

MANUEL MENDIVE: AGUAS CLARAS, AGUAS TURBIAS

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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.







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Born in Havana in 1944, Mendive was raised with a deep awareness of his Afro-Cuban roots through his practice of Santería, a transcultural religious system that combines Yoruba and Roman Catholic beliefs and practices. After graduating from the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts in 1963, Mendive decided not to acquiesce to the Western trends that influenced the work of his peers. Rather, he sought to establish an aesthetic philosophy that reconciled those models with Yoruba religious principles and Cuban popular culture.¹

Inspired by the work of Wifredo Lam, the internationally celebrated Cuban avant-garde artist who introduced Afro-Cuban themes into his paintings in the 1940s and 1950s, Mendive made the *orishas* (spiritual beings) and *patakis* (sacred stories) of Afro-Cuban religions the focus of his art.² Unlike Lam, his works do not broach the threshold of cultural appropriation. Instead, as art historian Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz writes, they "[challenge] the paradoxical use of cultural images in the absence of a true understanding of the culture so appropriated." Indeed, viewers respond differently to Medive's work depending on their degree of immersion in Cuban popular culture and their knowledge of and participation in Afro-Cuban religious practices. By asserting the importance of cultural context in the interpretation of contemporary art, Mendive posits a sharp critique of Western Modernism.

This exhibition displays a selection of Mendive's mature works that integrate the visual and materials cultures of Afro-Cuban religions. He removes figures and objects from their familiar settings and relocates them in magical worlds, ruled by perceptual illusions that set them in motion. Human beings, divinities, and the natural world are never separate, but rather interwoven in a state of constant metamorphosis. Mendive's iconography visualizes the cosmic transformations at the heart of Yoruba mythology and his materials, like cowry shells and iron, serve as conduits to *ashé* (spiritual power). Far from religious illustrations, Mendive's ritualistic artworks provide entry into the spirit world.

^{1.} For an introduction to Mendive's body of work, see: Gerardo Mosquera, Exploraciones en la plastica cubana (Explorations into Cuban Art) (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1983): 232-245; the exhibition catalog, Things That Cannot Be Seen in Any Other Way: The Art of Manuel Mendive (Miami, FL: Florida International University, 2013); and the compendium of artworks, personal writings, and critical essays selected by Isabel Hernández Martínez and Alexander González Carbó, Mendive (La Habana: Collage Ediciones, 2015).

^{2.} Guillermina Ramos Cruz, "Tribute to the *Grupo Antillano*" in *Grupo Antillano*: The Art of Afro-Cuba, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 25.

^{3.} Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, "Things That Cannot Be Seen Any Other Way: The Art of Manuel Mendive" in *Things That Cannot Be Seen in Any Other Way: The Art of Manuel Mendive* (Miami, FL: Florida International University, 2013): 12, 27.



¿Por qué no me respondes? (Why don't you answer me?), 2014 Acrylic on Cloth Lent by the Artist

Mendive's work visualizes the Yoruba cosmology at the heart of Afro-Cuban religions. He combines the verbal tradition of *patakis*, sacred stories about the lives of the *orishas*, with the iconography of Santería devotional practices. Cuban art critic, Gerardo Mosquera, contends that "the inner presence of African consciousness determines [the] content, language, and direction" of Mendive's art to such an extent that they become one and the same.¹

Familiarity with Mendive's visual language facilitates the viewer's interpretation of *Why don't you answer me?*² Many of the symbols employed in the composition point to a juncture: the three-breasted woman at the center signifies a crossroads, while the chick in the bottom corner references Eleggua, the guardian of the threshold. The prominence of human-bird forms, which signal exchange between the material and spiritual worlds, suggest that the figures in the painting are petitioning for guidance as they determine which path to follow.

1. Gerardo Mosquera, "Africa in the Arts of Latin America," Art Journal 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 35
2. On Yoruba iconography and its relationship to Mendive's visual language, see: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, "Things That Cannot Be Seen Any Other Way: The Art of Manuel Mendive" in Things That Cannot Be Seen in Any Other Way: The Art of Manuel Mendive (Miami, FL: Florida International University, 2013): 19-20.







