SPIRIT WORLD
Manuel Mendive Summons
Afro-Cuban Mythology

MARGERY GORDON
The works of Manuel Mendive conjure enchanted lands where the trees have eyes, the fish sprout human heads and limbs, and the people spread wings and fly. Freed from mundane limitations, these hybrid inhabitants evoke the intertwined fates of mankind and nature, imparting a symbiotic message that transcends the picture plane.

Two overlapping exhibitions in Miami this winter ushered in the Afro-Cuban master’s 70th birthday with immersion in the universal harmony Mendive imagines in shifting shapes, vivid pigments and mystical embellishments. An enlightening thematic retrospective at the Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum at Florida International University (FIU) was complemented by a showcase at Cernuda Arte, a gallery in nearby Coral Gables that specializes in Cuban art, centered on a trove of dreamscapes that mark a high point in Mendive’s oeuvre. Whether or not audiences embrace his elemental philosophy and spiritual morality, the originality of his artistic vision is as undeniable as its expression is unmistakable – a phenomenon framed by the fitting title of the museum exhibition, Things That Cannot Be Seen Any Other Way.

Spanning a career that has already endured 50 years, it is the first retrospective in the U.S. to focus on Mendive’s exploration of the belief systems and visual culture of Lucumi, the religion adapted by his ancestors from Yoruba traditions rooted in West Africa. Organized by Fundación Amistad, the exhibition was on view at the Frost Museum from November 2013 to January 2014 following the sixth-month run of an expanded version at the California African American Museum (CAAM) in Los Angeles that opened in April, 2013. Curator Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, director of the Orbis Africa Advanced Research Center of the Department of Art & Art History at Stanford University (and himself an Afro-Cuban native), decoded the Yoruba symbolism in Mendive’s imagery, the evolution of his signature style, and the impact his elevation of Afro-Cuban culture has had on Cuban art and society at large.

Martínez-Ruiz grounded his analysis in a conventional foundation by first establishing how Mendive’s formal education at San Alejandro Academy, the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes in suburban Havana, prepared him to render a marginalized aspect of cultural heritage as an art form. This chronological approach was designed to dispel any lingering dismissiveness among the public that characterized his art as naïve, vernacular and overeagerly exploitative of a primitive and pseudo-religious sensibility. Although the cluster of childhood drawings and student sketches – promising but hardly remarkable – made an underwhelming point of entry, they were strategically positioned to legitimize and contextualize the distinctive voice then yet to emerge. “Many of the unfinished drawings Mendive made before and during his academic schooling highlight his unique location between an Afro-Cuban sensibility not yet elevated to the realm of ‘art,’ but rather registered as a form of popular culture, folklore or popular painting, and an academic training oriented wholly towards Western ideals of art.”

The young Mendive’s stylistic sampling of artistic traditions from diverse cultures reveal the search for his own voice as he digested the first of numerous visits to Africa. The 1970s series Tale of the Golden Age contrasts with his mature works in its tighter, more sharply delineated compositions inked in tempera on modestly scaled sheets of paper. The denser stippling and decorative patterning of these early works connects the dots to the looser smattering he has consistently dabbed on canvases, sculptures and live bodies for decades. Explained Carol Damian, Director and Chief Curator of the Frost Museum, “He often uses dots to indicate a spiritual presence and the transformative powers associated with the gods and their earthly helpers (shamans, possessed, initiates) and to mimic the patterns of body painting, scarification, beadwork and African cloths, as well as the pelt markings of the great felines of Benin.”

This dynamic energy becomes more pronounced on canvases and sculptures studded with cowry shells, once used for currency in Africa as well as for divination in Santería – a syncretic form of Yoruba developed in the Caribbean by slaves whose clandestine observance under religious suppression necessitated masking their deities, called orishas, as Catholic saints. Mendive’s ornamentation with ritualistic referents encompasses the stuffed cloth shapes he has stitched to the surface of wall hangings, embedded in mixed-media sculptures, and singled out to softly dangle or cast in bronze that retains an impression of the woven fibers for an unusual texture. His striking hammered metal silhouettes – which form a frieze atop the 2010 hanging canvas Compartir (Share) and play off plumage spurtng from the towering assemblage Energías vitales (Vital Powers), sculpted the same year, that commands the center of the Frost exhibition – honor centuries of Yoruba craftsmanship.

