Cuban Art in the 1980s

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Cuban Art in the 1980s

Senior Project Submitted to

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by

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Thank you to my parents for raising me in a place with a constant summer and the most beautiful art I have ever seen. Thank you to Cuban artists for constantly producing incredible artwork, no matter the political circumstance. Thank you to David Diaz for helping with translations. Finally, thank you to Tom Wolf, for never talking me out of doing this project.
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Introduction

The Cuban Revolution ended in 1959 but has continued to spark controversy on the island to this day. When Fidel Castro seized power on the island he citizens were faced with a regime they had fought for but discovered they were given something radically different than what they expected. The art of the 1980s was the creation of the first generation of children that had grown up under Castro’s policies. Their education and lives had been shaped by the confines of the revolution, but it was apparent their country had not become the utopia their parents fought for. In this project, I examine the historical conditions that made this period an incubator for a new wave of Cuban art. My first chapter focuses on the original vision of art in Cuba starting with the 1967 Salon de Mayo Mural, then examines the devolution of that vision with the atrocities of human rights violations under the oppressive regime that led to the Mariel boatlift in 1981, a mass exodus of 100,000 Cuban fleeing to America. This sets the stage for the *Volumen Uno* generation of artists who were responding to mass censorship and restrictions from the government while attempting to carve out a new Cuban identity not dictated by the messages of the revolution.

My second chapter is devoted to an analysis on the concept of *picúo* and how the artists Flavio Garciaandía and Rubén Torres Llorca used it to examine the effects of colonialism and the class system on objects. My third chapter looks at the influence of the Afro-Caribbean religions Santería and Palo Monte, on the artistic practices of José Bedia and Juan Francisco Elso Padilla. As a whole, my project attempts to examine the ways Cuban artists tried to visualize what it meant to be Cuban, or *cubanidad*, in a
period of political chaos. To do this they looked at the history of the island and interpreted in a contemporary frame.
Cuba between reform and revolution

Chapter 1: When Cracks Form; *Volumen Uno* and Cuban Art in the 1980s

The Mural

In July 1967 famed surrealist painter, Wifredo Lam, invited over 100 sculptors, painters, writers, journalists, photographers and Museum personnel to the city of Havana in Cuba for the Salón de Mayo. The event had previously only been held in Paris with the French title of Salon de Mai, but it was a privilege for the new revolutionary country to host and was a sign of Cuba being welcomed into the global stage of culture.\(^1\) Art and communism were believed to have blended. The internationally acclaimed crowd that flocked to the island and were given studios to work, and donated their pieces created on the island to the Cuban people for a future modern art museum.\(^2\)

A canvas was divided into 100 pieces and was given to a group including famous names such as Karel Appel, Willem de Kooning, Alexander Calder, Hans Arp, Roberto Matta, René Magritte, and others to be individualized. Wifredo Lam had the canvases attached to a wooden grid and arranged in a spiral. The center of the spiral contained Lam’s piece and the 26th spot on the spiral was reserved for Fidel Castro, the leader of the revolution, who did not attend the event. The 26th spot was a reference to July 26th, the date Castro attacked the Moncada barracks in Santiago, the first act of the revolution. The resulting work was a bright looping collage containing vignettes of

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\(^2\) Schütz, “Paris in Cuba,” 277
Cuban revolutionary imagery, surrealist figures, propaganda slogans, and abstract drawings.

The production of the piece titled, *Cuba colectiva*, took place on the 17th of July and continued into the morning of the 18th. Rum was poured and the Tropicana cabaret dancers performed to salsa music as thousands gathered turning the installation into a festival.\(^3\) The Mural was displayed on the Cuban pavilion on Calle La Rampa; a large curving ramp leading up to a flat pavilion in the heart of Old Havana. The headline of the official Communist newspaper, *Granma*, read “The Revolution Ensures and Exalts the Rights of Artists and Writers to Express our Reality Freely.”\(^4\) Art world elites gathered and witnessed the creation of a truly communist piece. It utilized equality among the participants and displayed totality instead of addressing individuality. The crowd was invigorated by the display of life from the mural and by all accounts, the Salón de Mayo was a success, and the resulting artwork is a visually beautiful creation made by a team of acclaimed artists. Despite the famous names involved and the history, the mural is rarely shown. Perhaps because the artist who created it quickly disavowed the Cuban government in the following years.

\(^4\) Schütz, “Paris in Cuba,” 278
The revolution aimed to be a haven for artists and the working class. The vision for a new Cuba was one of equal prosperity and a society based on embracing its own culture as opposed to the tastes of its foreign invaders. The Cuban Revolution is, unfortunately, one full of contradictions. The government heavily monitored artistic production to make sure it corresponded to the motives of the regime. The blending of artistic disciplines and culture to create a patchwork of artistic freedom shown in the Salón de Mayo was not the artistic climate of Cuba in the upcoming years.

What began as a possible restructuring of capitalistic society shown in the collage of hope and unity presented in the mural began to fracture with a series of human rights violations and economic hardships. The art created under Fidel Castro’s Cuba has the undercurrent of fear brought about by the government’s tactics of repression.

**Prelude to Volumen Uno, The Human Rights Violations in the Regime**

Cuban art did not form in a void. It was crafted through a dense political history of oppression. Art was a way to speak out. Artists would risk their safety by challenging censorship laws that the government placed to discourage dissidence. The human
rights violations that took place in the 1970s, the period right before the explosion of contemporary art in Cuba, created a culture based on fear, and a desperate search for an individual identity in a collective society.

Fidel Castro once said "Our enemies are capitalists and imperialists, not abstract art," but his tone quickly changed in 1971 through 1976, a period Cubans refer to as “Quinquinio Gris,” or “The Five Gray Years.”

During this aptly named period, free speech was repressed; especially in terms of art. Exhibitions were closed, art was censored and professors were fired if their work deviated from the revolution’s beliefs. The Cuban Constitution was revised in 1976 to align with Marxist-Leninist principles and a section read, “deems that artistic creation is free as long as artistic content does not express views contrary to the revolution.”

Castro claimed, “Within the revolution everything, outside the revolution nothing,” but the confines of the revolution were constricting. The revolution set on the task of building what radical Communist, Maoist, and Cuban revolutionary leader, Che Guevara, referred to as a “New Man.” This “New Man” was to be sculpted by the harsh hands of the revolution through discipline.

The citizens of Cuba who were known or suspected homosexuals were rounded up in the “Night of the Three Ps.” The Ps stood for: prostitutes, pimps, and pájaros (homosexuals). Thousands were detained and sent to hard-care prisons such as El Morro, a converted old Spanish Fort located by the ocean, that had cells that would

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5 Gelburd, "Cuba and the Art of 'Trading,'" 25
6 ibid
8 Yoani Sanchez, "Che Guevara’s "New Man": Another Look," Huffington,
flood with water, no plumbing, and an interior that would reach sweltering climates in the tropical heat. The prisoners were regularly beaten and verbally assaulted, and then were moved to escuelas de reeducación, which were work camps masquerading behind another title. Over the gates in a camp located in Camagüey was the phrase “WORK MAKES YOU MEN,” eerily similar to the gate of the concentration camp, Dachau, that read “WORK MAKES YOU FREE.”

Castro said of these measures, “It is necessary to bring morality to the country. To create a strong revolutionary force.” He was pressured to stop the imprisonment of homosexuals by Che Guevara and his brother Raúl Castro’s wife Vilma Espín (founder and chief of the Federation of Women), but homosexuality was still a criterion for exclusion into the country until 1990.

The country has not made great strides in terms of safeguarding human rights, and still heavily monitors and discriminates against politically outspoken citizens, particularly artists. The contemporary Cuban artist, Tania Bruguera, attempted to organize a peaceful performance art piece at the historic Plaza de la Revolución in Havana in 2014. The structure of the performance was to give any participant a microphone and one minute to speak on any topic they choose. The idea stemmed from Bruguera’s belief that the government usually held the metaphoric microphone of the Cuban people’s voices. Before the performance could take place Bruguera was arrested, had her Cuban passport confiscated, was put through a series of 30 interrogations, and had to partake in a lengthy court case. This ordeal took place in

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12 ibid, 80.
modern-day Cuba after decades of protest, a mass exodus of citizens fleeing, political arrests, and a generation of artists who challenged the government by making art that was so smart it evaded censorship laws. Contemporary Cuban art emerged from a country that promised a utopian society and whose citizens fought and sacrificed for a Revolution that gave them a much different way of life than what they were promised. The 1980s was a period when the first generation of Cubans had come of age under Castro’s policies. Reality had sunk in for Cubans, that this was their country, this was their government, and the unique chaos of the time drew together a group of artists who attempted to make sense of the past and future of their country.

**Mariel**

Leaving the island was almost impossible. Cuban citizens would have to engage in radical actions in an attempt to achieve asylum with other Latin American countries. They began to smuggle themselves into various Latin American Embassies and demanding asylum, but soon they turned to more bold spectacles to show their desperation to leave the island. A phenomenon of citizens crashing their vehicles through the gates of an embassy and then taking refuge in the compound became so popular that by March 1980 close to 30 Cuban citizens and driven cars through embassy gates.  

14 The Venezuelan embassy attempted to show their disapproval for the radical actions by recalling its ambassador in protest of the “heavy-handed measures used by the Cubans in dealing with forcible entries at its Embassy.”  

On March 28, 1980, the action was escalated when twelve Cubans crashed a bus through the gates of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana in search of asylum. The

15 ibid
Cuban guards stationed at the entrance of the embassy fired shots at the bus but ended up injuring their own soldiers instead of the inhabitants of the bus. The Peruvian ambassador declined to return the refugees and the Cuban government responded by sending in steam rollers to destroy the embassy gates. These actions were fruitless and by the afternoon Castro released a statement that he would no longer risk the lives of its soldiers to protect “criminals.”  

