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'A Conflict In Which I Constantly Move: Existing From The Art'

Ofill Echevarria in conversation with Amir Valle, exclusively for OtroLunes
Visual Arts Dossier.

As a presentation we always give our guests a challenge: to look and try to explain to the readers of OtroLunes, who is Ofill Echevarría? The answer, as if to further deepen the challenge, must focus on two inseparable aspects but that with all purpose I want you to answer separately: Ofill Echevarría, the human being and Ofill Echevarría, the artist, considering how these two areas of your life oppose or complement each other.

David Lynch, the genius of cinematography, says we live in a dream; and that one day we wake up and we realize that everything has been a dream and we discover who we really are; A day he calls glorious. I assure you I haven't seen that day yet.

Every time I look back on my life —Arte Calle; the eighties; the departure from Cuba; the first time I stepped on Mexican land and thought I had arrived in the United States; MTV in the nineties or Beavis and But-Head; Natural Born Killers; Octavio Paz in life on television; Peter Greenaway live at the Palacio National; the world before and after The Matrix; all transitions and personal crises, even today— I realize that rummaging into the unknown is what catches my attention the most. And that only through that search, between the unknown, the human being and the artist in me complement each other.

I come from a dysfunctional family, I don't look like any of my creators and my name is invented. My parents, as well as those of most of the people of my generation, were boys and girls of ten and eleven years old in 1959; the real responsible for the disaster that our country is today. And although it was fortunate to have my grandparents in the educational aspect, I had a hard childhood because I always found contradictory the social machinery that surrounded me. So, at a very young age I decided to run away from my home environment, discovering over the

years that all environments are favorable and adverse to me at the same time. A conflict in which I constantly move.

Existing From The Art

Anyone who watch your artistic career will undoubtedly find an identity seal that is not usual in Cuban Visual Arts: that counterpoint between the artistic and the architectural in search of an interpretation of human existence and its “marks” in what we call "modernity". If you had to define "your seal", what would you say?

I have never pursued a personal seal. What I do have are fixed (recurring) ideas. The pictorial series with which I am identified have to do with the way I found to represent the active life of the metropolitan area of the city and the people who inhabit the common spaces, the so-called non-places, with which I have a special relationship.

Over the years I have continued to research and expand my visions and have often found myself emulating with photographers of the advertising field. And I have discovered, thanks to writers who explain my work, similarities between those ideas that harass me and those of Illuminists, like Walter Benjamin.

Other processes have taken place since my first forays into the subject of contemporary urban life, but, in general, even research, all has been as intuitive as casual.

Cuba, a very small country but of great artists of the Visual Arts, has the privilege of having one of the great schools of that specialty: the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts. It is obvious that an institution of that wingspan and historical prestige will mark anyone who passes through its classrooms, though what in particular did San Alejandro contribute to the style of Ofill Echevarría?

I think not very much. While I always had good Drawing's teachers, it happens that I did not study Painting as a specialty, but Engraving. Since I decided to dedicate myself to Painting professionally - let's say - around 1999, all I have done is learn "on the fly" according to the

needs that each project presents to me.

Anyway, if I said that San Alejandro was in my student days, an institution of great wingspan, I would be lying and several of my former colleagues would understand it that way. Let's be realistic. It was a specialized school, with good and bad teachers, with good and bad study programs, with politics and political activities interfering in each and every one of the artistic programs, and with technical deficiencies consistent with the economic problems of the island. On the other hand, if I were as innocent today as in my student days, I'd say San Alejandro was a place of prestige, because the innocence that lay at the bottom of all repression, allude to the repressive rules that we have all created, like stereotypes and other social values. I think that prestige is something that every day is at stake. Even within the cultural scene of the time: "the fabulous eighties in Havana despite Cuban cultural policy", I do not think that San Alejandro realized to what extent its reputation declined as the repression to its most enthusiastic students increased.

San Alejandro was - and surely still is - a special school. Let's not forget that being admitted there depends on aptitude exams. However, I remember that the first thing I heard in my house the day I was accepted there was a warning. Now the thing is to keep it! Then they "read me the primer." Apparently being expelled from there was easier than being accepted. A premonition maybe.