The cross-pollination of material culture and ceremonial customs in the African diaspora provides a wealth of indigenous and assimilative sources that Mendive - an initiated descendant of santeros, Yoruban priests - has further adapted into a personalized lexicon. An inherited iconography of flora, fauna and atmospheric phenomena animate the pantheon of orishas and their counterparts among practitioners, whereas human postures and activities signify specific religious experiences and psychological states. Among Mendive’s favored images are the human-bird hybrids that these hybrid inhabitants evoke the intertwined fates of mankind and nature, imparting a symbiotic message that transcends the picture plane.

At the Fin de Siècle exhibition he performed a ritualistic dance to summon the orishas and regale their earthly representatives, the Yoruba spirit mediums, with a caffeinated concoction created from his paintings. Among the numerous sculptural ensembles that commands the center of the Frost exhibition – honor centuries of Yoruba craftsmanship.

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Formas Fluidas (Fluid Forms), 1991
Pastel on heavy paper lay down on board
22 ¼ x 30 inches
Courtesy of Cernuda Arte
Among Mendive’s favored images are the human-bird hybrids that exchange messages between realms and connect with the divine, as well as underwater amalgams that appease and exalt the dominant deities of the sea.

Mendive breathed new life into the primordial power of the waters with Homenaje a Las Aguas, the latest of the group performances he has conceived and directed since the early eighties, painting bodies and molding masks to activate the tableau of his static objects. In a site-specific procession, a dancer schooled in Mendive’s repertoire led hand-painted student volunteers as they cut a tributary across the FIU campus. It concluded in front of the museum where Mendive – a shamanic presence in his self-styled uniform of white tunic and pants – presented the Frost with Aguas del Río, a new life-sized bronze statue capped with a fish offering.

Among the most captivating works in the retrospective are a dozen loaned to the Frost (from a total of 20 shown in its antecedent at CAAM) by Ramón and Nercys Cernuda. The Cuban émigrés’ hung their remaining Mendive holdings concurrently at their eponymous Miami gallery to set off the sublime paintings and pastel drawings from 1989-90 consigned this fall from a private collection in Italy. The lush tones and sinuous strokes of waves and foliage mingle with fluid beings, entrancing the eye and mind in murky waters, moonlit forests and sun-dappled groves where seekers wrestle and commune with the gods. They epitomize the extent to which Mendive stylizes and dramatizes his fantastical creatures – bending and stretching bodies, multiplying appendages and extending chins – to serve aesthetic and narrative ends.
The meditative mood of this series shows a more suggestive side of Mendive’s storytelling in comparison to the relatively lucid legends, continuing the oral history of Yoruban *patakí*, conveyed through the later works alongside that serve as an instructive counterpoint. The vast 2007 canvas *Dinner at Sunset* depicts an Afro-Cuban slave family at suppertime, savoring the treasured respite after a long, laborious day in the fields, as they share scraps of food with the animals and spirits that could only emerge at nightfall. A darker reality drives the 2002 *Travesía, Barco Negrero* (Journey, Slave Ship), hewn from the hollowed and painted trunk of a sacred Royal Palm commandeered by a white-faced wooden master, their weight borne by a half-dozen bent-metal Africans beneath.6

While colonial history and zoomorphic symbolism assist in interpreting Mendive’s allegories, they are not intended to be translated too literally, but rather impart a message open to the audience’s interpretation. Damian recalled an exchange with Mendive in the Frost exhibition when he responded to inquiries about particular pictorial elements by indicating that some decisions are driven more by formal than ideological considerations. As he relayed through an interpreter, “I am who I am. I am a Santero, I am a storyteller, I am a believer - these are my spirits - but I couldn’t do this if I wasn’t an artist.”7

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