The ambassador, not only granted asylum to the 12 from the bus but also opened the embassy to 10,000 more Cubans who wished to defect. The compound became a cramped refugee camp with little food, water, and lack of a functioning sewage system. Two babies were born in the embassy, fights broke out, onlookers pelted the attempting refugees with rotten food and rocks, but eventually, a path of emigration was negotiated by Cuba and Peru with the assistance of several other countries agreeing to take a portion of refugees. When the airlift commenced on April 16, 1980, journalists from around the world flocked to document the refugees leaving the plane. The world watched as they kissed the ground, shouted “Freedom,” and “Down with Castro!” and suddenly the image of the model Socialist state deteriorated into a state in Crises. Having citizens desperate to break from the state threatened the bedrock of the communist ideals the socialist state stood on. The image of the exhausted emigres who endured hellish conditions to be granted asylum crying with joy to be off Cuban soil gave the country a negative international perception. The government and its press led an effort to turn the refugees into cowards. The émigrés were frequently referred to as *gusanos* (worms), *escoria* (human waste), and *apátridas* (people without a country). On the May Day celebration at the Plaza de la Revolución

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16 *ibid*
Castro said in a speech, “We say to those who do not have the genes of revolutionaries, or the blood of revolutionaries, or do not have the necessary discipline and heroism for a revolution: we don’t want you, we don’t need you.” The Castro government used the occasion to rid the country of people who lacked the “blood of revolutionaries” which ended up being mentally ill patients who were hospitalized, convicted prisoners. María Cristina García wrote in *Havana USA*,

> A number of the refugees had either physical or mental disabilities. An estimated fifteen hundred had mental health problems or were mentally retarded; five hundred of these were judged to need long-term institutionalization, while another five hundred were eventually placed in halfway houses. The government was desperate for the event of over 100,000 people leaving the small island to be seen as good for the whole of the country. The émigrés were forced to sign documents declaring themselves to be social deviants and of committing crimes against the state. The government would also expedite the paperwork of criminals wishing to leave, so many families went to the local police stations to declare themselves prostitutes and criminals to receive passage out of the country. When it was known that a citizen wanted to leave the country the government encouraged *actos de repudio*

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17 Ibid, 59.  
19 García, *Havana USA*, 64.
(acts of retribution,) that were carried out by gangs of thugs at night. People were publicly beaten, and their homes were pelted with rocks and glass.

Many American citizens with family still living in Cuba rented a boat in hopes of being able to retrieve them from the country. Some were simply good Samaritans who wished to help out Cubans in need. Over 1000 boats flocked to the port of Mariel and had to dock at sea with limited food, water, and gas, but an abundance of Caribbean sun. When they finally reached the port the government would force the boat to carry as many refugees as it could fit, and would often not put the family members on the boat. Those who refused to carry the refugees were prohibited from leaving.20

Jimmy Carter, the U.S president, welcomed the “freedom loving Cubans” while Castro said, “Let them go, the loafers, the antisocial and lumpen elements and the scum!” and adding a week later “We need not worry if we lose some flab.”21 This exodus Castro saw as a removal of a tainted excess in the island, but it was evident it was more than that; It was a statement against the ideals of the revolution, it was an obvious indicator that the country that was run by communist principles which required a singular collective, was fractured. The chaos of Mariel, and the government encouraging attacks and humiliation on those wishing to leave created a deep divide in Cuba. The patriotism of the revolution was coming to an end. The political issue that was kept quarantined in Cuba had now leaked out for the world to see. As the world gawked at the images of busses crashed through embassy gates and sunburned emigres kissing the earth as they reached US soil it was obvious that the new country was going through a crisis so early in its existence.

20 ibid, 61
21 ibid
There was not a quiet year for Cuba since the Revolution began but the early 1980s was particularly chaotic for the country. The mass exodus of over 100,000 citizens showed what no propaganda could hide: citizens were unhappy with the revolution they were given as opposed to the one they were promised. Uncensored
expression was hard to pull off in a communist state, however, it was achieved by a
group of young artists. Eight months after Mariel, on January 14, 1981, the exhibition
*Volumen Uno* debuted at the Havana International Arts Centre. The show had
previously been subject to censorship and the government had gone to great lengths to
prevent the exhibition from taking place. The group had been trying to exhibit the show
since 1977 but was repeatedly halted by government’s efforts. After multiple state-run
galleries and institutions rejected the show the eleven participating artists, José Bedia,
Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, José Manuel Fors, Flavio Garciandía, Israel León, Rogelio
López Marín (Gory), Gustavo Pérez Monzón, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, Tomás Sánchez,
Leandro Soto, and Rubén Torres Llorca, decided to have the show in a private home.
This idea to host a show in a private space was remarkably anti-communist and in fear
that this could lead to some sort of privatization of the art market the government
allowed it to be held at the Arts Centre. The show was also named after the Led
Zeppelin album *Volume One*, promoting the rebellious capitalistic ideals of rock and roll
and America.

Flavio Garciandía, a participant in the *Volumen Uno* show, and well known
Cuban artist recalled the struggle and paradox of the opening of the show,

That was impossible! And that, and exhibit in a private home? And those guys, what?...I
was working in the office of the plastic arts of the Ministry of Culture. And the minister of
the interior was the one who said to my boss, to the director of the plastic arts division,
you have to give a place to those guys to exhibit, there cannot be one more exhibit in a
private home. So it was the minister of interior who got the gallery for us...they gave us
this place, somewhat to relieve the tension in that sense.22

With a venue, the show could open, and it was a cultural juggernaut. The show
attracted over ten thousand visitors in two weeks and the artists relied on grassroots

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22 ibid,7
methods for their own promotion of the show not allowing the government anymore influence in their show besides the venue. The group turned the event into a vehicle that harnessed the group's energy. Gerardo Mosquera, a Cuban curator, and critic remembered the event as, “lively, youthful...A renovating energy and enthusiasm bubbling there. One felt that that event was bringing a change.”

The show did bring a change to Cuban art. Stylistically, it was unlike anything ever shown in Cuban institutions. The show was a synthesis of pop art, minimalism, conceptualism, graffiti, Arte Povera, and performance works which differed drastically from the photo-realistic depictions of revolutionary heroes, surrealist paintings, and lush landscape paintings that dominated the artistic vocabulary of the island. The group’s new style became associated with “la generacion de los ochenta,” the 1980s generation.

![Image 4](Image 4) Exhibition view of Volumen Uno with an installation by Gustavo Pérez Monzón in the foreground

The show was a debut for a new ideology. The artists were young, all under the age of 26 and were the first generation to grow up under Castro’s policies. Their teenage years had been spent in “Quinquinio Gris,” and they had witnessed the government both succeed at social programs and repress certain freedoms. The group

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23 Ibid, 8
24 Ibid, 6
did not identify with the Sovietization of the 1970s and broke severely from the previous artistic style. The group had the unique situation of creating art in the first *apertura*, an opening of society and economy, since the Revolution. Artists could survive on the art they created and were not tethered to the demands of a market, so the production was purely artistic, and not shaped by economics. This was a rare moment of stability which encouraged artists to create. The establishment of the ministry of culture was another and there was an influx of new educational policies. Young Graduates of the Institution Superior de Arte in Havana became teachers and although they were monitored for their politics created a method of teaching that focused on the creation of art and not propaganda. One of the recent graduates turned teachers was a *Volumen Uno* participant, Flavio Garciandía. Garciandía’s unique style blended technical painting with local culture, elevating *picúo*, Cuban kitsch, found in ceramic figurines and house decorations.

Besides Garciandía the rest of the *Volumen Uno* group was relatively unknown and this functioned as many of their first shows. The group's members had widely differing styles bringing together an array of artistic influences. The group functioned as a collective for the show out of a connection to each other rather than a unifying political belief of style. Cuban art critic, curator, and close observer of the group, Gerardo Mosquera wrote, “It must be stressed that this transformation was a collective phenomenon that brought together different approaches to art, not a program with a manifesto or led by an individual, nor was it the result of strong personalities sweeping

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others along.” There was not a charismatic personality, or manifesto guiding the group, as there was guiding their country, but simply a group of friends who were exchanging ideas and styles through art.

Politics was very present in the show, but there was not one strong message besides being discontent. In a time when freedom of speech was heavily repressed political beliefs had to be expressed with a level of subtlety. Artist, Leandro Soto, did that expertly. A member of the Union of Young Communists he hailed from a family that was active in the revolution. Soto interests were vast and he studied Santería, Hinduism, yoga, Catholicism, and theosophy to have a broad range of perspectives. His belief in ideologies other than Marxism was considered a conflict and he was fired as an art school professor for “ideological problems,” but soon found a job in state design where he continued making art. His piece Retablo familiar (Family Altar) showed him as a child accompanied by his entire family all clad in khakis, ironed collared shirts, combat boots, with Cuban flag pins adorning their clothing. Their militaristic garb showed their allegiance to the communist party and to the revolution. Soto’s father had the family take the picture, “for posterity since each of us was to wear the uniform showing the work he or she was doing when the country is in danger.” The photo is blown up standing taller than the average man and has a thick black frame adorned with blue, white, and red lights and descriptions of his family written in curly cursive (the colors of the Cuban flag.)

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27 Mosquera, “New Cuban,” 314
28 Weiss, To and From, 30.
29 Weiss, To and From, 31.
Soto’s father and uncle fought in the revolution on the Escambray mountains and Soto used this in his mixed media sculpture *Campamento miliciano* (Militia Camp.) The knee-high display has a model quality with miniature animals fake bunkers, and eight large standing cutouts of military soldiers. The work could be a child’s toy, and Soto admitted to playing with his father’s military gear as a child in an attempt to feel “heroic and mythic” like them.\(^{30}\) At first glance, these works appear to be glorifying the revolution not critiquing it, and it was, with a twist. In a 2003 interview, Soto said, “They [the government] couldn’t say anything to me because ours is a completely revolutionary family...And so what I wanted to say with *Retablo Familiar*, somewhat to the establishment was, This is not going the way you said it would...You are veering away from the original plan of the revolution, this is not moving the direction you said it would.”\(^ {31}\)

By presenting his heritage he is stating that he is pro-revolutionary, but for the revolution they were promised, not the one they were given. By showing the revolution through the fairy-tale eyes of a child it gives it a falsehood and flimsy quality that cannot be held up to the government’s propaganda. Gerardo Mosquera once responded to

\(^{30}\) Ibid, 32  
\(^{31}\) Ibid, 33
Fidel Castro’s statement, “Within the revolution everything, outside the revolution nothing” with “Young Cuban artists are for the revolution, instinctively, intuitively, as one is for life.” Soto was defending the principles his family fought for and hoped to see him grow up with. He wanted the correct revolution, not the one filled with contradictions that he witnessed.

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**Img. 6** Leandro Soto, *Campamento miliciano*, 1984. Installation and performance, mixed media; dimensions variable

**Ana Mendieta’s Role in Volumen Uno**

The freshness of the show involved an outside influencer to the closed society. Ana Mendieta, an esteemed artist living in New York, was born in Cuba and forced to leave as part of Operation Pedro Pan when she was only 13. Operation Pedro Pan was organized by Father Bryan O Walsh, who organized transportation for over 14,000

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unaccompanied Cuban minors from 1960-1962. Parents who feared for their children with the uncertainty of the revolution used the project to see the children to safety. The project led to the placement of many of these children, including Mendieta, in foster homes in America. Mendieta was placed in a foster home in Iowa and speaks very negatively about her experience submerged in a different culture and geography among people that viewed her as a criminal. She was placed in a reform school and could not sufficiently speak English to communicate with anyone other than her sister. She found solace in creating art, and went on to study it at the University of Iowa, and later became an international artist.

