Two Citizens of Utopia

Ibrahim Miranda & Douglas Pérez

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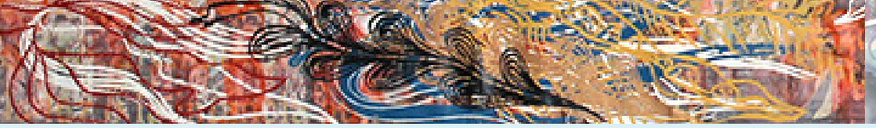

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Ibrahim Miranda & Douglas Pérez

Co-curated by Orlando Hernández and Rachel Weingeist

We imagine we know our country, our city well. From childhood we learn "by heart" the profile of our coasts, the sinuous line of our rivers, the layout of our streets and avenues, the façades of our buildings... Unfortunately, however, this knowledge is very fragile, very insecure. A simple detour in our daily rounds suddenly reveals to us unknown streets, down which we had never before trod. In a matter of minutes, a flash-flood transforms the lazy and parsimonious river of our infancy into a lake capable of swallowing up mercilessly entire neighborhoods of our memory, together with their parks, schools, and markets. An inexplicable explosion, or one of those collapses that occur all-too-frequently in Old Havana at sunrise after several days of rain erases forever the beautiful image of a building that seemed to us eternal.

Art is (or should be) just that: a kind of sudden detour in our predictable path; an unforeseen crossroad, a torrential downpour, an explosion, a collapse. Its main purpose is to reveal to us (preferably with kindness of course, but that's not always the case) the other side of a world that until just a few minutes ago seemed so convincing, so real. True art abruptly shatters our naïve confidence that in the world there is but a single path, perspective, or reality.

In their works, Ibrahim Miranda and Douglas Pérez have managed to divert our gaze to new and unusual geographies, towards unimagined urban panoramas. They have flooded our eyes with overflowing fresh and at times whimsical images of places we thought we knew, forcing us to explore them anew. Right before our eyes they have exploded the static, conventional image of what we like to call – almost always with pride, it is true– our country, our city: Cuba, Havana.

Oddly enough, neither artist is hypnotized by the vague, abstract concept of the "global village." Instead, they remain shamelessly spellbound by the ancient mysteries of the local village, by the "nation" and the "national," and by other apparently outdated concepts such as identity, hybridity, syncretism, and even the peculiar and provocative Caribocentric idea of "cimarronaje" (marronage, or the state of being an escapee).

It may be that these artists are but a pair of "provincial postmoderns," as if such a combination were possible. However, the fact is that the "maps" of Ibrahim Miranda are always maps of Cuba, even if their images are irregular and often irreconcilable with the island we thought we knew. And what Douglas Pérez represents in his work –at least in these enormous "Pictopías" we have before us– are images exclusively of Havana. In essence, Ibrahim and Douglas have taken the island of Cuba and the city of Havana as metaphors with which they can address complex and often obscure and unintelligible ideas.

Ibrahim Miranda always insists on referring to these works as "maps." However, what we see represented on his works is a row of sculpted Greek heads, or the heads of African slaves imprisoned in iron masks, or an elegant set of demitasse coffee cups, or bowls (of the kind used in Afro-Cuban rituals). We see poisonous Portuguese man-o-wars, crosses, animals, tropical flowers, children's scribblings, and crowns of thorns (like that of Christ) and other crowns (like those of kings). In these "maps," Miranda uses thousands of images he has previously drawn or taken from the archives of history and the history of art. He then prints these images horizontally over real maps using silk-screen, lithography, or any one of the graphic techniques in which he is an expert.

In these "maps" Ibrahim has almost completely abandoned the obvious cartographic technique that he used in his earlier work to visually represent the image of our island, and begun to deploy non-geographic techniques. But these are not ones that show (and transform) physical appearances but instead ones that uncover the most essential elements of the "Cubaness", the island's history, its religious beliefs, its traditions, and its culture. Here and there we are able to discern some remaining cartographic features, such as a vague and imprecise outline of the island (often transformed into a reptile with wings or something of the sort). However, if no one calls our attention to it or if we fail to be observant, it is easy for us to miss seeing the image of these "maps" in a more or less conventional sense. Sometimes there is no map there at all. However, with regard to the "map-other," the "meta-map" within which Ibrahim himself has been confined for so many years, it's always there, waiting for us. And this is likely a more reliable map of Cuba, because it contains within it elements of many other places, fragments from the entire world, Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Asia.

