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Tropical Excess:

CARIBBEAN ART & THE BAROQUE

MUCH THEORETICAL AND CRITICAL WRITING ON CARIBBEAN AND LATIN American culture has been devoted to the controversial equation of its artistic practices with the fantastic or magical realism. By comparison, Anglo-American scholarship has barely discussed Caribbean and Latin American art in relation to the concept of the baroque. This is especially regrettable considering the centrality of this notion within Caribbean, and particularly Cuban art criticism.

My presentation today will revisit the concept of the baroque as it has been theorized by prominent Cuban writers such as Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, and Severo Sarduy in connection to twentieth century Caribbean art. To these authors the term baroque designates not only the art produced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but rather it defines an ahistorical and continuous aesthetic impulse towards polyphony, heterogeneity, dialogism, textual density, and decorative excess. In their writings the stylistic traits of the baroque become a means to assert and elaborate a Latin American, and more specifically a Caribbean identity.

Alejo Carpentier was among the most vocal proponents of reading Latin American culture through the prism of the baroque. He envisioned the baroque as a constant of Latin American identity that could be traced to its remotest past. In the eyes of Carpentier, Pre-Columbian architecture, sculpture, and manuscript painting already exhibit a preference for baroque surfaces replete with curves and profuse ornamentation. How could it be otherwise, he argues, given the exuberance and overwhelming sensuality of the tropics. According to this view, the Americas, rather than Europe, should be regarded as the privileged site of the baroque.

Under Iberian colonial rule the inhabitants of Latin America participated in an unprecedented process of racial, religious, and cultural fusion or *mestizaje*. And indeed, during much of this period the arts attained an unusual vigor and inventiveness, coinciding with the stylistic movement known in Europe as the Baroque. Although this style was imported from Europe, novelist and essayist José Lezama Lima reclaimed the baroque as *cosa nuestra*, the property of the peoples of the Americas, and the quintessential American mode of expression, to borrow the title of his famous essay.

Instead of regarding the Latin American baroque art as a style imposed upon the oppressed

indigenous peoples by the Spanish colonizers, Lezama envisioned it as a synthetic art, born out of the merging of the European and the autochthonous, wherein the latter had the upper hand. This process of *mestizaje* rendered itself visible in the ornate stone facades and richly decorated interiors of cathedrals, convents, hospitals, and palaces.

Instead of partaking of the reactionary or obscurantist tendencies of its European paragon, the Latin American baroque embodied for Lezama a liberatory investment and transformation of the dominant culture with the irrepressible force of an indigenous pantheistic vision. In the process, the Latin American baroque artist enacted a counterconquest, an underhand operation capable of overriding and vanquishing the rationality of European culture with its sheer formal excess and the luxurious, sensual appeal of materials that celebrated the continent's abundant natural resources.

Lezama saw this playfully subversive syncretism best reflected in the work of the seventeenth-century mason and craftsman Kondori, a Peruvian Indian, and in the churches of eighteenth-century Brazilian architect and sculptor Aleijandinho. Kondori surreptitiously introduced Indian faces, native flora and fauna, and Inca symbols among the lush foliage, classical columns, and mythological creatures crowding the facades of his buildings. In Kondori's art classical European forms and local Inca iconography meet on equal grounds. Aleijandinho, a mulatto, performed a similar leveling of foreign and local artistic idioms, but this time impregnating Western forms with African influences. In Lezama's view these two native undercurrents, the Africanist and the Indian, constitute the main tributaries of Latin America's flamboyant baroque.

Within the syncretism intrinsic to the Latin American baroque, by means of which Western styles evolved into something genuinely American, Lezama discerned the genesis of a Latin American identity that would blossom into the independence movements of the early 1800s. The artistic *mestizaje* practiced by the likes of Kondori and Aleijandinho heralded the syncretic practices of twentieth-century avant-garde artists all over Latin America, constituting a precedent for the hybridity that authors such as Nestor García Canclini and Gerardo Mosquera have ascribed to the contemporary artistic practices of postmodernism.