Despite her violent ripping from her home country, she managed to infuse Cuban culture into her works. Santería and dedications to the Orishas were a large part of her artistic practice. She began to return to Cuba as an adult as a member of the Círculo de Cultura Cubana, an organization that allowed her to exhibit and create her works. Aside from creating her Rupestrian Sculptures during her time in Cuba, she engaged with artists and swapped information on the contemporary art scene for details of her Afro-Cuban roots, which she had not had the chance to understand in America. Her second trip to the island in 1981 serendipitously aligned with the opening of Volumen Uno. She befriended the group of artists and brought the Whitney Museum catalog, 200 Year of American Sculpture, which crisply documented artists such as Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Carl Andre, and Richard Smithson. She also brought the artist, and her romantic partner until a grisly end, Carl Andre, on the trip who engaged with the artists.

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34 Priscilla Frank, "The Life Of Forgotten Feminist Artist Ana Mendieta, As Told By Her Sister," Huffpost, March 7, 2016,
35 Roulet, "Ana Mendieta," 24
Andre, a theoretical Marxist, who consistently wore a worker’s jumpsuit, was criticized for his beliefs by the artist saying they had to live inside “la teoria” (the theory).  

José Bedia said about Mendieta’s visits, “We were already formed as artists, but she gave us a look at the broad art world through the eyes of Cubans like us.”

\[\text{Img. 7} \text{ Mendieta Ana, Guanaroca (First Woman) from the Rupestrian Sculptures series, 1981} \]

\[\text{Img. 8} \text{ Standing, back row: José Bedia, unidentified woman, Lucy Lippard, Ana Mendieta, Ricardo Brey, Leandro Soto, Juan Francisco Elso, and Flavio García. Kneeling, front row: Gustavo Pérez Monzón and Rubén Torres Llorca} \]

\[\text{36 ibid} \]
\[\text{37 ibid} \]
cultural exchange allowed for contemporary art to be infused with Cubanidad influencing the works by the *Volumen Uno* artists. They told her of the complexities of Santería and other Afro-Cuban religions explained the power and significance of the Orishas to her. Bedia, a practitioner of Palo Monte, also referred to as *Regla de Conga* (Conga Rule), a religion that originated in the Congo and Angola that was brought over to the Caribbean with the slave trade, used his religion in his art. Although he did not officially initiate into Palo Monte till 1983, his interest in the religion seeped into his practice in the early 1980s. Upon initiation, he was given the spirit guide Sarabanda, the communicator with the underworld and God of iron.\textsuperscript{38} Because of this, metal objects like knives, magnets, razor blades, and nails are common objects throughout his works.

![Image 9](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Img. 9** José Bedia, *Los cuchillos no lo pinchan* (The knives don’t prick him), ca. 1985, Crayon on Paper; 22x28 inches.

Mendieta placed her new knowledge in her 1981 *Rupestrian Sculptures* that she carved into cave walls with images of yonic women that she decorated with her menstrual blood as an offering to the Orishas. The exchange between Mendieta and the *Volumen Uno* showed an infusion of contemporary art into the country, that accounted for the modernity of the show, and Cuban culture that left the island and went into an

\textsuperscript{38} Carlos Suarez de Jesus, "Jose Bedia: Transcultural Pilgrim at MAM," *Miami New Times*, May 31, 2012
international scene with Mendieta. This was an early crossover for the isolated island to the international scene and showed a clandestine, yet soon to be publicly displayed artistic exchange with the United States and Cuba. However, despite the foreign influence and the avant-garde nature of the show, the show was incredibly focused on the concept of Cuban identity, or cubanidad.

**Volumen Uno as a New Cuba**

The *Volumen Uno* show carried a unique power with it. Leandro Soto said, “The artists of the 1980s managed to draw attention to the visual arts from practically all the social sectors through a series of rapid and communicative events. We managed to change the course of art history in Cuba in spite of limited materials and access to information, and political constraints and totalitarian control.” The tactics demonstrated in *Volumen Uno* became the new lingua franca of art making in communist Cuba. Rebelling through style, subject matter, and reclaiming the identity of Cubanidad that had been reshaped by the revolution became central to the new style of art. The artists themselves were committed to praxis over theory and worked out complex ideologies with art objects and performances. Through bold moves in one of the most oppressive regimes in the 20th-century, Cuban art allowed for repressed voices to have an outlet. Art became a social and political event that could not be completely censored.

The artists of the 1980s are often divided into three “generations.” This is largely due to the Cuban art critic and champion of the *Volumen Uno* group, Gerardo Mosquera’s writing of 1980s art in which he separated the artists into these groups. The distinctions between the generations are largely artificial since the artists functioned

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more individually instead of being united under a common style. There were certain aspects of each group that did join them together. The “first generation” graduated from Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), a prominent art school in Cuba, from 1980 to 1981 and participated in the large group show *Volumen Uno*. The “second generation,” was the least defined of the three. They did not share a particular style, or political message, but seemed to improve upon the developments of the first, while not venturing into the heavy political commentary of the third generation. The “Third generation” of Cuban art in the 1980s focused on a politically radical message against the Castro regime.

Each of these “generations” was dedicated to one goal, to examine what it meant to Cuban in such a period of turmoil. The artists sifted through the historical past of Cuba and merged it with their current reality. The first generation, the *Volumen Uno* group, looked at aspects from Cuba’s past such as slavery, colonialism, revolution, and Afro-Caribbean religions and used these influence to attempt to construct a modern Cuban identity. The body of their work is a testament to resilience in the face of oppression, which is a key to the Cuban identity.

The past is inescapable in Cuba. The streets of Havana are full of beautiful, yet heavily worn, colonial architecture. Buildings are painted candy colors, and the roads are paved with cobblestone. Vintage cars from the 1950s move along the streets releasing puffs of smoke and if the architecture is examined signs of decay are prominent. The buildings refuse to crumble, despite the time, despite the neglect. They are held up by scaffolding and sheer will. Rebellion in the face of force is a common theme of the island, it is somehow ingrained into the architecture. The artists who were a part of the *Volumen Uno* generation dug up the past of colonialism in the form of

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kitsch and Afro-Caribbean religions and translated it into modern art to try to consolidate the fractured Cuban identity.
Chapter Two: Kitsch and Pop Art

*Kicúo*

Kitsch does not have a high regard in the artistic community. Kitsch is a German word meaning ‘corny’ or something that is tastelessly commonplace. The word and the objects it represents have an overwhelmingly bad reputation often referring to cheap and sentimental imitations of artifacts from the upper-class. Every culture has a form of the lower class mimicking the unobtainable objects of the wealthy, or kitsch. In Cuba the word *picúo* is used to describe this class of objects. *Picúo* is slightly different from the term kitsch and comprises a much more narrow type of objects all related to *Cubanidad*, or Cuban identity. Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer writes in his book, *New Art of Cuba*,

*Picúo* is less directed to mass-produced commercial kitsch than to what is genuinely produced under its influence, such as bar decorations and carnival floats. All this determines that memories- pre-revolutionary memory, childhood remembrances, romantic nostalgia- are all suffused with some *picúo* quality that can become a starting point for much of the Cuban work. 41 Camnitzer defines the Cuban brand of kitsch, *picúo*, as being born from a collective Cuban nostalgia. *Picúo* is not just imitations of bourgeois style but with memories interweaving with the revolution, and childhood events that are specific to the common people of Cuba. White fake marble and glass diamonds constitute kitsch, *picúo* incorporates these themes with imagery specific the Cuban culture, such as stereotypical symbols of Tropicana like the palm tree, or Communist imagery like the hammer and sickle

Cuba has long been susceptible to forms of Kitsch. The Indo-Cubans, the original inhabitants of Cuba, faced a massive population slash due to the disease and systematic murder by Christopher Columbus and the invading Spaniards. The

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population of Indo-Cubans fell from over 100,000 in 1511 to 3,900 in 1555. With this void in the population, an invading culture imposed its ideals onto the island. European bourgeois kitsch invaded with the Spaniards and it settled its way deep into the culture. Tourism and “mafia taste”, imports from the United States, also cemented their way under the umbrella of picúo as the economy began to depend on foreign investment.

Picúo has a distinctive Cuban appearance to it. It has become emblematic of a Cuban style. Flavio Gariciandía, a Volumen Uno artist who pushed the subject of picúo into the generation’s art described the paradox of being asked to create something that looks “Cuban”, saying “People who commission work insist that it have a Cuban look for the market abroad. They need to impose a Cuban look, but what is it?...A desperate search for identity.”

The void of a stable identity is a defining characteristic of Cubanidad. In a culture that is rooted in the imports of its physical and economic invaders, picúo allows for these things to be washed in Cubanness and become a part of the culture as opposed to belonging to its conquerors. Picúo possesses a unique quality that Camnitzer dubs, “double-kitsch.” Cuba’s kitsch stems from colonialist imports as well as a class structure. The history of kitsch is very starkly opposed to the values of revolutionary Cuba. In Gerardo Mosquera essay, Bad Taste in Good Form, he writes about how capitalist ideals spawned kitsch,

Capitalist development in the era since the Industrial Revolution brings with it a segregation of art, a weakening of its communicative ties with the people, such that art becomes a province for initiated elites, to the point, at times, that it is incomprehensible to the masses...To fill the void left by the evanescent artistic

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42 ibid
43 ibid
traditions of the majority, an "artificial," "showy," "complacent," "pseudoplastic" art is fabricated after degraded models of elite art. 

Capitalism separated economic classes of people to an almost feudal level and with the break in classes came the shift of art to possession of the wealthy. This gap divorced the lower classes from access to the artistic world forcing them to copy the elements of culture from the wealthy creating objects deemed as gaudy.

Clement Greenberg in his essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," theorized, incorrectly, that in a socialist state kitsch would cease to exist. He wrote, "In the end the peasant will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at pictures, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort. The state is helpless in this matter and remains so long as the problems of production have not been solved in a socialist sense." In the case of Cuba, kitsch was not solely about class differences but was also influenced by the invading colonialist culture. Camintzer referenced this when he used the term "double kitsch," so Greenberg’s theory is incorrect probably because it was directed towards European countries. Also, Cuba’s economy, although ostensibly Communist, was in a highly stressed state throughout the 1970s, 1980s and especially the 1990s. Cuba was also not the Marxist state of the future it desired to become, it was ruled by a dictator, Fidel Castro. Greenberg brings up that kitsch or in Cuba’s case, *picúo* can be used as a razor-edged tool for the manipulation of the masses. Greenberg writes, “Kitsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the ‘soul’ of the people. Should the official culture be one superior to the general mass-level, there would be a danger of isolation.” Referencing kitsch in high culture has an equalizing effect on classes that the new society could try

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45 Gerardo Mosquera, "Bad Taste in Good Form," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 60
to utilize to create a sense of harmony. This paired with the inherent Cubanidad of picúo made for great material to be used by artists.