San Alejandro, in my specific case, ended in misfortune when a few days before the final thesis I was announced that I would have to wait six months to have the right to present it, if my behavior during that time warranted it. The sanction was directly related to a performance that months before several of my colleagues from Arte Calle and I performed at the facilities of Casa de las Américas.

San Alejandro was also a meeting point where the group of colleagues and promoters of Arte Calle, grew up, and a secure base from which to look at the world and philosophize. In general, the experiences accumulated in that institution helped me - from a very young age - to begin to assemble the puzzle of the life of art and my possible interaction with the bureaucrats of culture, which are everywhere.

It is necessary that we talk about a unique moment in the history of Cuban culture of that

period that is called «of the Revolution»: the Arte Calle group, of which you were part. There is undoubtedly a before and an after that moment in the Cuban Visual Arts. I want you to think now and tell us the before and after of Ofill Echevarría artist from that watershed that was the repression of Arte Calle by the revolutionary cultural policy.

Definitely an interesting moment in the history of Cuban art. I think that the Art institution was not prepared to deal with the way in which a certain rebellious process - by an entire generation - was evolving and, it is possible that the “actions” of our group called their attention especially. I think, by the time they started trying to "fix things" it was already too late.

In the early 80s a certain intellectual freedom dominated the Havana cultural panorama. After that, more or less since 86 — to be more specific — as the decade progressed and cultural policies changed, we also changed. And just as inevitable were the changes that to Arte-Calle the adolescence presented, organic was also the experience that set the passage from a normal life — you know, in family, in society — to another a little more particular, in where beliefs like, "life as a performance" or, "art as a way of life" became latent, essential to survive in a society where censorship is still the norm that governs all creative activity. Hence the impossibility of choice. This is the moment when as an artist you understand that in order to protect what you possess (your talent, let's say, that which has been granted to you naturally) you must run, because fighting would be a mission too dangerous; a delirium similar to madness. But if madness was seen as virtue and not as award, it should also be protected. Hence the self-exile.

When the 90s arrived, the protagonists of the events in the Visual Arts during the 80s, we felt part of a generation whose goal was to leave Cuba no matter what. "The voice had spread" and now - on the occasion of censorship, of closure, of whatever - we all wanted to leave, move our vision to other contexts. The economic situation on the island was the factor that pushed many to make the final decision, but expanding was a good way to fight the repression that was felt and the best way to save what was achieved before the crisis that was coming.

Other Cultures

Then you lived several years in Mexico, a country with a rich tradition in the Visual Arts. What did that residence in Mexico mean for your work?

The first thing that happened to me in Mexico was to run into a Macintosh, which I learned to use while working as a graphic designer for a small advertising and direct marketing agency. Then I began to exhibit and be interested in visiting museums as of the Archeology Museum, of Modern Art, of paintings of the nineteenth century.

In Mexico City, during the 90s, the Yuppie culture of the business world that portrays the American Psycho of Bret Easton, for example, was still in fashion. The interaction with this other universe opposed to all forms of art as well as the arrival of the Internet, gave me a new way of understanding and managing my artistic proposals.

Mexico could serve as a practical school for anyone who decides to put their attention on the application of technology to arte popular: folk art, or would like to fill the void that still exists between the world of naive creativity and that more complex one, related to the so-called contemporary art.

Two other big cities, perhaps in the antipodes of "the American": Miami and New York, have seen you through its streets. From the purely artistic, did your work change somewhat under the cultural influences of these two cities?

Miami was a city that, as you say, I traveled, and New York is the city I have lived in for 15 years, to which I have dedicated most of my work during the last 10 years and has inspired a series of projects I still work on.

In Miami a loose life; in New York narrow, tight. In the first one the warm, soft breeze; in the other the cold, hard wind. In the town a slow life and in the city a fast life.

As for my painting, the strong light of Miami, coupled with my chronic photophobia, worked quickly to turn the backgrounds of my paintings into huge pale areas. When I moved to New York, the detail of the white spaces as well as other contrasts with the realism that had defined my previous pictorial stage end up melting and disappearing, among more complex projects arising from the life in the metropolis: the series of reflections which later extends to video or recently, the series 'Moonbeams', which comes from the photos that in 2013 I began to take with tablets, mobile phones and other devices, while walking (always in a hurry) the Midtown of

Manhattan.

And Europe, where have you also lived? What has brought you this other dive into the many European cultures?

