolved gradually between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, first recorded in literature and later in painting and music.⁴ The epic poem “Espejo de paciencia” (“Mirror of Patience,” 1608), written in Cuba by an immigrant from the Canary Islands, Silvestre de Balboa (1563–ca. 1644), is usually considered the first literary work to exalt the island’s exuberant nature.⁵ One of the earliest Cuban composers was Esteban Salas (1725–1803), who taught and wrote baroque music for the Catholic Church, while one of the first prominent Cuban painters, Vicente Escobar (1757–1834), excelled in portraits of the island’s elite in a classical European style.

Whereas vernacular expressions of literature, music, and art appeared to be isolated in the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century witnessed a notable intellectual awakening in Cuba and other Spanish colonies of the Americas. Influenced by the European Enlightenment, numerous Cuban intellectuals, most of them born on the island, set out to foster progress and renovation through culture and education. Thus, in the early 1800s, the institutionalization of art teaching in Cuba was part of the deliberate attempt by a budding local intelligentsia to promote art as the embodiment of a *criollo* identity, while disseminating European standards of culture.⁶ Modeled after the French and Spanish royal academies, the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts, established in Havana in 1818, continues to this day.

Since the Spanish Conquest, itinerant European artists had been producing widespread representations of the environment and inhabitants of the “New World.” In Cuba, such artists included the French-born lithographers Frédéric Mialhe (1810–81) and Édouard Laplante (1818–60). The visual chronicler of nineteenth-century Cuban society, the Basque painter Víctor Patricio de Landaluze (1829–89), arrived in Havana in the 1850s and stayed in Cuba for the rest of his life.⁷ Many of these artists’ images remain popular representations of Cuban landscapes, characters, and history, and they formed part of the emerging discourse on national identity on the island.

The nineteenth century witnessed a growing Romantic interest among visual artists in local themes and landscapes. The depiction of things Cuban comprised a wide range of subjects, from public buildings, street and country scenes, and Afro-Cuban processions to portraits, historical events, and still lifes. One of the recurring themes of this period was the bucolic portrayal of the island as a fertile paradise, full of lush vegetation and bathed in a brilliant tropical light.⁸ The end of the century set the stage for the *vanguardia* (avant-garde) movement in the first decades of the twentieth century. This transition accompanied shifting political, social, and cultural circumstances as the island’s status changed from Spanish colony to independent republic (1902).

During the first half of the twentieth century, many artists and intellectuals from different generations sought to delineate the cultural tropes of the young republic. Cuban art underwent an intense process of identity exploration, emphasizing the depiction of autochthonous scenes and customs, including rural landscapes (usually dotted with palm trees) and folk types (especially the *guajiro* or peasant). In the 2013 retrospective exhibition at the Vero Beach Art Museum, *Cuban Art & Identity: 1900–1950*, art critic and curator Juan A. Martínez explored four leitmotifs that helped modern and traditional painters visualize collective identity: the Cuban countryside, Havana interiors, Afro-Cuban religion, and popular music.⁹ Both groups of artists depicted a similar subject matter, though they differed in their perspectives: whereas traditional painters favored naturalistic representations, modern painters tended toward expressionist or abstract images.

Art historian Abigail McEwen has discussed how a new generation of Cuban artists took up abstraction during the 1950s. These artists, too, framed their work within the nationalist discourse of *cubanía*, even while

abandoning the mimetic pretensions of art.¹⁰ Abstract artists affiliated with the third-generation vanguardia, grouped around Los Diez and Los Once, were increasingly drawn to universalist and cosmopolitan trends in modern art. Yet they found ideological legitimacy in earlier *cubanista* codes that had survived the political turmoil of Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship (1952–58). After the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, the new regime increasingly identified abstract art with bourgeois, capitalist, and elitist values.

The revolution inaugurated a new era for Cuban art. Under the emerging political order—officially proclaimed socialist by Fidel Castro in April 1961—artists experienced moments of extreme tension. The early 1960s represented the radicalization of revolutionary ideology, as the country's political leaders imposed conceptual boundaries on artistic creation. The revolution also exacerbated state censorship, which politicized the appraisal of art and placed new pressures on those artists who tried to evade government restrictions on creative expression. The so-called Gray Years (*Quinquenio Gris*, 1971–76) were probably the worst period of bureaucratic control over the visual arts in Cuba.¹¹

Nevertheless, the postrevolutionary history of Cuban art reveals a wide spectrum of styles and coexisting trends; several generations who introduced substantial renovation within the artistic scenario; the rise of the diaspora and the formation of Cuban artistic communities throughout the world; the active presence of Cuban and Cuban-American artists in the international scenarios of contemporary art; the emergence of a more fluid dialogue between artists on and off the island; and the effects of all these elements on the constant redefinition of Cuban collective imaginaries.

As the capital of the Cuban diaspora since 1959, and one of the leading artistic hubs of Latin America and the Caribbean since the 1990s, Miami has become a crossroads for Cuban art and culture. Furthermore, the introduction of Art Basel Miami Beach in 2002 expanded the international dimensions of the local art scene, together with Art Miami, established in 1990, and Miami Art Week, started in 2001. Similarly, Art Wynwood has become a leading exhibition center for modern and contemporary art since its inception in 2012. It is in Miami that a Cuban diasporic identity has flourished most powerfully in the visual arts as well as in other cultural expressions, such as creative literature and popular music.