The claiming of picúo by artists in their work elevated a culture deemed as inferior into a form of “high” art. Inspired by communist principles and trying to equalize class culture, artists embarked on an interesting journey with the style. Camnitzer writes,

Their [Artists] mission was to eradicate it, and by presenting it in an art context the expected result was to shock the viewer into reason. While pursuing their noble intentions the artists involved discovered that the educational process had reversed and that they were learning from kitsch.47 Picúo became art and not just incorporated into it. The theory rooted in the use picúo within artists’ works began to view kitsch culture as something more pervasive than originally thought.

Appropriating images from mass culture and putting them in the frame of high art was not a revolutionary concept in the art world. The Pop movement began in the late 1950s in the United States and Britain and it was known for looking at popular culture as a material for artwork. The pop movement was not a part of picúo but was definitely an influence on the artists. Mosquera writes,

The use of kitsch has undergone a similar fate, especially since pop art, which on one hand, incorporated not only the images, but also the techniques, procedures, and artistic discoveries of mass culture, and, on the other, expanded “high” sensibilities toward the values inhering in that realm.48 Pop art paved a way for the style of picúo by incorporating the artistic style of mass culture into a more sophisticated form of art. Kitsch is the unofficial artform of the masses according to thinkers such as Camnitzer, Greenberg, and Mosquera, and the use of kitsch in high art with picúo seems to be the theoretical cousin of Pop art.

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47 Camnitzer, New Art of Cuba, 18.
Flavio Garciandía

The artist Flavio Garciandía embraced *picúo*, pop art, and his own wit to create pieces. Garciandía, born in 1954, the son of militants who were directly connected to the revolution, grew up in the fishing town Caibarién, which is nicknamed “La Villa Blanca,” for its famous white sand beaches. Caibarién is most famous for its *parrandas*, or parades, and the whole town creates intricately extravagant floats. The most famous parade of the year is the *Parrandas de Caibarién*, which totes floats, African drums and pyrotechnics. The Float decorations are the epitome of *picúo*, celebrating over the top wealth and tropical imagery made out of cheap materials. His childhood embedded itself in his artwork with his revolutionary themes that celebrated *picúo*.

![Image 10](Image 10)

*Img. 10*

![Image 10 and 11](Image 10 and 11)

*Images of Floats from Parrandas de Caibarién, year and source unknown*
Garcíandía’s style did not always embrace abstract shapes and elements of kitsch, and he was a prominent member of the hyperrealist movement of the 1970s. Photography was a great tool of the revolution. At the invent of photography it was hailed as a scientific breakthrough. It took decades to even be considered an art form and in the 1970s it still had a fledgling status as serious art. Photography allowed for reality to be portrayed accurately. The artistic license that came with other art forms was not as visible in a photo. The Revolution utilized this as a tool for propaganda combining the accuracy of photography with the mythos of the revolution. This style is exemplified in the famous photograph of Che Guevara taken by the artist Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez Korda. The black and white photograph shows the revolutionary with a severe stare gazing to the left, with his trademark scruffy beard and beret perched on his head. The leaves of a palm tree frame him as does Che’s wild hair and unkempt face make him resemble another famous revolutionary, Jesus. His beret doubles as a halo, and his determined stare demands action. The mixture of Christian imagery with reality turns Guevara into a hero instead of a deeply flawed man. His status as a savior is almost indistinguishable with propaganda photography since it captures reality and keeps its true motive hidden.
Garciandía’s style was once deeply connected to this tradition, but with a clever twist. With his 1975 award-winning painting *Todo lo que Ud. necesita es amor* (*All you need is love*) which shows an image of a pretty woman lounging in the grass he manages to subvert the style of the times instead of showing images connected to the revolution. When the painting was first shown it was placed next to paintings of Che Guevara and New Guinean revolutionary Amilcar Cabral. The smiling image was a shock and great contrast to the images of the revolutionaries and seemed outside of the Cuban art scene of the time. Garciandía said this was done on purpose,

When I did the hyperrealism, it was the big moment of hyperrealism in the U.S. That is to say, I was copying the enemy in a way, in the eyes of the ideologues and politicians; it was a sort of copying the enemy. And the painting was titled after a Beatles song. The guy who was in charge of cultural affairs in the Union of Young Communists questioned me about that...Those of us who were making hyperrealism, we were questioned severely on a political level... ⁴⁹

It was easy to make a statement that differed from the political ideology of the time with hyperrealism. To portray something so dreamily happy as the young woman in the *Todo lo que Ud. necesita es amor* appears to be is inherently counter to the artistic climate of

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⁴⁹ Weiss, *To and From*, 36.
the time. To reference a Beatles song was also a bold move in the communist state. Rock and Roll music was seen to align itself with capitalistic values, and Castro banned the Beatles music in Cuba in 1964. Castro wanted the primary culture of the island to be rooted in local traditions and not taken from the countries of colonizers. By 1966 the Beatles ban had been repealed because keeping the juggernaut group’s music off the island proved impossible, and Castro eventually approved of the political stance of John Lennon, which led to a statue of the now deceased star in Havana. At the time of Todo lo que Ud. necesita es amor Castro still disliked rock and roll in his country, but that did not prevent it from taking hold of the 1970s generation and creating a revolutionary rock sound, which Castro would oddly enough embrace eventually. The rock reference Garciandía gave the painting alluded to rock’s cultural moment in Cuba and draped a bubbly innocent painting with a sharp political context. Cuba’s history of cultural oppression was hidden beneath the veneer of the smiling woman.

![Image 13](https://example.com/image13.jpg)

**Img. 13** Flavio Garciandia, *Todo lo que Ud. necesita es amor*, 1975, oil on Canvas

Garciandía’s style evolved out of hyperrealism. His work became flatter and more abstract, pushing away life like qualities from his pieces. He began to dig for references
buried in his childhood in the *parrandas* capital of Cuba, Caibarién, and from the general mass Cuban culture and he became interested in kitsch. He said in a 1981 interview that he wanted to express

> Certain visual elements generated by people who despite a lack of knowledge of plastic arts and formal training, have felt the need to handle forms and colors. Nobody can ignore them because they are everywhere: [in] living rooms, shop windows, cafés, TV studios...there can be found these aggressive, grating, irredeemably “bad” forms. Within their intrinsic poverty—in themselves they have no visual prestige at all, they are “bad forms”—such elements are of an extraordinary variety. I do not approach them because I like them, but simply because they are a visual subject susceptible for re-elaboration. Why this and not something else? Because these forms are the ones that abound in our universe and as for me myself they impress me.\(^{50}\)

Garciandía embraced the “bad forms” that surrounded him and added them to his art. He grabbed the lowest rung of visual culture and elevated it to the status of high art. His “re-elaboration” of elements of the mass Cuban culture that surrounded him let *picúo* find an unfamiliar home, an art gallery.

His 1985 piece, *El lago de los cisnes (Swan Lake)* kitsch and topicalism are gloriously hailed. The installation took up almost all of the floor space of the gallery room standing cutouts of swans with a marble pattern are dispersed throughout the floor. Faux-marble tiles form a checkerboard pattern on the center of the floor. The swans and palm tree cutouts stand in a formation on the glossy tiles. There is a flamingo cutout standing behind a silhouette of a bush as if it were trying to blend in with the swans. The floor is covered with a sea of pebbles outside of the marble adding a rougher texture to the piece. The piece exemplifies *picúo*, combining perceived elements of the upper class, like marble and elaborate swans, with a Cuban flair of the palm trees and pebble floor.

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\(^{50}\) Weiss, To and From, 35.
Garciandía’s use of kitsch evolved beyond just literal objects and dipped into etymology. He began to use Cuban sayings in his work and create illustrations that are comedic and literal representations of local proverbs. His series *Refranes* was created directly after *En el lago de los cisnes*, and showed an evolution to his perception of *picúo*. It was everything surrounding mass culture, not just the objects filling it. The phrases are often shorten alluding to their longer versions. His piece *Cuchillo de palo*, translating to “wooden knife,” refers to the proverb *En casa de herrero, cuchillo de palo*, meaning “In the blacksmith’s house, wooden knife.” Its refers to a problem that occurs when ones trade specializes in something, like a Blacksmith, and how usually one could be inattentive to it at home, like providing a wooden knife when you are trained to craft metal. The work is comedic but very powerful. The biomorphic red shape the knife rests on is composed of thick shiny strokes of various shades of red. The red shape paired with the knife looks like a blood stain that the knife is cutting through. The knife itself uses swirling shades of brown, perhaps copied from his earlier faux-marbling, to create
the illusion of wood. The spiked form behind the red is speckled with multi-colored dots that blend together to look gray from afar. The colors are striking and although the chaos seems to be sequestered in the specked piece the work is still full of life while covering a message: this work is for Cubans.

It is an inside joke that is only eligible to those who grew up in the culture. The idiom takes ownership of the culture at a time when it was being opened up to the scrutiny of others. The first international Havana Biennial was in 1984, and the island was flooded with foreign presences investing, often without knowledge, in Cuban art. In Antonio Eligio’s article, A Tree From Many Shores: Cuban Art in Movement, he discusses the impact of the Biennial market system on Cuban artists writing,

Many artists face commercial demands based on distorted perceptions of what Cuba is and what Cuban art should be. In fact, the market is aimed at tourists-from well-informed wealthy consumers, to creators of major museums, to European visitors who buy T-shirts of Che Guevara and sip their *mojitos* as they remember May 1968.\(^{51}\)

This work is not directed at any person in those categories. It is not for outsiders trying to sculpt a Cuban identity when *Cubanidad* is already so plentiful. Garciandía’s embracing of *picúo* is protection from the invading tourists, who craft an idea of the island and attempt to make it its identity. The process of colonialist influence spawning kitsch came full circle with Garciandía’s using *picúo* to territoriality mark Cuba’s culture by allowing an outsider to view it, but no fully understand it.

His work began to translate the imagery of communism to the Cuban experience. The iconic hammer and sickle represented the communist structure that Cuba aimed to have in their government, but there were always aspects that could not be applied to the island. The communist aspect of the revolution that Castro led was based on the texts of German philosopher Karl Marx and then made possible by the aid and structure of the U.S.S.R, both of which were far removed from the Caribbean island of Cuba. Castro said in a speech commemorating the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev visiting Havana, 

"Doesn’t it seem really absurd to pretend- as do some people abroad- that we apply to a country of ten million inhabitants the formulas that must be applied in a country of 285 million inhabitants, or that for a country covering 110,000 square kilometers [42,471 square miles] we apply the formulas for building socialism that must be applied in a country that covers 22 million square kilometers [8.5 million square miles]? Anyone will understand that it’s absurd, anyone will understand that it’s crazy."

