

Afro-Cuban Artists: A Renaissance

Manuel "Mendive" Hoya and Eduardo "Choco" Roca Salazar

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Kristin Schwain

Associate Professor, Art History

Manuel Mendive and Eduardo "Choco" Roca Salazar are two of the most celebrated Cuban artists working today. Both men benefited from the educational and cultural initiatives instituted by Fidel Castro following the 1959 Cuban Revolution and receive inspiration from their Afro-Cuban heritage. However, their distinct selections of subject matter and divergent styles underscore the manifold ways revolution and race continue to be interpreted and understood on the island today.

Castro declared 1961 the "Year of Education" and established an enormously successful campaign for universal literacy; in less than a year, the national literacy rate rose to 96%. Mendive and Choco were members of the first generation of artists, often from "the popular classes and the living folklore that surround[ed] them," educated in the newly nationalized school system (1). Mendive grew up in what he describes as a "marginal" neighborhood in Havana, populated with dock, railroad, and factory workers, and graduated from the prestigious San Alejandro School of Arts in 1963. Choco was born into a family of agricultural workers in Santiago de Cuba, graduating from the National Art School in Havana in 1970. He explicitly links his artistic success to the Revolution, declaring in an undated interview: "The Revolution rescued me. It picked me up, a little country boy, and taught me art."

As Afro-Cuban artists, Mendive and Choco inherited a rich heritage that has been celebrated as the heart of Cuban national identity; at the same time, they have been subject to an institutionalized racism that pervades all aspects of Cuban culture. In the 1920s and 30s, rising nationalist sentiments, a desire for a native definition of Cubanness distinct from

United States influence, and an international interest in "the primitive" provided the foundation for the *Vanguardia* and *Afrocubanismo* movements. Cuban intellectuals, visual and literary artists, dramatists, musicians, and composers of all kinds turned to Afro-Cuban folk cultures to shape both the form and content of their scholarly and expressive works. The Revolutionary government continued the celebration of Afro-Cuban culture as part of its "deracialization" project, and in recent years, has used it to encourage tourism to the island. Even though these artistic and political movements helped install *mestizaje* as authentically Cuban and Castro officially renounced racism in the public sphere, it remains part and parcel of Cuban life.

While the Cuban Revolution and Afro-Cuban culture shape Mendive and Choco's work, they do so in very different ways. Mendive is an initiate in La Regla de Ocha, a religious worldview and practice popularly known in English and Spanish as Santería, or "the way of the saints." In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, over 500,000 Africans crossed the middle passage and landed in Cuba. The majority were Yoruba, members of a once powerful empire in Nigeria and Benin. The remarkable overlap between the African worldview they brought to the New World and the Spanish Catholicism imposed upon them when they arrived enabled them to sustain their religious beliefs and practices. Both traditions boast a supreme being (Olodumare and God, respectively) whose agents (orishas and saints) serve as intermediaries between the earthly and heavenly realms. Throughout his career, Mendive has produced a distinctive body of work predicated on the orishas



Manuel Mendive (Cuban, b. 1944)
De la serie Aguas, 2012
Tempera on paper



Manuel Mendive (Cuban, b. 1944)
Untitled, #7, 2015
Acrylic on canvas

and their sacred stories as well as the mythological world they inhabit, characterized by the seamless coexistence of people and animals, nature and culture, the magical and the everyday.

