

New York-based Cuban artist, Ofill Echevarria interviewed in Berlin, after just having presented 'In Situ', his last exhibition in Valencia, Spain.

The path of time and the high speed in which we live nowadays are the main themes in Ofill Echevarría's both, paintings and moving pictures. A critical and particular point of view regarding the way we spend our lives; especially if we are living in faster living cities such as New York.

But what is most significant in the art of Ofill -as once said Thomas Morin, an expert on Latin American Study Program at URI, where the Cuban born artist exhibited first time in the USA- is the idea that political and social dogma of any stripe cannot counterbalance the inevitability of transformation and refraction.

Monica Isla: *What is your understanding of Art?*

Ofill Echevarria: I like to think that the main idea of any work of art comes from a moment of lucidity, what they call inspiration, by the artist itself. I believe that art is an extension of who produces it. I also think that today the artist needs to know certain aspects of Art History to be able to interact in the Art World.

MI: *Why does speed appear constantly in your work? Why do you think it is important?*

OE: All begins with an investigation in regard to Photography, of how to translate the effect of speed raised by it, to oil on canvas. However, the hurry, as we all known, is not a characteristic phenomenon of the human being, it is not a natural anthropological data.

The constant acceleration of time; the impatience; the stress; the waste of information, are all factors that to a certain extent define our lives. I most of all consider myself an observer. See for example my videos taken by all over the city, they are observations, mainly.

***MI:** What does the city means to you and in what sense do you intend to portray it in your work?*

OE: A city is a town that has grown. The metropolis, for instance, tells us about the future; the future of all cities. You get away from it and when you turns back and see, you can see its true essence: it is a living thing.

Imagine Downtown as an actual body, except that it is growing without measure. So the streets, with their constant flow, are its veins; and that that we call chaos is nothing more than splendor, boom of that “living thing”. The city is full of dreams, of expectations; and there is where the lack of identity becomes more evident. I try to convey all of this through my work.

***MI:** What are the ideas that you are trying to convey through the people's lack of identity in your work and the colors you use?*

OE: Perhaps in an ideal, eminently prosperous future, It would matter little who we were before. I think that the speed of modern life in cosmopolitan cities establishes a very low parameter of personal identity. Since our judgment depends on preconceived ideas, we are delimited by small moments of absolute reality. We are a social product. We relate at all times, even with the machines. All our universe has been invaded by icons, symbols, flags.

When conceiving an urban landscape, I do it thinking about all of this; and I usually worry that one or another detail appears more or less diffuse, returning to the topic of how to represent the ephemeral of an image. That is why I always return to abstraction.

Color isn't just not an issue for me. Although perhaps color and gesture would be the only elements that remain spontaneous when I'm making a painting.

***MI:** Who do you consider your greatest influences?*

OE: I am a very curious person, everything interests me. Though I have always been interested in the Italian and Spanish schools of painting, as well as in the classics, generally speaking; the Renaissance. I must say also that 90% of learning comes from the moving image, or more recently from the virtual world. In Latin America we have both abstract and figurative painters, as well as conceptual artists that I am passionate about, but not to dwell too much, I will say that in general American, Asian, and European contemporary art, interests me.

***MI:** How does it influence or how did it influence your development as an artist, the political experience of your country?*

OE: In the midst of the rebellious spirit and precarious conditions of the late eighties in Havana, and during a moment of openness in the cultural policy — partly thanks to the Perestroika, which was already imposing a new way of seeing the world— a booming occurred, culturally speaking. It was during those years that arises what has been called the Generation of the 80s, of which I took part as a member of the Arte-Calle Group.

The opening turned into closing almost immediately and then the reprimands, the raids, and the censorship of everything that appeared to be politically incorrect began. At that time it was very popular (among us, always) "El Seguroso" [kinda secret agent to the service of the regime]. El Seguroso: the one in charge of security; the one on the part of the power; the one who controls and has control; the informer.

All dictatorships are more or less the same, and every repressive experience, threat that one should try to remember. I would say that the fear that I came to feel at that time—to the frustration, the discontent, or even the madness that would have had accompanied to the impossibility of making a life in the Havana of those years— threw me into the adventure of exile; an adventure that I mostly recognize congenital, but, as is well known, entails other frustrations, other discontents, and even other follies.

Those who know me, know that I am not an “artist” or something like that. I am interested in social criticism, but not in politics itself. Nor I am a pessimist. However, from my point of view, Havana today is experiencing a moment of glow similar to the one mentioned above, although in another historical context; a truly paradoxical moment, I would say. It would seem the triumph of opportunism as a logical aspect of the times. Emerging artists with their own studios- galleries? “Apparently” Independent art galleries? Unlimited sale of artwork, In a scenario of devastation and a people marked by poverty and repression?

Surely this part of the history is not been written yet. A few months ago, the director of a gallery in New York told me enthusiastically on his return from the island that things were changing there. Is a Cuban-American who does not

understand that things in that country changed in 1959, when the working class took power; a dream that does not fit the democracy that the capitalist left has got, especially in the United States.

In Miami, for instance, a new way of analyzing the problem of exile is beginning to gain popularity between scholars recently coming from other parts of the world, a group of capitalists who now serves as allies of Cuban culture (business people, basically) and the same old group of artists and intellectuals. A perverse circle, I would say, where misinformation as a programmed form of evasion and a new type of utopia coherent with the new reality of Cuba, converge.

Years ago, whilst in Mexico, I was trying to understand the political thinking of artists and friends around; which was diverse but prudent. "Freedom is respecting the rights of others", I heard saying many times. One day I wrote a note, an idea: ways of scape = ways of art; it is not true? An indoctrinated artist is a passive artist, limited by his beliefs. In this regard I think that all utopia is also a limitation; a self-limitation, to be exact. I understand that creative processes has to do with the way we'd like the world to be, but could not justify the way we want the world to be.

Freedom is still a dream for any Cuban, wherever they live. Faced with the impossibility of feeling completely free, I try at least to remain creative. That is why I always try to push my proposals towards a new level of action, to help release them.

***MI:** How do you conceive the idea of the cultural field and how do you insert yourself and move away from its center?*

OE: The Visual Arts field has specific rules that are characteristic of the field itself, which are not learned in school. Artists and intellectuals participate in a game where it is not necessary to win or lose, and where, I would dare to say, the chances of error are higher than those of succeeding. Art and Politics do not go hand in hand, but many in the field insist on relating them, creating barriers that basically undermine the work of art.

I started very young to interact in the Art World, first during the prodigious eighties in Havana, and later in other places of vast cultural activity. Thinking about it, I think that I usually approach the Art circle to show what I've been doing, and I move away from this to grow as an artist.

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