De la serie de Aguas claras, aguas turbias (From the Clear Waters and Murky Waters Series), 2012 Tempera on paper Lent by the Artist

Water is a central motif in Mendive's body of work, evoking purification, memories, unrealized dreams, and tears. Each painting in the series features an *orisha*: Orunmila, the patron of divination, appears as a turtle; Yemayá, the mother of all living things, as a fish; and Eleggua, the god of the crossroads, as a hen. Set in ambiguous, somewhat unsettling environments and surrounded by human-bird forms that reference conversations between this world and the next, the *orishas* do not provide direction. Rather, the figures appear to flounder in the murky waters of uncertainty.

1. For an introduction to Mendive's visual language, see: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, "Things That Cannot Be Seen Any Other Way: The Art of Manuel Mendive" in Things That Cannot Be Seen in Any Other Way: The Art of Manuel Mendive (Miami, FL: Florida International University, 2013): 19-20.











De la serie Paños (From the Cloth Series), 2013 Acrylic on cloth Lent by the Artist

The banner form employed by Mendive in this series references Western and African traditions as well as popular religious processions held in Cuba. By encompassing all three influences, Mendive achieves a mixture that the Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, might have characterized as authentic *cubanidad* (Cubanness). In 1940, Ortiz famously used the culinary metaphor of *ajiaco*, a Cuban stew made from indigenous, African, and Spanish ingredients, to describe the "*mestizaje* of races, *mestizaje* of cultures" that compose Cuban identity.¹

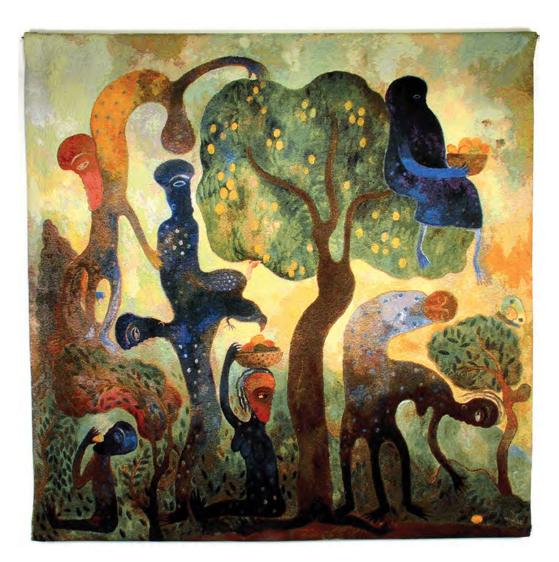
Mendive's elongated, trapezoidal banners are framed by a basic whipstitch. He blends acrylic paint on a twill weave fabric to create a watercolor effect in the background. Undulating white painted lines along with green satin stitching create a textured surface and establish distinct visual bands. These layers of waves are interspersed with hybrid forms and veins of dots, often used by the artist to indicate a spiritual presence and the transformative power of the *orishas*. Beads, some painted and some bare, highlight particular features of the birdfish-human forms, most often the faces. When presented next to one another, the banners generate vertical and horizontal movement and invite the viewer into this protean world.

1. Fernando Ortiz, "The Human Factors of Cubanidad," *Revista Bimestre Cubana* (1940), translated from the Spanish by João Felipe Gonçalves and Gregory Duff Morton and reprinted in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 4*, no. 3 (2014), accessed April 19, 2016, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14318/hau4.3.031.



Puedo soñar (I Can Dream), 2009 Acrylic on canvas Lent by the Artist

To create I Can Dream, Mendive stretched canvas onto a frame made from rebar and then laced them together with a cross whipstitch. Cowrie shells, sewn to the surface with the same kind of string, embellish the heads or bodies of certain figures. Thin threads embedded in the paint call attention to the face of the hybrid form in the center of the composition. The resulting tension between the raw materials used to manufacture the work and the otherworldly scene painted on the canvas captures the challenge of integrating the material and spiritual realms. While a bird flies free in the upper right corner, the other figures remain tethered to the earth or reach for the sky, perhaps dreaming of their own emancipation.