The communism that Cuba chose to adopt came with the complications of the anatomy of Cuban society and the marks of colonialism. Cuba could not perfectly translate

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another country’s definition of communism onto its government and the version it adapted was specific to the island and deeply affected generations of Cuba.

Garciandía tried to capture the unique political translation of Cuba’s communism. His works were adjacent to the Soviet era of Perestroika which was a period where serious economic reforms were completed to give the U.S.S.R more longevity. Tamara Díaz Bringas writes in her article “Nine Innings in 1989,” “If the Soviet model had been implemented for almost thirty years with incredible faithfulness, in the era of Perestroika the “copy” was revealed to be meaningless.” Cuba’s biggest ally and fellow communist superpower that allowed the funds and platform to implement communism in the country had revealed that their system was flawed and needed severe reforms to survive. Garciandía expressed this through his exhibition, *La última exposición* [The Final Exhibition] which were various sizes of canvas with bold acrylic paint showing the hammer and sickle as phallic imagery with tropical plants in the background. He mounted vibrant houseplants on the wall breaking up the canvases, which gave the impression of a contained jungle. Gerardo Mosquera wrote, “His hammers and sickles allude to ‘Perestroika’ as a revitalization of socialism, but at the same time they constitute a ‘third world’ carnivalization of the symbol in order to break its orthodoxy and make it take part humorously in the multiplicity and contradictions of the South.” The “carnivalization” effect Mosquera refers to is the essence of the piece. The iconic imagery of the hammer and sickle is morphed into a perverted Cubanidad. The curvature of the sickle and the long bent depiction of the hammer turn the symbol into a thinly veiled phallic comparison.

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53 ibid
54 ibid
The works are reminiscent of the Pop artist Andy Warhol’s 1976 series of photographs and paintings of the hammer and sickle imagery. He photographed a hammer and sickle he bought from a hardware store with colloquial and nonsensical objects such as a woman’s shoe, a slice of pizza, and a dildo. This depiction morphed the icon into an everyday object stripping it of the power it once had, and showed its poor translation into the real-world. The pieces acted as a precursor to Garciandía’s exhibition showing pop art branching into his practice. Garciandía added a *picúo* influence to the piece with the tropical foliage details that make up the background of the canvas. The symbols were warped and recontextualized to become apart of cubanidad and Tropicana.
The artist Rubén Torres Llorca expresses *picúo* in a drastically different way from Garcianía’s playful style that embraces the gaudiness of the everyday. His practice can be seen as directly related to Pop Art utilizes more sleek and mass-produced images but adding a twist of processing the images through a distinctly Cuban view. While Garcianía plays with images and theories connected localized memories and attempts to show their connections to mass culture and history Llorca does the reverse. He connects pop culture images found in U.S movies, television, and comics and shows their influence on Cubanidad, and their presence in local memories.

He was born in 1957 in Havana and participated in the art scene from an early age. After *Volumen Uno*, Llorca continued his exploration of international influence in Cuba. In his 1983 Exhibit “Cine Del Hogar,” he used images from old Hollywood
movies, that were constantly being replayed on a Cuban television station. Llorca said of the exhibition,

The idea was that all these films - North American, Argentine, Mexican - well, since the triumph of the revolution we’ve been seeing the same kind of film over and over again. In effect, they are all the same movie. They have one theme - boy meets girl - and the same stupid dramatic ending. My interest was in the effect these films have in cultures that no longer have anything to do with such themes. When I see one of these films I try to figure out what structures make it work despite the fact that it is junk. Llorca was exploring the abundant mass of media that was fed to the public and was trying to break down how - despite its lack of substance - it could permeate a culture.

Camnitzer described Llorca’s blending of international and local culture writing,

Nevertheless, and despite the unevenness, like no one else in his generation he had explored vital aspects of Cuban culture and its internationalized taste. The accepted value of blondeness for cinematic deities, the status symbol of the refrigerator (placed at an angle against a corner in the living room,) the import through cartoon dialogue bubbles of onomastic sounds (in Spanish totally nonsensical) such as “bah,” “blam,” and “hurrah,” all became imagery that denounced the colonial subversion of values. These “imports” such as international film, comics art, and symbols of wealth like the refrigerator made a deep mark on Cuban culture. Llorca enjoys playing with these well-known images that can easily be identified as foreign but forcing the viewer to recognize its place in their life. This style, however, did not have great longevity in his career. His use of 1950s esque illustrations and comic book word bubbles began to lose their efficiency at addressing Lorca’s vision. His 1985 piece for the second Cuban Biennial Te llevo bajo mi piel (I carry you under my skin), was the culmination of his former tropes and acted as the final piece in his previous style. The six-paneled work reads like a collage boring images from 1950s advertisements, anatomical diagrams (showing x-ray views of the figures), religious imagery, and speech lines borrowed from comic

55 Fusco and Knafo, "Interviews with," 47.
56 Camnitzer, New Art of Cuba, 24.
books. The background of each panel is a different shade of a highly decorative floral wallpaper as if to draw these images into the viewers home and lives. The title of the piece refers to the anatomical aspect to the figures, showing their bones and veins, but originates from a Cole Porter song. Torres said in an interview,

I always use as an example a song by Cole Porter called “I've Got You Under My Skin” that's universally known as a romantic song, and is still a hit now...an extremely popular song, and Cole Porter wrote this song because he was a morphine addict. Once you have this information each time you listen to the song it will never again be a love song or a romantic song and consequently, we’re limiting the possibility of the spectator making the song his own. Torres appropriated the song title and warped it under the context of his art. Just as Porter’s history changed the meaning of the song, Torres did the same giving the phrase a new life with his art.

Torres’s quickly adopted a new style after a trip to Mexico in 1985. His work began to adopt motifs not specific to Cuba, but a part of greater Latin America. He

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incorporated the structure of altars and objects of Catholic kitsch into his practice. His piece *La Trampa* recreates an alter with loaded imagery. The three-tiered alter has a man with a face surrounded by thorns at the base looking upward at the standing viewer. Above him is the head of a Mesoamerican man with an elaborate feathered headdress, again, locking eyes with the viewer. On the second tier of the piece there is a metal gear with a crank, with human figurine hanging from a noose on the left and a man watching on the right. A top the work is the Virgin Mary in an elaborate white gown and halo offering a sign of peace as her followers kneel at her feet.

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**Img. 19** Rubén Torres Llorca, *La trampa (The Trap)*, 1987, Mixed media, 78 x 39 39 inches Collection Perez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jorge M. Perez

Llorca’s had undergone an ideological shift in his art practice since his trip to Mexico. In an interview he explained how his art-making practice shifted saying, “The
important part of my visit to Mexico that in the same way the idea occurred to me that these spaces that I create in which the spectator is forced to see the work in the way that I submit it, not the way it normally happens in the exhibit of public arts.” He adapted the monumental style of an altar but used it as a vehicle for discussing the political climate in Cuba. In his 1988 work, *Aún con mi enemigo bajo el mismo techo* (Still with my enemy under the same roof,) his altar takes a minimalist style, losing the heavy ornamentation of *La Trampa*, and opting for a sleek all white podium with *Aún con mi enemigo bajo el mismo techo* in raised lettering. On top are two male busts staring at each other, and depending on where it's shown, he draped the Cuban flag over the heads. By choosing for his personal display preferences over readability for the audience Llorca made a piece with an obvious message have more of a conceptual quality.

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58 “Torres Llorca,” video file.
Rubén Torres Llorca, *Aún con mi enemigo bajo el mismo techo / Still With My Enemy Under the Same Roof*, 1988
Medium: Mixed Media/Collage - Flag draped over sculpture
Llorca appeared to have shed all of his former _Volumen Uno_ influenced style, except his love for working in a group. The collective that assembled for _Volumen Uno_ did not continue all working together after the show. Llorca called the show, “the beginning of the end,” for the group. 59 With the show came international prestige that led to some member of the group being promoted overseas by Cubanologues and accepting commissions from the Cuban government, while others did not see success in the same fashion. Despite this he still found it beneficial to work with a group Llorca said,

First because of the political situation created a need. The more of us there were, the harder it was to repress this type of art. We have to remember that the plastic arts in Cuba were, at the moment the only medium of communication that channeled the socio-political interest of the public. Why? Because it was independent and did not need state production. 60 The protective cushion that came with a large group allowed for Llorca to continuously expand his artistic practice without the input of the Cuban government. He began to partner with members as what is referred to as the “third generation” of Cuban Contemporary Art. Llorca and the rest of the _Volumen Uno_ members belonged to the first generation of art in the 1980s. With the number of advancements and theoretical changes that happened so rapidly in the decade, historians have divided the artists onto three generations. Llorca partnered with Lázaro Saavedra, member of Grupo Puré and a solo artist, for a very memorable exhibition. The “third generation” placed ethics over aesthetics focusing on more blatantly political topics than previous artists. 61 They played with the Communist Slogans that littered the Cuban landscape and twisted them to have a comedic edge. For instance the slogan, “Messers. Imperialists, we absolutely

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59 ibid
60 ibid
61 Camnitzer, _New Art of Cuba_, 177.
have no fear of you,” was transformed into “Art critics: know that we have absolutely no fear of you.” The group was not an industry darling like the first generation, but strived for much more radical statements than previously attempted.

Llorca collaborated with Lázaro Saavedra, a member of the “third generation,” on the 1989 exhibition where he exhibited, Nosotros los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos (We are not anymore who we were). The piece is a hand colored photograph of the members of Volumen Uno with visiting artist Ana Mendieta and her art critic friend, Lucy Lippard, all in a cluster taking a photo. The piece is mounted on cardboard which has been painted to have an aged industrial appearance and an electrical outlet is to the left of the photograph with a cord that drapes across the piece that is not plugged into anything. The piece is encased in a glass table and has a rectangular placard just underneath the photograph reading, “Nosotros los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos.” The hand painted colors on the photograph and purposefully battered background gives the once-vibrant group an antiquated quality. The electrical cord leading to nowhere emphasizes stagnation and disconnect of the group. The show featured many works that interpreted issues with contemporary art through the perception of colonialist Spanish kitsch. The piece adopts the industrialized appearance of contemporary art but is encased in glass, like an ancient artifact being displayed in a museum.

The title of the work is borrowed from the Chilean poets, Pablo Neruda, series Veinte poema de amor y una canción desesperada. Llorca said in an interview he made the choice of the famous title was a part of a “method that I use in in much of my work

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62 ibid
63 Camnitzer, New Art of Cuba, 29.
which is to decontextualize and give a new meaning to a particular literary quote.”