Douglas Pérez often gives us a Havana completely encased under a single massive roof, as if the city were one giant greenhouse or warehouse, or more appropriately the nave of an old, decrepit sugar mill. Perhaps the enormous roof is there to protect the city from the toxic atmosphere caused by the same belligerent event that dried up the sea, which once upon a time would happily explode against the seawall of the popular Malecón. What a strange image, that of a mushroom cloud masked over by a festive display of fireworks. It's as if we are witnessing the celebration of slaughter or blithely playing down a destructive act of such magnitude. "Long live Havana with its carnivals, its joyful, chaotic celebrations, its jubilant Dionysian throngs! We will fiddle as Rome burns!!" seems to cynically intone this massive painting. We know that the artist is anything but a "terrorist," but we also know that he enjoys a little anarchy and (whenever possible) freedom of expression.

The catastrophic character of these images is never terrorizing, and in fact the paintings call to mind scenes from those science fiction films that we love to watch with friends on a Saturday night. These huge futuristic panoramas that Douglas has baptized with the name "Pictopías," not only attempt to presage the future (that zone of the imagined, of the probable), but also reflect upon and interpret the past (the territory of memory, traditions, and oblivion). Above all, however, these Pictopías are a reflection on the uncertain present that we all suffer under and that haunts our wildest dreams like a bird of ill omen.

Time appears in his paintings as something elastic, moving back and forth. For example, "I Have a Dream," is the title of one of Douglas' paintings where the image appears in the famous Plaza de la Revolución in Havana full of huge cranes that are constructing (with Lego blocks?) images of Che Guevara and other revolutionary leaders. However, among serious, stalwart figures, we find none other than Mickey Mouse. What kind of dream is this? –so far from that of Martin Luther King. Could it be jocular utopian dream, that is to say, unimaginable?

I think both artists should be considered legitimate citizens of Utopia. They have been artistically representing a country and a city that does not really exist, just like that other island also called Utopia, created in 1516 by the London-based writer and politician Sir Thomas More. It is often forgotten that More wrote with the intention of satirizing the corrupt English society of the time by good of the community (moral motivations) and not for private interests (material incentives). The land was held in common and there was no private property. There was broad religious tolerance where harmony and fraternity reigned. Although Thomas More was later canonized as a saint, he should certainly be remembered as the first socialist; a forerunner to Fourier, Owen, Saint-Simon, and of course to that other "More" named Marx, with whom he is bound by the same utopian dream about the future of humanity.

In the case of Douglas' Pictopías, it should be obvious that the term captures exactly what it is: a painted utopia. Is it not? However, far from being a "place that does not exist" or a "non-place," as the word's etymology would have us believe, the attractive images of Utopia created by Douglas Pérez (and also by Ibrahim Miranda) are in fact a "too-place," that is an overcrowded place, saturated with reality. In different ways and from different perspectives, both artists have used the landscape, the city, cartography, maps, and representations of inhabited space to refer to such a huge mass of material and spiritual heterogeneities that we like to call (for short) "culture." Their works are principally that: cultural maps.

With the word "map" the same thing happens as with the word "text," both have come to signify much more than they did just a few years ago. Now there is talk of the World as a Text, or of genetic maps, conceptual maps, mental maps, and so on, with geography having nothing to do with it. The fact is that both artists (each in his own way) have managed to pull off an extraordinary "mapping" of our culture, the history of our society from colonial times to the present, of our political adventures, of our ancient and modern problems, and course of our inalienable hopes… And this they have done as if they were not just a couple of random artists working separately, but as a mysterious, invisible brotherhood formed by historians, anthropologists, poets, astrologers, fortunetellers, witch-doctors, diviners, dreamers, idealists, anarchists, and crazy men... and only God knows if the protective spirit of some dead utopian socialist is also in the mix. Only then can we come to terms with such surprising results.

Orlando Hernández, June 2012, La Habana, Cuba
Translated by Ted Henken, Ph.D

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Details: Ibrahim Miranda, Untitled from the series *Mapas,* 2008-2012. Mixed media on maps. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.
Reverse: Douglas Pérez, *Pictopía III: Still I Have A Dream*, 2009. Oil on canvas. 63 x 93 3/4 in. Courtesy The Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection.