

EDUARDO
"CHOCO"
ROCA
SALAZAR:
PORTRAITS
OF A
PEOPLE

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EDUARDO "CHOCO" ROCA SALAZAR: PORTRAITS OF A PEOPLE

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This exhibition would not have been possible without the generosity of Choco and Astrid Martinez-Jones, founder and director of Latin Art Space, who lent the collagraphs for the exhibition. Thank you for making this show a reality.

Special thanks go to Cordones-Cook for organizing the international and interdisciplinary conference this exhibition accompanies, "Afro-Cuban Artists: A Renaissance." The documentaries by Cordones-Cook that inspired this event evoke the worlds inhabited by Cuban artists as well as the worlds they create, and we are privileged to support her vision and vocation.



EDUARDO "CHOCO" ROCA SALAZAR: PORTRAITS OF A PEOPLE

Born to rural farm workers in Santiago de Cuba in 1949, Choco seized the opportunity to study art at Havana's National School of Art, a school established by Fidel Castro's revolutionary government less than a decade earlier. He is a member 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 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."²

Choco's early work celebrated the *campesinos* (agricultural workers) and the rural landscape. It embraced the revolutionary spirit of the 1970s and put him in the vanguard of the epic-rural movement in painting.³ His work reached a much broader and international audience in the 1980s and 90s: art became an important form of cultural exchange for Cuba, and Choco was one of the first artists invited to exhibit his work in the United States after the Revolution.⁴ His work also became associated with the black consciousness movement, institutionalized in the visual arts by the *Grupo Antillano* in the 1980s.⁵ Ultimately, Choco's exploration and mastery of collagraphy, a technique he considers a "reaffirmation" of Cuban life, has earned him the most recognition and critical acclaim.

This exhibition showcases Choco's collagraphs from the past decade. Choco's familiarity with rural and urban life, identification with physical labor and the arts, and status as Afro-Cuban within a racial hierarchy that privileges white skin give him both an insider and outsider's perspective on Cuban life. His works, in turn, embrace both the particular and the universal. "When I paint, I don't think in terms of white, mulatto, black or Chinese," he told critic Miguel Barnet. "The person I portray has body, limbs, soul, heart, grey matter."⁶ Choco's depictions of "biological, universal" humanity are nonetheless rooted in his personal experience as an Afro-Cuban man and conveyed through the materiality of his works. He consistently recycles discarded remnants of mass culture in his collagraphs, bringing them historical specificity and continued relevance.

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

2. "Choco: Visual Artist," *Havana Cultura*, accessed March 29, 2016, <http://havana-cultura.com/en/visual-arts/choco>.

3. For a discussion of Choco's early work, see: Nelson Herrera Ysla, *Choco* (La Habana: Letras Cubanas, c2004).

4. Along with Nelson Domínguez, Choco was invited by the Center for Cuban Studies to participate in the first Cuban art exhibit in the United States following the Revolution. Drawings and prints by the two artists appeared in an accompanying catalog: *Two Contemporary Cuban Artists* (San Francisco, CA: Mission Cultural Center, 1981). For a discussion of the Cuban government's use of contemporary art to bolster its international image, see (among others): Rachel Weiss, *To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 9.

5. While never a member of the *Grupo Antillano*, Choco's work is consistently included in exhibitions of Afro-Cuban artists. See, for example, Judith Bettelheim, *Afro-Cuban Works on Paper, 1968-2003* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005); and *Grupo Antillano: The Art of Afro-Cuba*, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

6. "Two Roles, One View Point: Interview with Cuban Art Critic, David Mateo, 10/2010," *AfroCubaWeb*, accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/choco/Choco.htm>. The interview appeared originally in a guide to the exhibition, *Choco: Colour and Rhythm of Cuba*, at the Chambers Gallery in London, England.



Eleggua Collagraph

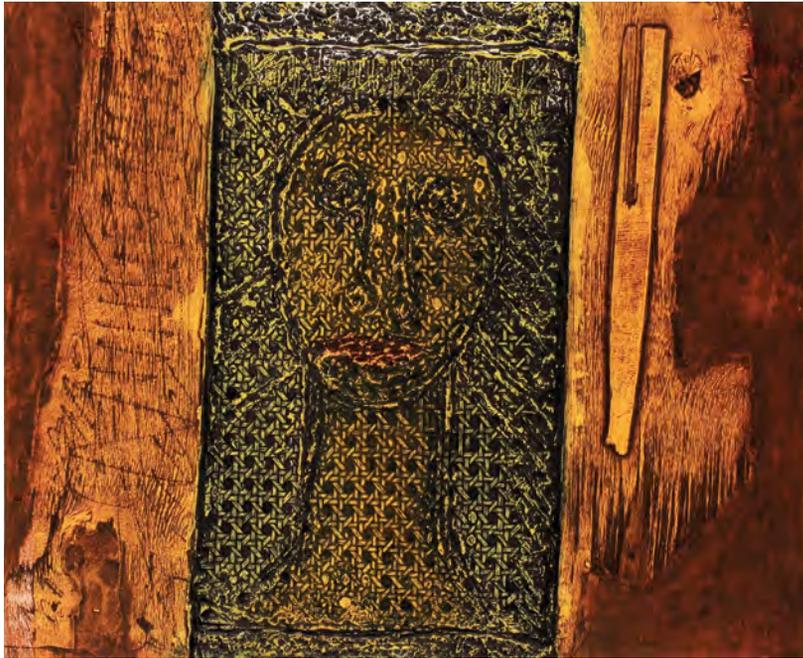
Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

Eleggua is one of the most important *orishas* (spiritual beings) in Santería. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, over 500,000 Africans crossed the Middle Passage and landed in Cuba. The remarkable overlap between the Yoruba 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. The resulting transcultural religious system of Santería has become central to Cuban life and culture.

Eleggua is a paradoxical figure that embodies opposites: openings and closings, life and death, light and dark, day and night. Most importantly in this context, he is the guardian of the threshold; he opens doors and paves the way for *aché* (spiritual power). Here, Choco does not present Eleggua as a syncretized Catholic saint, often the Holy Child of Atocha, but as a mass-produced, popular devotional object: a hollow stone in the shape of a head with a cement outer layer and cowrie shells evoking facial features (see below). Believers place Eleggua on a shallow clay dish behind the door to guard the entryway.



David Marquina Reyes, *Eleggua*, 2010



Detrás de la ventana
(Behind the Window)

Collagraph

Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

Choco is well known as a master of collagraphy, a collage printmaking technique. The process starts with a plate or thick piece of wood or cardboard. Then, the artist arranges and adheres a variety of materials to the surface, allows it to dry, and coats it with a varnish or similar material to preserve it. The resulting plate is then inked and pressed.

Choco's selection of materials adds layers of cultural meaning to his works. In *Behind the Window*, for example, two pieces of wood enclose a conventional weave cane known for its durability and use in customary domestic items like chairs. As the figure peers out the window, his or her view outside -- and our view inside -- is obscured by the substantial but porous screen. Choco's use of this widespread material acknowledges that our view of the world is framed by ordinary objects that are so familiar to us that they go unnoticed.



Empujando el muro
(Pushing the Wall)

Collagraph

Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

Choco selects a piece of wood, incised with seemingly erratic but controlled graphic lines, to serve as the titular subject in *Pushing the Wall*. The figure, fully penned between two barriers, appears to be leveraging the partition behind him to lunge against the overwhelming obstruction. However, it is unclear how much effort he is exerting, thereby posing a question as to whether or not it is possible to surmount our material realities.



Siete Potencias (Seven Powers)

Collagraph

Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

Reminiscent of a traditional African funerary pole, Choco presents an elongated figure with a long neck and head carved from a single piece of wood (see below). It stands in honor of the Seven Powers, or the ancestral spirits of the seven different African tribes brought to Cuba and forced into slavery: the Yoruba, Congo, Takua, Kissi, Calabar, Arará, and Mandika.

Incised in the wood is a *firma* (signature) that forms a cross. The bottom half contains an arrow pointing upward with zigzags traversing it. It signals the path followed by the ancestral guides from the land of the spirits to the land of the living. Far from marking a final resting place for the dead, then, *Seven Powers* underscores the continued presence of African influences in contemporary Cuban life.



Konso, *Waga Grave Marker*, 19th century.
Wood, metal, 52 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 3 1/4 in.
Brooklyn Museum,
Gift of Serge and Jodie Becker-Patterson,
2000.94.4.



El abrazo (The Embrace), 2014
Collagraph
Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

In *The Embrace*, a man and woman are locked in one another's arms, tied together by the impression of braided rope outlining their bodies. The texture of the print and the presence of a cigar wrapper in the woman's lips add touch, smell, and taste to the apparently sensual scene. Despite their physical closeness, the relationship between them is far from intimate. Their lack of eye contact and vacant expressions suggest this embrace may not be erotic, but rather consoling or, perhaps, unwanted.



Juego con la luna (I Play with the Moon), 1996

Collagraph

Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

The austere composition dramatizes the relationship between the crescent moon above and the tightly enclosed figure below. The moon announces the presence of Yemayá, the mother of all living things, ruler of the seas, and symbol of mature womanhood; and/or Ochún, the spirit of love, rivers, sensuality, and fertility. Given the collagraph's title, the moon likely represents Ochún because of her flirtatious nature. The generalized male figure, wedged in a box, looks longingly at the beautiful and seductive *orisha*, often associated with Venus and Aphrodite.



La gran piedra (The Great Stone)
Collagraph

Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

While devoid of specific religious references, the scene alludes to Christ's resurrection. A male figure is encased in a wooden circle shaped like a stone. He looks upward with his arms crossed over his chest. On first glance, he appears entombed. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that he is standing on the base of his wooden container, the one foot jutting outside to support his weight.

Choco embeds tobacco labels in the figure's head and chest, their images clearly visible through the paint. By relating the figure to tobacco production and iconic Cuban exports, the artist calls attention to the centrality of black labor in the Cuban economy, and, at the same time, questions its cultural consequences.



Mujer con piña (Woman with Pineapple), 2001

Collagraph

Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

Choco personifies the Cuban landscape in *Woman with Pineapple*. The reclining woman lies on a bed of lace in the shape of the island, its texture suggesting the geography and topography of the nation (see below). A ripe pineapple, standing in place of Havana, signifies hospitality. The worldwide demand for the fruit, as well as its associations with Cuban nightlife, underscore how nature, economic production, tourism, and the Afro-Cuban experience are inextricably intertwined on the island.



United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Locator Map of Cuba*, 2013.

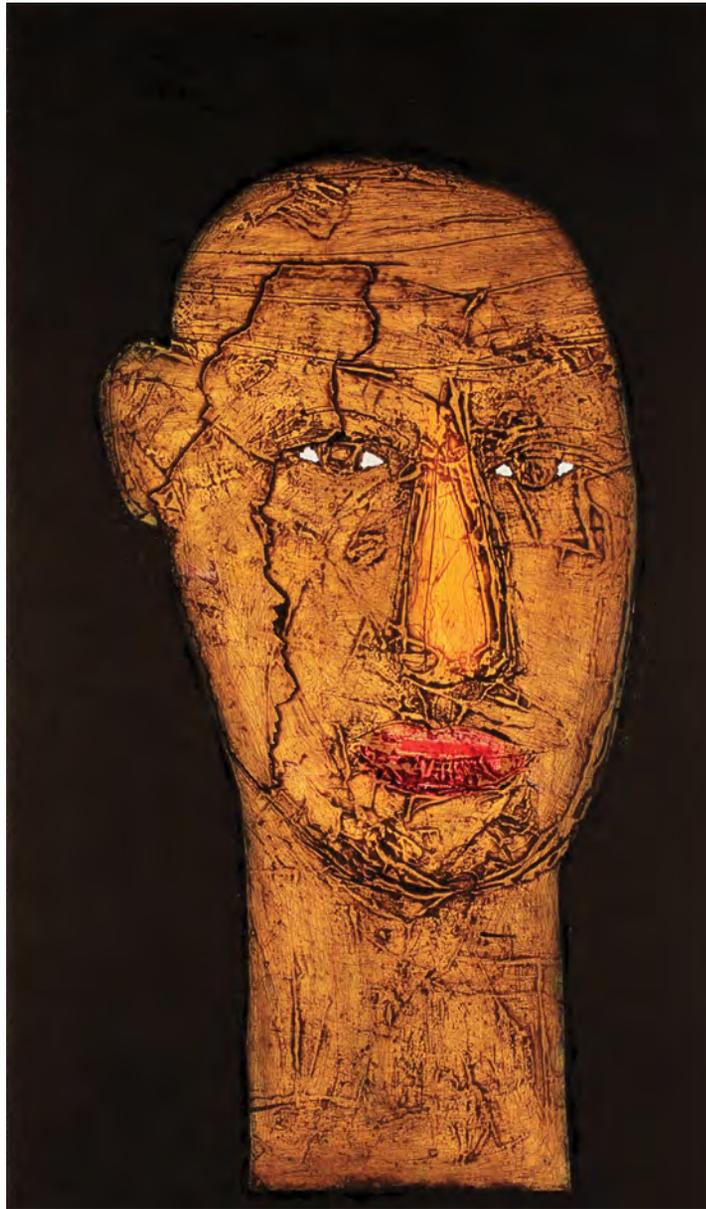


Juego de cabezas III (Head Game III), 2013

Collagraph

Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

Choco reduces the figure in *Head Games III* to primary, geometric elements: an oval head rests perpendicularly on a rectangular neck. The darkness of the subject, whose facial features are defined by decisive yet fluid lines, contrasts sharply with the light background. The collagraph's apparent directness is deceptive, however, since the figure is nearly impossible to engage. The unnatural angle of the head requires viewers to crane their necks to meet the subject's gaze. Even then, the figure appears to look beyond the beholder, as if lost in thought.



Untitled
Collagraph

Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

In *Untitled*, a male figure with recognizably African traits emerges from a dark background. As in many of his collagraphs, Choco implants remnants of mass culture in the print; in this case, a cigar label on the figure's lips (see below).

When Cuba became a Spanish colony in 1511, European settlers quickly established tobacco plantations. Spain finally permitted free trade between the island and the rest of the world in the early nineteenth century, and small and large Cuban firms competed for the market. They used enslaved labor, until it was abolished in 1886, and mass-produced labels to advertise their brands. When Castro seized power, 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.



Christopher Braun, *Habanos S.A: Romeo y Julieta*, 2010.



Untitled, 2001

Collagraph

Lent by Latin Art Space, LLC

Choco presents a conflation of the particular and the universal in this larger-than-life sized portrait. As the figure lifts his arms in a position of praise or petition, his elbows and fingers extend beyond the frame. The subject's refusal to be physically contained echoes his transcultural physiognomy. While elements of the figure's facial features suggest an Afro-Cuban heritage, others point to the artist's characterization of the "universal man." "The person I paint has no particular skin color or profile," he told Cuban art critic David Mateo. "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."¹

1. "Two Roles, One View Point: Interview with Cuban Art Critic, David Mateo, 10/2010," *AfroCubaWeb*, accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/choco/Choco.htm>.

INSTALLATION



Born to rural farm workers in Santiago de Cuba, Choco seized the opportunity to study art at Havana's National School of Art, a school established by Fidel Castro's revolutionary government less than a decade earlier. After graduating in 1970, he pursued an advanced degree in social work in his native Santiago and returned to his roots in the Cuban countryside. Choco's familiarity with rural and urban life, identification with physical labor and the arts, and status as Afro-Cuban within a racial hierarchy that privileges white skin gives him both an insider and outsider's perspective on Cuban life.

Choco describes himself as a socialist artist. His early work celebrated the campesinos (agricultural workers) and the rural landscape; it embraced the revolutionary spirit of the 1970s and put him in the vanguard of the epic-rural movement in painting. His work reached a much broader and international audience in the 1980s and 90s. Art became an important form of cultural exchange for Cuba, and Choco was one of the first artists invited to exhibit his work in the United States after the revolution. His work also became associated with the black consciousness movement, institutionalized in the visual arts by the Grupo Antillano in the 1980s. Ultimately, Choco's exploration and mastery of collagraphy, a technique he considers a "reaffirmation" of Cuban life, has earned him the most recognition and critical acclaim.

This exhibition showcases Choco's collagraphs from the past decade. While many works appear to represent a particular subject, closer inspection reveals their universality. "When I paint, I don't think in terms of white, mulatto, black or Chinese," he told critic Miguel Barnet. "The person I portray has body, limbs, soul, heart, grey matter." Choco's depictions of "biological, universal" humanity are nonetheless rooted in his personal experience as an Afro-Cuban man and conveyed through the materiality of his works. He consistently recycles discarded remnants of mass culture in his collagraphs, bringing his works historical specificity and continued relevance.



Informational text label for the artwork on the left.



Eduardo "Choco" Roca Salazar: Portraits of a People





Small informational label.



Small informational label.



Small informational label.