Llorca’s plays with the idea of *picúo* by incorporating signifiers of Spanish colonialism into his work, and by treating popular phrases as a tool for his own appropriation. The title also perfectly fits into the fate of the group that collapsed due to the individuals growing fame. Llorca said, “I know that the work has a nostalgic vision of what the group was, but in the same ways it also tries to alert this new group as to where we are trying to do things what could happen, no?” This glance to the then-recent past shows how quickly a group’s momentum can fade. The work is not an insult to *Volumen Uno*, and does not have any vicious subtext about the artists individual success, but acts as a reminder to the third generation to remember the mistakes before them.

Llorca use of *picúo* throughout his career constantly evolves tapping into different themes of the vast definition of the word. His use of communist inspired propaganda messages morphed into using other popular phrases that were woven into the culture, like lyrics or poetry, in a transformative way. Llorca attempted to translate the everyday into his personal artistic language. He utilized the familiarity certain imagery and quotes carried with them and created something unrecognizably nuanced.

**Flavio Garciaandía and Rubén Torres Llorca**

These artists are both from the first generation formed by *Volumen Uno*, but their styles are radically different. The *Volumen Uno* generation was not one united by similar styles and themes, but by the unique artistic friendships that acted as adhesives to the collective. After the show, the artists disbanded the group, but the different topics the group focused on were carried throughout their individual artistic career. The subject of

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64 “Torres Llorca,” video file.
65 ibid
*picúo* allowed for the past cultural influences of Cuba to be analyzed through a more critical modern lense. Both artists had a different method of examining the cultural forces that shaped Cuba. Garciandía used aspects localized aspects of Cuban culture. Focusing on specific proverbs, the niche qualities of Cuban homes, and cultural traditions such as parades. He blended these features together in a sleek modern smoothie of cubanidad that inadvertently brought up questions of class structure that complicated the classless ideals of communism. Llorca utilized *picúo* in a much different way, looking at Spanish colonialism and international influence that was at play crafting Cuban kitsch. His career stretched from examining American celebrities influence over beauty standards to the mimetic nature of famous phrases. He appropriated these aspects into his art creating works that explore how the deep culture history of Cuba affects the everyday. *Picúo* represents kitsch that is rooted specifically to Cuban history ranging from colonialism to communism. When used in art it forces the viewer to reckon with the invisible hand of other cultures and governments on the islands identity. It acts as a critique and an embrace of all of the pieces that history left behind.

One of the main uniting aspects of *Volumen Uno* that each of the artists was interested in challenging the norm of “high art” by incorporating their Cuban culture into a europeanized cannon. *Picúo* was a perfect tool to blend these two artistic classes, but other artists apart of *Volumen Uno* used a different tactic to create a singular, Cuban art. José Bedia and Juan Francisco Elso Padilla used their personal connection to the Afro-Caribbean religions of Santería and Palo Monte in their works. The contemporary pieces were now rooted in an ancient tradition spanning hemispheres. They showed the idea of *cubanidad* as not being centered in Cuba but rather the original lands the
inhabitants were stolen from. The works act as a reckoning of the past, and embrace of the current Cuban culture, and an inclusive vision of the future.
Chapter 3: Santería and Palo Monte in Contemporary Cuban Art

For the works of José Bedia and Juan Francisco Elso Padilla to understood, a much broader history of Cuba and the pictorial language encased in the religions of Santería and Palo Monte must be examined. The multi-faceted beauty of Cuba, it's blending of cultures, the mixture of languages and artistic practices can be traced back to the dark horrors of the slave trade. In 1503, Queen Isabella of Spain issued a decree to limit the access of white women to the colonies to force settlers to procreate with natives. The native population of the Taino, Ciboney and Guanahatabey Amerindians was being slashed due to epidemics of diseases and cruel treatment from the Spanish. Black slaves were imported to fill the growing labor need. The number of slaves coming to the island started slowly with a request for 300 slaves in 1523, but by the mid-sixteenth century, that population increased to 1000. In 1762 Cuba’s economy was almost solely based on the sugar trade. The tropical climate allowed for the crop to flourish but made the conditions to harvest it unbearable. Between 1790 and 1820 300,000 African natives were kidnapped and brought to the island without any possessions, but they brought something that would permanently affect the cultural landscape of Cuba, their religions.

At first, the Spaniards attempted to repress these religions. Every slave upon arrival to the island was forced to undergo a conversion to Catholicism. Conversion could not erase a deep devotion to their native religion and traditions and the slave community adopted the veneer of Catholicism with their own theology. Catholicism was fractured into different cults and traditions at this time. Certain groups were dedicated to

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66 Camnitzer, New Art of Cuba, 35.
67 ibid
68 Camnitzer, New Art of Cuba, 37.
the saints, others revered the Virgin Mary, and some were dedicated to the creation of ex-votos, which were representations of suffering attached to a specific saint in hopes the ailment would disappear.\textsuperscript{69} This rupturing of the religion allowed for the slaves to slowly merge their religions with Catholicism using the parallels between the two. Their various orishas, beings of supreme divinity that act as intermediaries between God and humans, were able to masquerade as Catholic saints. Baluandé in Palo Monte, and Yemayá in Santería is a Mother Goddess who is associated with the ocean was matched with Virgen de Regla became a version of the Virgin Mary who is associated with the sea and highly venerated in Cuba.\textsuperscript{70} Chola Wengue in Palo Monte and Ochún in Santería, a goddess of rivers, fresh waters and luxury became associated with La Virgen del Cobre, the patroness of Cuba.\textsuperscript{71} Sarabanda in Palo Monte and Ogún in Santería, who represents tools, weapons, and technology was paired with the San Pedro also known as Jesus’s disciple Peter.\textsuperscript{72} The several other orichas were given a Catholic doppelganger and the religions were able to maintain their beliefs and hide from generations of persecution.

The two main African religions that were brought to Cuba are Palo Monte Mayombe (also referred to as Palo Monte, Palo, and Congo Reglas) and Santería (Regla de Ocha). The religions have a high degree of overlap, including their beliefs in the orishas, but are fundamentally different. Palo Monte originates from the historical central African kingdom of the Kongo which is now broken into the countries of Republic of the Congo and Angola. The language of Ki-Kongo is interwoven with Spanish to

\textsuperscript{69} Camnitzer, \textit{New Art of Cuba}, 36.
\textsuperscript{70} Judith Bettelheim, “Palo Monte Mayombe and Its Influence on Cuban Contemporary Art,” \textit{African Arts}, Summer 2001, 38.
\textsuperscript{71} ibid
\textsuperscript{72} ibid
create the terminology of Palo Monte. Palo Monte has a Spanish origin with “Palo” meaning stick and “Monte” being a forest or rural area roughly combining to mean “spirits embodied in the sticks of the forest.” Palo also refers to the sticks placed around a military outpost to form a protective barrier possibly connecting the reputation of people of Kongo descent in Cuba as being strong and rural.  

Stephan Palmié, the author of the book, Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition, distinguishes between Palo Monte and Santería writing, 

“In contrast to ocha, palo is said to be more crude (“rustico”) but also very powerful (“muy fuerte”), violent but fast and effective (“violente,” “trabaja rapido,” “muy efectivo”; it is associated with the dead instead of divine beings (“cosa de muerto”) instead of humanly inhabited, and therefore socialized, spaces.”

Paleros, practitioners of Palo Monte communicate with the dead (muertos) to strengthen themselves or harm others and attempt to contact orishas with this spiritual assistance. The most important object associated with the religion is the nganga. The nganga is a receptacle that contains a skull, human bones, sticks, herbs, bowls, bones of birds and animals, and dirt from a grave. The nganga and its human possessor have a special relationship. The Brujo (witch or practitioner of Palo Monte) gathers physical items associated with a deceased person (bones, earth from the grave) and lures the nfumbi (spirit) to the receptacle with chants, songs and offerings. Palmié was told that the purpose of this ritual is to “con a spirit who wants to get out of the grave.” Once the nfumbi has entered the nganga a relationship must be maintained with ritual attention to

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73 Bettelheim, "Palo Monte," 36.  
75 Bettelheim, "Palo Monte," 37.  
76 Palmié, Wizards and Scientists, 172.
ensure the nfumbi’s loyalty and cooperation. The items put in the *nganga* vary, and act to enhance the spirits power.

Palo Monte is saturated with art images. Art objects are created and used for ceremonial worship the orishas and satiate the *nfumbis*. The use of *firas*, line drawings which are used as aesthetic offerings are integral to worship and can be seen in contemporary art meant to reference the religion. *Firas*, can represent a specific casa-templo, an establishment where Palo Monte is practiced, an orisha, or be personal to the palero. The drawings always show 21 intersections between the lines and vary greatly in design. The artist, José Bedia uses *firas* frequently in his practice.

The other prominent Afro-Caribbean religion in Cuba is Santería. Through the influx of slaves in the sixteenth-century, a mixture of people from the Yoruba region and the Bantu tribe from the Congo were brought to the island. The Yoruba people are incredibly religious, worshipping the high god of Olodumare, who created life but remains removed from human affairs. To rule on earth in his place he put in charge divine intermediaries, orishas, which each represent a specific manifestation of human life. Palo Monte and Santería both share the belief in orishas, however, Palo Monte attempts to contact the orishas through the assistance of nfumbi while Santería contacts them directs through worship. The original Yoruba religion believes in an estimated 400 to 1700 orishas, but in the Cuban versions, only 16 are acknowledged. The attachment of those 16 to Catholic saints led the religion to be known as Santería, or the way of the saints.