Looking at the art of their contemporaries, Carpentier and Lezama saw no solution of continuity between the formal intricacy and excess of the Latin American baroque and the paintings of Amelia Pelaez and René Portocarrero, leading figures of Cuba's modernism. Both of these artists achieved a synthesis of European avant-garde languages and native themes and motifs that was construed at the time as part of a larger endeavor to forge a national cultural identity. As such, Pelaez and Portocarrero revised and updated the cultural processes of *mestizaje* and syncretism that had shaped and created a post-colonial Latin America. Carpentier and Lezama understood these artists' recourse to a baroque visual language in relation to their social and cultural spheres, the physical presence of nature, and the impact of local artistic traditions.

Amelia Pelaez (1896-1968) is usually regarded as the most important Cuban artist working with

the innovations of the European avant-garde. Having trained in her native Cuba under the tutelage of late Impressionist painter Leopoldo Romañach, Pelaez came into first-hand contact with European modernism over the course of a seven-year sojourn in Paris, from 1927 to 1934. She especially gravitated towards Cubism, particularly the work of Picasso and Juan Gris, although Alexandra Exter, a Russian painter and set designer interested in Constructivism and Futurism, appears to have been an equally important influence through her classes at the Academie Moderne. Upon her return to Cuba, Pelaez quickly developed her personal style, coming into her own as an artist in the 1940s.

Pelaez absorbed from Cubism the convention of laying out a geometric structure and the rendering of objects and spaces from multiple points of view. Her pictures displayed fruits or fish seen from above, sideways, and below, resting on plates or tables tilted forward. Yet this simplified geometric structure vied with a penchant for increasingly complex arabesque lines, overwrought compositions, and bright colors.

Pelaez's decorative urge and vocabulary of formal motifs have been linked to the design and ornamentation of colonial Cuban architecture. After her return from Paris, Pelaez spent the remainder of her life living with her mother and sisters in a turn-of-the-century colonial house in the residential neighborhood of La Víbora on the outskirts of Havana. Like other upper-class districts of Havana built immediately before or after Cuba's independence, La Víbora contained exquisite homes designed in the eclectic classicism of the Beaux Arts tradition or the sinuous, organic shapes of Art Nouveau. Thus the frequent curvilinear shapes in her paintings seemingly recall the grilled ironwork of balconies and windows, while the bright colors enclosed by thick black contours are reminiscent of the stained glass windows and fanlights that filtered the heat and harsh Caribbean light. These formal references, as well as the tropical subject matter and its baroque, decorative rendering, have been read as signs of Cubanness.

Pelaez rarely depicted the human figure; like her French counterparts, she evinced a preference for still life over portraiture or landscape painting. Nevertheless, there is an indelible presence of the feminine, not only in the evocation of domestic space, especially kitchens and gardens, but also in the tacit sexual connotations of the undulating tropical fruits, flowers, and birds. In addition to these signs of gender, Pelaez's paintings exhibit as well markers of class. The colonial spaces evoked in these works were the habitat of the creole bourgeoisie, the wellspring of Cuba's independence movement and fulcrum of its intellectual and artistic renaissance. Thus this highly decorative and self-contained pictorial style figured a specific Cuban identity, namely that of the primarily white, upper and middle classes who, up and until Castro's insurgency, had controlled Cuba's destiny and defined its cultural self-image.

The other Cuban painter that Lezama and Carpentier located within the realm of the baroque is René Portocarrero (1912-1985). A member of the circle of poets and writers assembled around

Lezama and the journal *Orígenes*, Portocarrero seems to have been essentially a self-taught artist. His first exhibitions date from the early to mid 1930s. Like the writings of the *Orígenes* group, Portocarrero's art has been construed as staking out a national identity through a pictorial language rooted in local cultural forms. Unlike Pelaez, Portocarrero covered a broad and varied range of themes: urban views, domestic interiors, images of the circus and carnival, and religious subjects, especially angels and popular saints. If Pelaez fixated on Cubism, Portocarrero drew from diverse sources. At times his work echoes Matisse, with whom he shared a preference for luminous color, a decorative line, and a taste for depicting the spaces of femininity; at other moments the influence of Wilfredo Lam, Paul Klee, or the Mexican muralists prevailed. What distinguishes Portocarrero's art is a quasi-expressionistic brushwork and the corruscating textural quality of his canvases.

