Heavy Hitters: Damn Yanquis and Cartoon Vampires

BY R.C. BAKER   WEDNESDAY, JULY 31, 2013 AT 4 A.M.

El Cuarto Bate (2013), Reynerio Tamayo.

The camera pans across battered cinder-block walls, a muddy infield, concrete stands shorn of

awnings, and palm trees silhouetted against gray skies. On the soundtrack, an old-timer reminisces in Spanish about his days on a Cuban baseball team: "Nobody could beat us! Do you remember the game with the Yanquis?" Our perspective sweeps over the deserted field as he recalls a tough American pitcher striking out his teammates, then how they rallied in the eighth inning and, finally, how this veteran warrior vanquished the Yanqui hitters in the ninth, his voice now soaring: "I threw my best pitches and knocked them all out. Let them learn not to mess with us! We crossed the whole field waving the flag. . . . We were heroes!" Then his tone flattens. "But that's all gone."

Duniesky Martin's 2013 video *Fly Out* combines that faded champion's monologue from a 1985 Cuban feature film with footage of a ballpark ravaged by Hurricane Ike in 2008. A bittersweet vibe permeates this group show of 20 Cuban-born artists, curated by Rachel Weingeist and Orlando Hernández. Even Hernández's name, which he shares with Cuban pitching sensation Orlando "El Duque" Hernández—whose high black stockings and even higher leg-kick excited New York Yankee fans in the late '90s—gets at the knotty complexities on display, since the curator is no fan of the game and the name coincidence buries him under baseball stats in Google searches. Hernández has written, "I definitely detest when baseball, or any other sport for that matter, functions with impunity as an instrument of chauvinism or regionalism, or

serves as an expression of an exaggerated and xenophobic patriotism that only emboldens rivalries and a false sense of superiority." Take *that,* Bleacher Creatures everywhere.

But isn't focusing our lower brains away from actual war and vicariously projecting them onto competing athletes a beautiful aspect of sports? For example, Juan Padrón's painting *The Great Stake* (2013) presents members of the team from Santiago de Cuba (analogous to the Boston Red Sox, in the States) preparing to drive a shattered bat through the heart of a player from the Industriales, the Havana team that dominates Cuban baseball the way the Yankees do American. This comic evocation of murderous rivalry could be an outtake from Padrón's wonderfully bizarre 1985 animated feature, *Vampires in Havana*. In the same vein, consider Reynerio Tamayo's 2013 *Fanático,* in which Jacques-Louis David's famous painting of the slain Marat in his bath has morphed into a baseball-headed victim slumped over a broken, bloody bat.

More surreally serious, sculptor Arles del Rio gives us a skeletal bronze arm extending a worn leather fielder's mitt upward in *Hoping That Things Fall from the Sky or National Sport* (2012). Cubans, like folks the world over, pine for manna from heaven, or at least—back in the day—commodities from the Soviet Union. Perhaps now it is Miami cash those macabre gloves will strain after. And of course Fidel Castro is a lurking presence here—isn't that El Comandante swinging the bat in Jose Toirac's *Death by Balls: Homage to Antonia Eiriz*? Eiriz was a painter accused in the 1960s of being "conflictive" and "pessimistic," of creating art out of step with the revolution's triumphant spirit, and she quit painting because of official restrictions.

But Fidel's oppression can be seen fading in a 2011 charcoal drawing by Frank Martinez envisioning an outfielder leaping to

snag a fly ball before it sails over the Berlin Wall. Is the fielder trying to keep the ball out of the hands of the discredited communists of the old Eastern Bloc? In an alternate universe, could stealing this ill-fated homer spare Cuba half a century of enervating revolution? Such conundrums pervade this engagingly complex show, which makes the compelling case that baseball, not revolution, has long been the true unifying force of Cuba's adulterated paradise.