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78 Ibid, 319.
The orishas are contacted through divination which utilizes ashe (life force of God) to make predictions of the future. Traditionally palm nuts, cowrie shells or kola nut valves are cast and their patterns are interpreted, but in Cuba coconuts and seashells are used. The orishas are worshipped through sacrifice and offerings with each orisha craving a different animal or foodstuff. For example, Oshun receives a female white hen while Yemaya receives a duck, turtle, or goat.\textsuperscript{79} One of the highest forms of worship in Santería is dance. Drum and dance festivals called bembes are held in the living quarters of a santero and specific drum beats and dances are used to summon a specific orisha.\textsuperscript{80} The ritual sometimes leads to the orisha possessing the human's body. Bodily possession is sacred and causes the human to be overwhelmed with ashe, their style of dance and mannerisms will change and in this trance state they will approach others at the bembe and offer advice and warnings.\textsuperscript{81}

Santería and Palo Monte originated from different African cultures, but respect the same orishas, despite the different languages used to name them. The practices for communicating with theses orishas differ, but as a whole, the aim of both religions is to honor the spirits of the orishas in an attempt to become closer to a higher God. Since its establishment in Cuba, the religion had to be shrouded in secrecy in order to avoid persecution from the Spanish and almost every other governmental force on the island, including Castro's regime which stressed atheism. Some rituals in Palo Monte call for the casa-templo to be protected, this refers to spiritual protection, but also protection from the police who would often intervene in religious ceremonies.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{79} ibid, 321.
\textsuperscript{80} ibid
\textsuperscript{81} ibid, 322.
\textsuperscript{82} ibid, 338.
Despite consistent persecution, the religions grew and thrived. Their ability to reflect everyday life and create a culture that has a bedrock in art and music has assured the place of the religions in the makeup of cubanidad. The flexibility and resilience of the religion allows it to be linked to many aspects of Cuban life. Palmié even likened praise of orichas with praise of the communist state writing,

Although both the socialist state and the oricha increasingly fail to reciprocate, the latter enjoy a somewhat ironic advantage: unlike the state, the moral silence of which is increasingly being undermined by the deprivations that it forces on its citizens, the gods are viewed as not having received their dues themselves. Nevertheless, a human-divine moral economy would seem to hold. The juxtaposition of people leaving offerings to the orishas in hopes of a better life and the physical suffering the Cuban people had to make in the name of Castro’s regime is poetically jarring. The mixture of sacrifice and art oddly connects these religions to the complex political history or Cuba. The Volumen Uno artists that drew inspiration from Santería and Palo Monte were drawing on a history of slavery, oppression, spirituality, beauty and resistance. The works they created honored religious traditions, but could also be translated to be metaphorical of the contemporary conditions of Cuba. The two artists, and members of the Volumen Uno generation, José Bedia and Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, used the influence of Santería and Palo Monte in their works to construct contemporary works drawing on ancient traditions.

José Bedia

José Bedia has always been drawn to the different spiritual communities of Cuba. As a young adult, he studied different Native American tribes and cultures. In the early 1980s, he became incredibly interested in African Religions in Cuba that had surrounded him throughout his life. He visited an espiritistas, leaders of a religion that

83 Palmié, Wizards and Scientists, 167.
also incorporates Afro-Cuban systems, and later visited a Palo Monte tata, the head of a casa-templo, and entered the process of initiation into the religion. His art is centered around images of Palo Monte and how it interweaves with his sense of self. It is important to mention the criticism Bedia has received based on his use of the religion in his art. Bedia is of Cuban of European descent and his critics doubt the sincerity of his dedication to the Afro-Cuban religion. One of his sharpest critics is Guillermina Ramos Cruz, a spokesperson for the Afro-Cuban art collective Grupo Antillano, who was a part of the Black Arts movement in Cuba during the early 1980s, which she believes was eclipsed by the fame of the Volumen Uno generation. Cruz has said of Bedia, “Now Bedia is in the United States and is incorporating in his works elements of the religious culture of Palo Mayombé, in which he says he has been initiated. A subtle and complex story began to unfold, which was incursions into black culture without the Afro-Cuban artists.”

Despite his ancestry, Bedia has notably been initiated into Palo Monte and has become a tata, the highest member of a casa-templo.


Before initiation can occur one must meet with a tata and receive a divination. The initial divination shows what level of initiation one can undergo, whether they will become a ngueyo (first level of Palo) or a tata. A candidate's mpungu or guiding spirit is revealed through divination, and the tata will construct a list of items that one must obtain to fill his nganga. During Bedia’s divination, his mpungu was revealed to be Sarabanda the

84 Bettelheim and Berlo, Transcultural Pilgrim, 68.
spirit of war, iron, and conflicts. With Sarabanda as his mpungu, he was given a list of objects to fill his nganga with including handcuffs and a pistol, which were incredibly difficult to obtain in Cuba at the time. It took Bedia six months to assemble all of the components for his nganga and the process can be seen in the three drawings. El caldero: Un recipiente (The Cauldron: a Vessel), is a simple line drawing of a tripod cauldron, which is specifically associated with Sarabanda. Los ingredientes: Materias vegetales, animales, y minerales (The ingredients: Vegetable, Animal, and Mineral), shows all of the objects flying into the nganga. Skulls, sticks, bones, turtles, dogs, snakes, the pistol, a horseshoe, anvil, and knives (the last three are the symbols of Sarabanda), all pour into the nganga. La Prenda: Un compendio del mundo en pequeño (The Iron Pot: The Compendium of the world in miniature), shows the completed nganga glowing with light as the sun, moon and a star hanging above it.

![Image of three drawings](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

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85 Bettelheim and Berlo, *Transcultural Pilgrim*, 55.
Bedia’s *nganga* becomes a central figure of his artistic works after his initiation. In his 1988 work, *Mama quiere menga, menga de su nkombo* (*Mama Wants Blood, Blood of His Bull*), Bedia creates a self-portrait of his chest with his initiation markings. Upon initiation ritual cuts called *rayadoras* are made that consist of crosses and lines. Bedia’s skin is a reddish-orange color, and the indentation of his muscles and ribs are made with thin black lines. Four straight lines are made on his left shoulder and three on his right creating a total of seven, a sacred number in Palo Monte.\(^86\) A cross is on each of his pectorals, and the numeric line marking and crosses are also on his hands. He holds his gray *nganga* towards the viewer. It is empty indicating that he is still a young initiate because it takes years to complete one’s *nganga*, but the title indicates that a sacrifice is to come. The background of the painting is divided in two, with one half showing a starlit sky and the other a gray sky filled with birds. Underneath his left arm a car races up a road, and on left a man wanders forward, leaving footprints on the ground. Bedia said of the work, “This guy is moving between two worlds.”\(^87\) Bedia himself was a man straddling two identities, one as a star of the contemporary art world, and the other as a dedicated practitioner of Palo Monte. The images under the figures arms of a car and a man wandering, show an image of modernity juxtaposed with a depiction of a man on a spiritual quest. The two remain separate, not interfering with the other.

\(^{86}\) Ibid, 40
\(^{87}\) Ibid, 48.
His *mpungu* Sarabanda is also a prominent figure throughout his works. In his 1984 drawing, Sarabanda, a faceless man stands in a contrapposto pose surrounded by an avalanche of knives. On his chest he is clad in a ceremonial chain with a gun going off above his heart and on his waist is a belt with bells. On each of his wrists is a broken handcuff, referencing the history of slavery on the island. In his left hand he holds a hammer and on the right, he clutches a machete. He stands on top of a railroad track straddling a mountain with a nganga by his right foot and an anvil and horseshoe by his right. The work represents many ancient symbols associated with Sarabanda and the modern one of the train. Sarabanda is considered the god of transportation and present-day vehicles are associated with him.
Bedia blends modernity with the other *mpungus* he depicts. In his 1989 installation, *Que te han hecho, Mama Kalunga?* (*What Have They Done To You, Mama Kalunga?*), Bedia portrays the serpent-headed and human bodied sea deity, Mama Kalunga, squatting in a birthing position with two knives raised in her hands. Beneath her on the floor are colorful squares representing water with a miniature barge placed on top. Bricks with sticks poking out of the top emanate from the barge filling the gallery. Mama Kalunga, the mother of the sea, is in a position of attack with the contemporary pollution of man-made vessels. She is attempting to protect her child, the sea, from these new foreign predators. Her feminine body mixed with the aggressive nature of her serpent head and he raised her weapons show her as a diety under distress of encroaching invaders. Bedia questions how the ancient deities would react to modern problems that would have been unknown in ancient times.
The modern problems of Cuba come through in his art as well based on his personal experience living, fighting for and then ultimately leaving the country. Bedia’s decision to leave the country was directly linked to him being drafted by Cuba to fight for the leftist People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola Army. The two years he was out of the country, he saw the origin of many Cuban artistic and cultural practices, as being rooted in West Africa. The trip began a lifetime of ventures into West Africa, but it also forced him to come to several realizations about the state of Cuba’s political system. Bedia says the troops were misinformed about their role in the country, “We were somehow going to extend a hand and help the people. In truth, we found out that we were the invading army.”

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88 Scarlett Cheng, “On View: José Bedia’s spiritual and physical journeys,” *LA Times* (LA, CA), September 11, 2011,
the government fed to the people he began to scrutinize the supposedly utopian society he returned to 1986. Bedia says of his return,

It was a question of ethics. Morally, I felt very badly. There were a lot of contradictions that I felt upon my return from Angola (in 1986). I wasn't able to adapt, and I wasn't able to accept the social decrees, what the government said. My personal utopia was destroyed. It's not like I hadn't let myself think like that before--there's been a moral double standard since I was very young--but this was the last straw. I wasn't going to let myself be manipulated anymore, so I left that laboratory where I was just a guinea pig.89

In 1991 Bedia, his wife, and young son left Cuba for good. They, like many other immigrants, lived in Mexico before immigrating to Miami in 1994. He says he will only return to the country under the circumstance that "the political situation changes totally."90 Bedia’s art shifted to reflect his newfound status of an exile. The disconnect that he felt from his home, culture, and community showed through in his art as he dealt with creating art that was inherently Cuban abroad. In his 1991 piece Si en mi tierra no hay sol yo brinca al lado allá (If There Is No Sun In My Country I Jumps to the Other Side) he tries to deconstruct the psychological process of leaving one's homeland. The drawing shows a nude man with the markings of a Palo Monte initiate straddling a body of water. One foot is leaving the side with rows of cracked buildings, presumably Cuba, with one car zooming down the road. The other foot is planted in a new land with mirrored buildings and rows of cars and a plane soaring through the sky. The man's body is almost fully on the left side, the new country, but he brings with him his culture from the other side. His arms are raised above his head holding his fully assembled nganga. The method the figure is using to reach the new land is shown to be one coming from privilege. A man drowning surrounded by sharks is shown in the middle of

89 ibid
90 ibid
the strait between the two sides. His placement seems to allude to the Cubans who risked their lives, and often died, by attempting to cross the Atlantic on poorly made rafts. Bedia as an international artist had the ability and funds to leave the country with his family safely.

![Image](Image 25)

**Img. 25** José Bedia, 1991, *Si en mi tierra no hay sol yo brinca al lado allá* (*If There Is No Sun in My Country I Jumps to the Other Side*), Ink on *amate* paper

The image is bordered by numbered, flip book style drawings all showing transformative images. The top shows the process of a headed figure sprouting ears. The right border shows a man morphing into a turtle. The bottom shows a pair of legs walking out of the frame. The left shows a man transforming into a bird and flying away. These metamorphic images show the man going from one state to another. They mirror the transition the man is undergoing by rooting himself in a new home, but the image assures us that he is carrying his religion and its cultural history to his new home. His identity has shifted from being centered in a Cuban identity to being placed in his religion, which unlike the country can travel with him everywhere.
Juan Francisco Elso Padilla

Similar to the other members of the *Volumen Uno* generation, Juan Francisco Elso Padilla was born in the mid-1950s, right in the middle of the Cuban Revolution. He grew up as a child of the Revolution, educated in its ideology, believing in its message, its hope, but truly beginning to understand its faults. Unlike the other members of this generation, Padilla did not get to develop his career and witness the further devolution of the revolution because of his untimely death from leukemia in 1988. Padilla’s body of work is almost exclusively from the 1980s. His work stands as an encapsulated testament to the *Volumen Uno* era, fiercely meditating on the power of colonialism and the subsequent growth of the Latin American identity. Padilla examined many of the fragments that form the Cuban identity: The influence of the Spanish through colonialism and Catholicism, the bloom of African religions in Latin America and their perseverance throughout time, the mythology of heroism throughout Cuban history, the hope of socialism and the frustration it brought with it. His art examines these topics but understands the impossibility of perfectly blending them into a work because of the difficulty of blending them into one country, Cuba.