In his own way Portocarrero is as stylized an artist as Pelaez, manifesting an equally keen eye for translating the quotidian into a rarefied world of profuse ornamentation. But if Pelaez offset her decorative bent with a rigorous feeling for structure, Portocarrero eschewed reality for an evocative world fashioned by memory and a kind of inner vision. In Portocarrero's painting entire surfaces radiate with the sensuality of the tropics in an intricate and luxuriant impasto that renders the presence of the human figure, as in Pelaez almost invariably female, nearly indistinguishable from its luxuriant surroundings (Lezama describes them as "prolongations of the house").

Art historian Narciso Menocal notes how the highly saturated surfaces of Portocarrero's canvases evoke the visual memory of interiors bathed in the patterns of colored light diffused through the stained glass panels of the *medio punto*. The latter is an architectural device consistent of geometrical patterns of large pieces of colored glass inserted into the semicircular area of an arched doorway. Lezama interpreted these lushly colored surfaces as visionary reminiscences of a childhood spent in the protective warmth of the colonial house.

Lezama and Carpentier also identified Portocarrero's baroque fusion of color, light, and gestural brushwork as a statement of Cuban cultural identity. Yet if these early paintings' metonymical references to colonial architecture once again posit a creole bourgeois identity, Portocarrero's work of the 1960s, the Carnival series, the series of Popular Saints, and perhaps most paradigmatically the Color of Cuba series, appeared to turn away from European high art and bourgeois culture towards popular and folkloric art forms, particularly the religious practices and imagery of Cuba's African population. Carpentier could now describe Portocarrero's painting as a unique celebration of the baroque spirit that traversed and informed Cuban popular culture: its dances, its music, its food, its very attitude towards life.

Under Castro's regime Portocarrero's painting took on an emblematic role in a revolutionary society that had catapulted to the fore subaltern expressions previously excluded, with the exception of Wilfredo Lam, from modern art discourses. As renowned Cuban critic Gerardo Mosquera has pointed out, Portocarrero's midcareer submersion into the Afro-Cuban experience signaled the

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recognition of a Cuban identity no longer solely based on its European component, but proudly aware of its African roots.

Twenty years earlier Wilfredo Lam had advanced a similar notion of the baroque in canvases like *The Jungle*, *Mofumba*, *What Does It Mean*, *Omi Obini*, all three from 1943, or *The Idol* (1944). Lam's *barroquismo* erupts in horror-vacui compositions of flowing, organic shapes —strange, hybrid creatures combining human, animal, and vegetal forms, generally regarded as depictions of the orishas or deities of the Afro-Cuban religion known as *santería*— set against shallow backgrounds of dense over-all tropical foliage and luminous colors.

Pelaez's cubist geometrical structures attempted to impose order and immobility on the profusion of organic forms and ornament, attaining a measure of balance between nature and culture that mirrored the creole's domestication and sublimation of the tropics into the decorative patterns of the colonial home. Conversely, Lam's paintings celebrated nature's rebellion and ultimate triumph over the rationality, functionalism, and repression of Western culture. The disruptive sexual energy found in nature, and contained by Pelaez's thick black contours and meticulous composition, explodes in Lam's painting into a promiscuous proliferation of breasts, buttocks, and phallic symbolism.

In its inventive fusion of surrealism, cubism, African tribal art, and *santería* imagery, Lam's painting, of course, realized the hybridity and syncretism that Lezama and Carpentier posited as the foundation of Caribbean identity. Although neither of these authors place Lam at the center of their arguments, from their perspectives his brand of the baroque, by virtue of its exuberant miscegenation of races, cultures, religions, and artistic languages, would constitute the most Caribbean expression of all.