Serie Árbol del mango II (Series: Tree of Mango II), 2013 Number 1 of 3 Jacquard Weaving Lent by the Artist

Tree of Mango II blends the legacy of nineteenth-century jacquard weaving techniques with twenty-first century technology and Mendive's cosmological vision. It unites French textile history, Belgium computer-driven looms, and Afro-Cuban religious traditions. This work, produced as part of the Magnolia Tapestry Project, translates Mendive's organic artistic process into an electronic weave file and his fluid, hybrid forms into repeating patterns of warp and weft threads. The apparent tensions are resolved through color. Jacquard weaving allows for the creation of over three thousand color swatches, and their optical blending produces a visual sensation similar to that created by Mendive's paintings. In their interaction, Mendive merges his magical world with the global economy.





Serie El espiritú, la naturaleza y el cuerpo (Series: The Spirit, Nature and the Body), 2015 Acrylic on cloth Lent by the Artist

The Spirit, Nature, and the Body series employs Mendive's signature iconography: humans, birds, flora, and fauna interacting in a state of constant metamorphosis. While the artist describes his paintings as extensions of his beliefs that stimulate larger discussions about life, death, good, and evil, they engender social commentary as well. For example, Mendive's belief in the oneness of the spiritual, natural, and human worlds becomes more direct in these paintings, and he acknowledges that his concerns about the environment and global unrest transform his recent stories into warnings.

In addition, the simple fact that Mendive employs Afro-Cuban subject matter makes his art revolutionary. His decision to focus on Afro-Cuban history and culture in the 1960s coincided with a revival of interest in black culture among Cuban intellectuals and artists. After individual explorations became formalized in the Grupo Antillano, a black consciousness collective, in 1978, Mendive was invited to join and quickly became an active member. As Cuban art critic Guillermina Ramos Cruz notes, Mendive's early embrace of Afro-Cuban history opened "the possibility for other artists to approach Afro-Cuban cultural themes with originality, authenticity, and profound artistic renewal."1

1. Guillermina Ramos Cruz, "Tribute to the *Grupo Antillano*" in *Grupo Antillano*: The Art of Afro-Cuba, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 26. For a discussion of the *Group Antillano*'s place in Cuban art history, see Judith Bettelheim's "*Grupo Antillano*, Revisited" and de la Fuente's "Drapetomania: *Grupo Antillano* and Cultural Cimarronaje" in the same volume.





Ellos meditan (They Contemplate), 2015

Acrylic on cloth Lent by the Artist

Conversando (Talking), 2015 Acrylic on cloth Lent by the Artist

One year before painting They Contemplate and Talking, Mendive said through an interpreter: "I am a Santero, I am a storyteller, I am a believer - these are my spirits." His sentiment echoed the Cuban poet Nancy Morejón's description of his pictures as embodied myths.² In both these works, however, Mendive appears to go beyond storytelling to model religious practice. In They Contemplate, the artist represents a number of figures looking attentively at the world and themselves. In Talking, he pictures a kneeling figure beseeching a central form that bows its head in return. By pairing seeing and meditating, speaking and listening, Mendive affirms and advocates for the communion of inspection and introspection.

- 1. Carol Damian, interview with Margery Gordon, January 14, 2014, unpublished. Qtd. in Margery Gordon, "Spirit World: Manuel Mendive Summons Afro-Cuban Mythology," *Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum Frost Art Museum*, press release posted April 6, 2014, accessed April 5, 2016, https://thefrost.fiu.edu/about/press-room/index.html.
- 2. Morejón quoted by Gerardo Mosquera in *Grupo Antillano: The Art of Afro-Cuba*, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 269.



Puedo soñar (I Can Dream),2009 Mixed Media Lent by the Artist

In *I Can Dream*, Mendive fabricates a two-dimensional sculpture by stretching canvas across a rebar frame that outlines the larger-than-life figures. He uses appliqué and swirling strands of string to create dimension and movement in the trio of hybrid forms on the right. Cowrie shells add more texture to the surface and create a relationship between them and the three-headed and winged bird on the left. Their union is soldered in place by a small bronze entity presented in profile.

This drama unfolds above and behind the human figure, who sits with its eyes closed between two trees in the lower left corner. Mendive emphasizes the dream's spiritual power through the use of his signature iconography as well as materials associated with particular *orishas*. The prominence of the bird who stands on the sleeping figure's head while stretching its wings to fly intimates that dreams are never disconnected from the material world; they allow people to transcend it.

INSTALLATION