Nothing like traveling from New York to Europe, to understand that we do not live in an instant world, that not everything is a click away; that while there are positive aspects in that dynamic of the triumph of the ephemeral, there are disadvantages in such a rapid gratification in the development of things.

The first time I visited Europe was in 2001; The Euro had not yet entered into force, so that was a different Europe. It was the first thing I noticed during my stay, in 2017. On that first trip, finding myself in front of a giant work by Giuseppe de Rivera in the Prado Museum, I felt like if a whisper, an inner voice, commanded me to bring the life of the businessman in the big city -the one that is typically American- to oil on canvas.

Any traveler from the future in danger of losing their ability to appreciate the value of time in cities like Valencia, Rome or Berlin, would recommend to their friends, 'You Must Change Your Life' by Peter Sloterdijk. And it may be that Berlin is the only cosmopolitan city today where everyone laughs, or where nobody ever cries. However, for a "survivalist" like me, with a visual storage capacity of two terabytes per day (approx, don't think I'm kidding), the city became excessively rich: a true historical drama of complex informative framework. So after a few months wandering its streets exactly as I do in the city where I live, Europe spoke to my ear again, confirmed visions and served as inspiration for a new pictorial series.

Cuban artist, from the Cuban diaspora? How would you define yourself before that criterion imposed by the national policy that divides Cuban culture into two shores?

Diaspora's artist is a category that appeared a few years ago in the language of Cuban Visual Arts. A slightly capricious term, according to me. The term, it seems to me, invites the interested party to think about Cuban contemporary art "despite of" that diaspora of which speaks - that of the artists of Havana in the 80s - and not "by virtue" of it. When actually almost nothing, if not

an abyss of spots and distinct concepts are those that inhabit the national Visual Arts scene - even in the exile of Miami or New York -, before the arrival of this new group of artists to the international scene.

In a more than necessary, voluntary exile - that of the Visual Artists of the 80s -, I think that this term (and criterion) will be disappearing due to lack of evidence evidencing the group at issue, while it becomes greater or failing, for inconsistencies in the information in this regard, especially before the eyes of the informative network, Internet.

A More Personal Look

In much of your work, in any of its periods, the blurring of the human figure draws much attention, as if modernity intended to swallow what is human in the bodies. Any thesis?

There are several proposals that I handle when I blur the figures or mix contours in my paintings. The most important would be: search for movement and representation of speed.

Adjusting the eye to the needs of my time, on the other hand, has often put me to compete with Photography, but it is not the perfection of the photographic image what I pursue, but a type of realism that aims to go beyond of the physical. That is why the spiritual appearance that in many of my paintings the bodies transmit; When I get it.

Another mark is the capture of an idea based on perspectives on reality from photography, architecture and the environmental environment. What have been your biggest challenges to configure that message that every visual work should convey?

Speed and movement are modern concepts that we increasingly understand thanks to technology and, visually, they are fascinating. I think that representing them in painting is a challenge in essence.

Another challenge was to want to talk about urban life, about those details that we, the city dwellers, can no longer see, or dare not look at.

I'm very interested in transitions from one style to another, I'm still trying to talk about concepts

without doing conceptual art and I'm still thinking about showing realism where there seems to be only abstraction.

Every artist feels that there are moments of definition in his professional life: which or what do you think were those moments in your life, those in which (if you look back) you discover that you have made a quality leap in your maturity as an artist?

Surely there are several such moments, since I usually worry a lot about not getting stuck in some phase of work and I try to stay active, creatively speaking, but the truth is that I don't keep track on it. Another thing I try is not to think much on what I've been achieved.

Finally, in which projects are you up to right now and which ones do you already have in mind for the future?

I don't want to be specific about future exhibitions or events because I am extremely superstitious, but right now I am at the productive stage of the series of paintings I started in Berlin, and I am still working on the series of wet paintings called, Moonbeams I started in 2014. In addition, I work on the concept of a rather ambitious project that involves Video Art as well as technology for the everyday life, and a few months ago I launched an E-commerce website to promote graphic work that I don't normally exhibit in galleries among which is an entirely digital series: a group of 36 works created from a photograph of an oil painting, and the 'Moonbeams' photo collection, which refers to the pictorial series of the same name.

I would like to invite the readers of OtroLunes to visit the site at: www.ofillindustriart.com and make "contact". It will be fun.