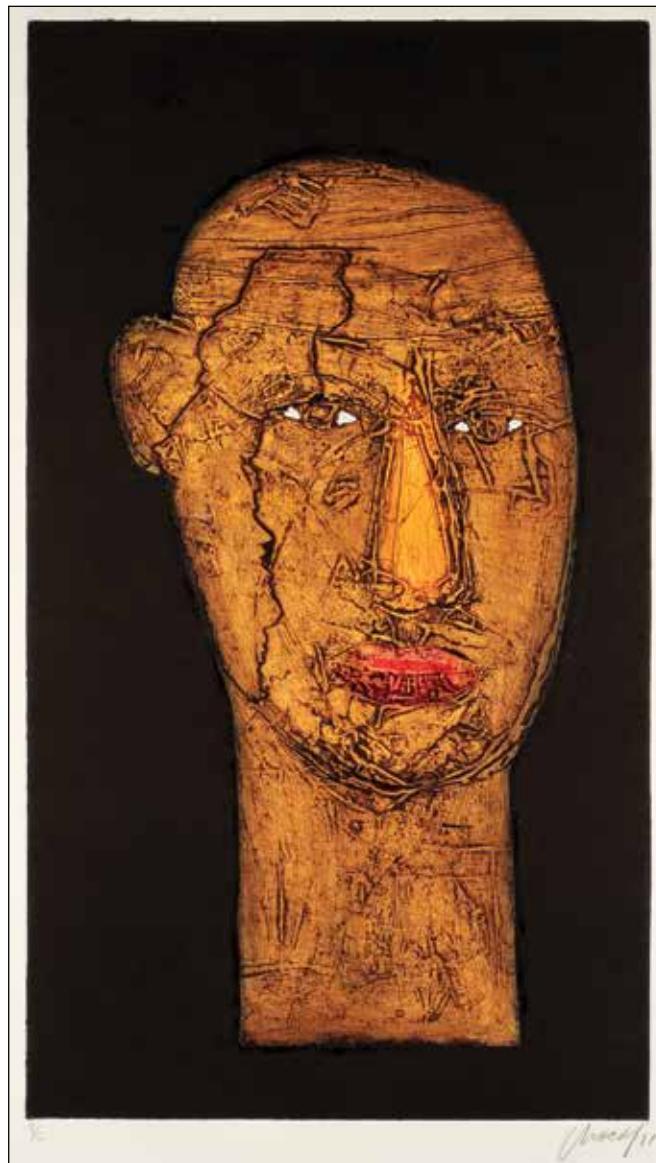
Mendive's commitment to Afro-Cuban themes permeates his artistic output. He was an active member of Grupo Antillano, a black consciousness art collective active in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, whose purpose was described recently by historian Alejandro de la Fuente as "the search for the origins, the roots, and the expressions of an authentic Cuban popular culture with a Caribbean and African cast" (2). The significance of Yoruban ancestry within his family and his extended stays in Africa have led Mendive to emphasize the Yoruba, rather than Catholic, elements of Afro-Cuban religions in his artworks and performances. In a painting from *De la serie Aguas*, human and animal forms morph into one another. Arms and legs become birds and amphibian feet. The figure on the far left has three breasts, but the turtle between its legs makes its gender as ambiguous as the location itself. Indeed, the painting presents metamorphosis, as animals and humans transform before us.

Importantly, the direction of the movement is unknown. In Yoruba iconography, the three-breasted woman is associated with the cross-roads while the human-bird form is linked to the exchange of messages between the human and divine realms.

Choco's images of *campesinos* in the Cuban countryside garnered considerable critical acclaim in the 1970s, but his international reputation was cemented in the 1980s and 1990s by his collagraphs, a printmaking technique in which a variety of textured materials are placed on a plate, inked, and then pressed. His early images of agricultural workers have given way to more abstracted and generalized figures. In a 2010 interview with the Cuban art critic, David Mateo, Choco asserted: "I refer to the biological, universal man. The person I paint has no particular skin colour or profile. If you look closely, I show them with heterogeneous features, maybe African lips, Chinese eyes, pink or earth skin shades: it is a person that has its ascendancy all over the world." Choco believes his particular experience as an Afro-Cuban man grants him access to the general human condition.

Choco's dramatic portraits often picture the head of a single figure against a dark background. In *Untitled*, [#6] for example, a male figure with recognizably African traits emerges from a dark background. As in most of his collagraphs, Choco recycles discarded remnants of mass culture in the print, giving it a strong sense of three-dimensionality and texture. In this case, his inclusion of cigar label on the lips of the figure also incorporates a subtle, but significant, cultural commentary. When Cuba became a Spanish colony in 1511, European settlers quickly established tobacco plantations. The Spanish king demanded that all tobacco go through Seville in 1717, establishing a monopoly that lasted over a century. When it was abolished, small and large Cuban firms began to compete for the worldwide market, using enslaved labor until it was abolished in 1886 and mass-produced labels to advertise their brands. These labels typically pictured pastoral scenes of European gentility; allegorical figures; peaceful images of agricultural cultivation by black and white laborers; and/or stereotypical representations of the indigenous peoples and Afro-Cubans. When Castro seized power in 1959, he nationalized the tobacco industry. By using a cigar label to create the figure's lips, Choco embeds Cuba's economic history in the black body. He explores the nature of this history further in *Pushing the Wall* and *Behind the Window*; abstracted figures literally composed from the detritus of consumer culture struggle to escape the confines of their physical location and to see through or beyond it.

This exhibition showcases artists whose artistic production is at the heart of an international conference to be held at the University of Missouri from April 27 to 30, 2016, titled, *Afro-Cuban Artists: A Renaissance*. In addition to the artists themselves, critics and scholars will explore the aesthetic, cultural, and political contexts and influences of Mendive, Choco, and other visual artists who came of age after the 1959 Cuban Revolution.



Eduardo "Choco" Roca Salazar (Cuban, b. 1949)
Untitled, #6, 2011
Collagraph

(1) Gerardo Mosquero, "Africa in the Art of Latin America" in *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992), page 37.

(2) Alejandro de la Fuente, "Drapetomania: Grupo Antillano and Cultural Cimarronaje" in *Grupo Antillano: The Art of Afro-Cuba*, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), page 55.