The magic of Cuban religions greatly influenced his work. During his last months on earth, he wrote,

> For me, art is a long personal process of apprehension of the world and of myself as a part of the world. The process and insights are more important than my work. They act as a nearly mystical learning experience and they shaped my attitude towards life…. The whole of this experience is based on Latin American spirituality which only now we are starting to project as a value system…. Cultural changes may come from this development and some of us may become its insignificant harbingers.  

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91 Camnitzer, New Art of Cuba, 50.
Padilla’s humbleness did not translate to “insignificance” in his role as a part of this wave of elevating the Latin American identity to the arena of high art. He attempted to combine Cuban history, spiritualism, and the new forming Cuban identity in his pieces and he often succeeded. In his 1984 piece, *El Monte*, which was used in the first Havana biennial he created a human silhouette that stood at over five feet. The human figure stands with his feet disappearing into the floor with his arms hanging at his side showing open palms. The body of the figure is made out of burlap and twigs which intersect the figure like veins and evoke Palo Monte ceremonial line drawings *firmas*. The figure has the mark of a heart on the center of his chest, but no other organs represented. The figure is consumed more with the symbolism of spirituality than anatomical correctness. The symbol of a cross on the figure’s right hand and a ladder made from sticks leans against his right leg with the base resting in a white bowl sitting outside of the piece.

The title of the work, *El Monte*, references the religion Palo Monte. The religion stresses that spirits are found in nature, particularly in *el monte* (The forest.) Padilla was not trying to create the figure of a man, but rather of his spirituality. The materials of the piece, burlap, and sticks, can be read as being influenced by the Arte Povera art movement or referencing the religion of the mass Cuban working class. The piece heavily references the religion, but did not capture the spirituality that the artist intended. Padilla thought the work was too descriptive and said that “The narrative parts of the piece did not add to a total and did not achieve the magic state I wanted.” 92

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Unlike Bedia, who characterized the orishas with great detail in his work, Padilla chose to portray spirituality with a layer of ambiguity. He avoided showing the intricate structure of Palo Monte and Santería in his pieces and opted for including artistic references to the rituals while discussing a broader Cuban history. This is perfectly demonstrated in his 1986 piece *Por América*. The five-foot sculpture depicts the Cuban national hero, José Martí, in a way he had never been shown. Martí was a Cuban writer and philosopher, who was exiled to Spain at age 18, but his subsequent literature, became linked to Cuba’s separation from Spain. He returned to Cuba 24 years later and died on the battlefield within five weeks. He is the perfect martyr, stirring a revolution then heroically dying in battle, and that is how he is usually portrayed. Usually clad in a suit and bowtie like a gentleman, his mustachioed face is usually shown pensively

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staring off into the distance, as if he were looking into the future. Padilla’s Martí is not
the polished fallen hero of Cuban history.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Img. 27** Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, *Por América*, 1986, mixed media

In *Por América*, Martí is miniaturized. Padilla researched Martí’s measurements
that were recorded by a Dominican tailor but decided to have the statue stand six
inches smaller than Martí’s five foot five.94 The statue is styled after the sculptures of
saints in the Catholic church. It is made of wood with life-like paint and what appears to
be real human hair. The statue is not just referencing Catholicism, but in the complex
Cuban fashion also referring Santería, and the dogma of the revolution. Martí is not
shown in a distinguished suit, but that statue has a tattered quality. The paint is
unevenly applied and chipped. White splotches appear all over Martí, but the most
shocking aspect of the work is Martí is not shown in clothes at all. In lieu of clothing
Padilla coated the arms and legs of the figure in a mixture of dirt, wax, his own blood,
and potions. The paste was applied similarly to ritual in Santería when they

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94 *ibid.*, 64.
commemorate effigies of orishas. By mixing his own blood with the work, he adds a powerful ceremonial quality to the work, but also includes himself in the piece. His presence is invisible, but a part of Martí.

Martí holds a wooden machete in his hand, a which functions as an allusion to Palo Monte as a ceremonial device, and to the history of the sugar cane industry on the island. The machete was a symbol first of the slaves then later of the oppressed working class in Cuba, both which were underpaid and overworked by foreign powers. Martí is covered and surrounded by wooden cut out of sprouts. Some are colored red, symbolizing sacrifice; others are green referring to new growth. Padilla reopened the closed narrative on the figure of Martí and complicated it. The story of the hero Martí is the same that the Cuban government concocted for leaders like Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos. The heroes all have the classic tale of martyrdom. They lived virtuously, served the cause then died by it, and were immortalized in a valiant image. Padilla showed Martí literally covered in the complexities of Cuban history. The linked references of Catholicism and Santería, and the revolutionary symbol of the machete which conjures images of slavery and the African diaspora greatly disturb the simple story of martyrdom. The work does not have to be specific to Martí, it could be any interchangeable Latin American martyr. However, the fact that Padilla chose an antiquated hero over a modern one shows that despite the history of great thinkers and revolutionaries, Cuba has not arrived at its utopian state, it is still fighting.

Padilla said of the work,

When I made Martí, I thought: “Why not? Let’s give this a shape and a name.” In this case for me it is like taking that out of the local context and putting it into a broader one, one that is Latin American. It will [then] become something about a myth where there is a creator who will make a world starting from an ethical
principle of relations. That is what my understanding is of socialism, or better, how I understand my understanding of socialism. Martí was of a face to the larger history of Latin American revolutions. He eliminates the God-like creator status of martyrs by displaying the complicated intersections of Cuban history. Padilla recognized the magic of Afro-Cuban faiths, but he also saw it as a way to evoke a much more complex history. The inclusion of his own blood in the paste that covers Martí also challenges who the real martyrs are in Cuban history. Are they the clean images history presents? Or perhaps the blood of ordinary citizens?

Bedia uses Palo Monte imagery in his work to honor his religious practice and construct a portrait of his spiritual self; however, Padilla uses it more to invoke the history of the African diaspora. Palo Monte and Santería capture the magic and culture that the inhabitants of Cuba struggled to keep alive through generations of oppression. They represent resilience; show a window to a cultural landscape that had to remain shrouded to survive. When combined with the figure Martí it subverts the traditional narrative of history to create an incoherent one, which has too many sides to ever be whole. Padilla, a deeply spiritual human, saw the history of Santería as inherently political and was able to weave it into the history of protest and revolution in Cuba through his works.

95 Weiss, To and From, 61.
Conclusion

The group of artists that banded together for the *Volumen Uno* show at first glance appear to have very little that connects them. They all graduated from Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) from 1980 to 1981, and were the first generation to have ever only known Castro's Cuba. They were children of the revolution. Their lives had been shaped by its dogma, heroes, and messages, and when they entered young adulthood they witnessed their reality crumble. The wave of art they all participate in connects them. Their practices and styles were very different but they all focused on the idea of “low” and “high” culture and used their work to blur the two.

This concept fit perfectly into the time they worked in. The *Volumen Uno* generation could have only existed in Cuba in the 1980s for several reasons. First, the 1980s was 20 years after Castro’s 1959 victory, meaning he had been in sole control of the country for 22 year at the time of the *Volumen Uno* show. The group of young artists, almost all of whom were in their early 20s, had seen their whole life, and education shaped by communist rule. They all believed in the revolution, but were beginning to see that reality to not coalesce to what their families fought for. These were the children who grew up believing fervently in what their country was fighting to create, but soon the hypocrisies of the regime were to apparent to ignore. The Mariel boatlift, an exodus of almost 100,000 people leaving the country voluntarily or forced, showed not only the Cuban people, but the international community that the country was deeply ideologically fractured.

The 1980s was also the first time a tuition-free education system was in place in
Cuba. This allowed for an artistic education, something that was historically only available to the upper class, to be available to anyone with talent from lower economic backgrounds. This shaped the new wave of Cuban art. Gerardo Mosquera writes, “Consequently, most of the new artists come from, and remain a part of, the popular classes and the living folklore that surrounds them.” The folklore that surrounded them was the aspects of Cuban identity that had been generally ignored by the upper class. Objects branded as *picúo* became a central topic for artists at the time because it allowed for them to showcase the cultural objects they lived with as art. *Picúo* referenced the brand of “double-kitsch” that originated in Cuba through the implant of Spanish culture, and then later the influence of the class system on the island. It allowed for artists to discuss the complexities of the Cuban identity, as being borrowed from so many different sources, while also discussing the intricate topic of colonialism. Flavio Garciaandía and Rubén Torres Llorca were able to have this theoretical discussion with art, while incorporating household objects the outside deemed gaudy; such as parade float decorations and tchotchkes that the lower classes kept to imitate the upper class- all of which entered the art world and were looked at as high culture.

African religions found a similar route to entering the gallery space. José Bedia and Juan Francisco Elso Padilla were able to weave the history and art objects of the religions of Santería and Palo Monte into art that demanded a serious gaze. Their work also discusses a history brought about by colonialism. They focus on the impact of African diaspora through the slave trade, and examine the strong African influence in Cuban culture rather than that of its European founders. It brought an often ignored

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96 Bettelheim, “Palo Monte,” 37.
aspect of Latin American identity to the global stage, and showed the magic and power of their culture with pride.

Cuban art in the 1980s reclaimed what had been branded in their own culture as "low" and forcefully transformed it into "high" art. Picúo and Afro-Cuban religions had been thought to belong to the peasant classes of Cuba, but the artists treated them as serious art objects and engaged in a discussion with them. This came at a time when Cuba was facing an identity crisis. With the failures of the revolution, the Cuban people did not know what the represented. These artists tapped into concepts that were deeply historic and accessible to the people. Picúo objects could be found in any household, and were now elevated to fine art. Santería and Palo Monte have shaped Cuban culture, music, street art, and the lives and religious beliefs of millions of Cuban, but was largely ignored by the outside world and the upper classes of Cuba. Padilla and Bedia were able to claim that culture and show their embrace of it through art that was shown internationally. The retrieved ignored aspects of the Cuban identity and were able to reshape cubanidad. The artists of Volumen Uno rejected having an identity shaped by the revolution and fought to build one based on and for the people of Cuba.
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