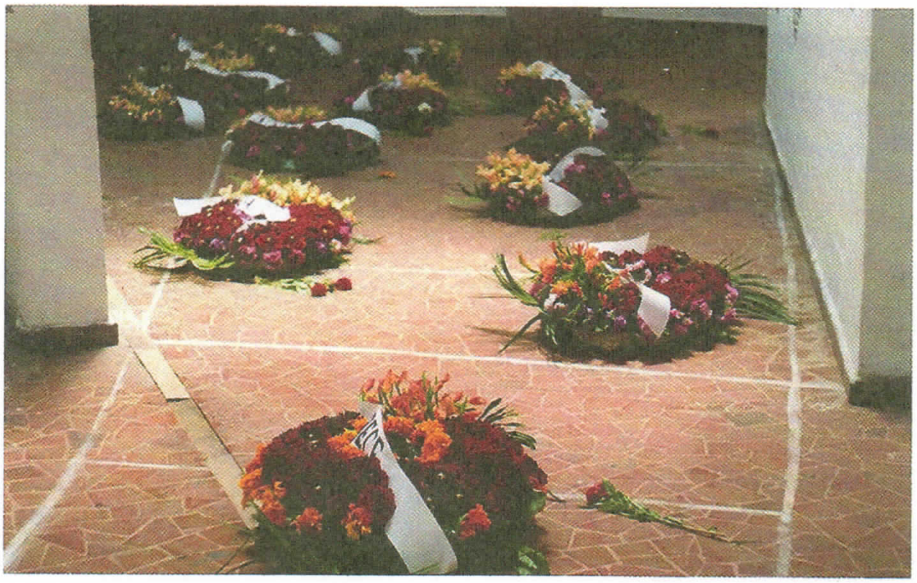
# Poetics and Utopia in Cuban Contemporary Sculpture



BY DENISE CARVALHO

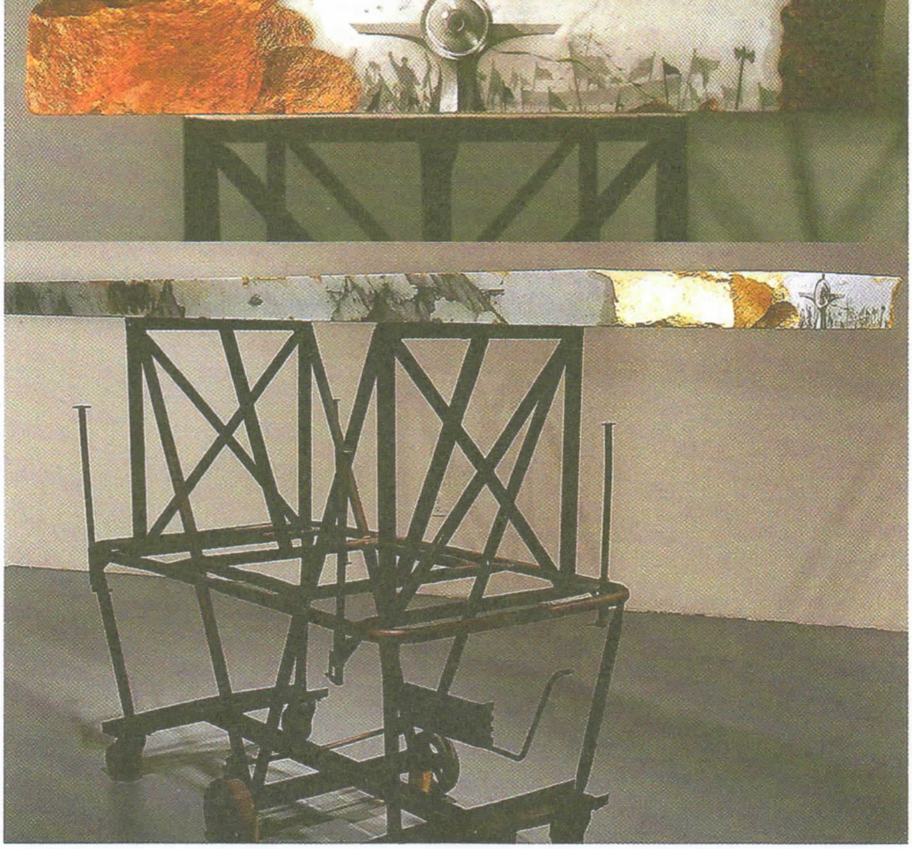
Recent exhibitions of Latin American and Caribbean contemporary art have fostered new interest in Cuban art. While the island nation may be isolated politically and economically, its art scene has kept the door open to international influences and exchange. Today, Cuban art raises questions about the meaning of socialist or socially contextual art in a post-socialist era, about its capacity to challenge the limitations of political ideologies, and about whether socially contextual art can be both critical and complacent.

As opposed to other Latin American and Caribbean art, Cuban contemporary art shifted from the influence of an "imperialist" importation of Modernist aesthetics to an art of the revolution, springing from a series of art historical discontinuities shaped by social and political conflicts. It went from a period of salonism in the 1970s to socially contextual art controlled and sponsored by governmental projects and ideologies in the early 1980s, to a period of ephemeral, undocumented art that subtly transgressed governmental ideologies in the late 1980s and early '90s, returning to more formalist ideas and processes with the influence of mainstream art in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Despite the government's socialist motivations and intentions, aesthetic ideas and processes were somewhat autonomous, which allowed artists to shed new light on topics such as revolution, utopia, globalization, collective effort, leisure, loss, exodus, migration, and displacement.

An unprecedented exhibition, "Volumen I" (1981), curated by Gerardo Mosquera, marked the more recent shifts in Cuban contemporary art, from which José Bedia, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, Leandro Soto, Gustavo Pérez Monzón, Juan Francisco Elso, and Flavio Garciandia emerged as leading influences of the next generation. The main idea behind this exhibition was the integration of Afro-Cuban religions and art, not in a folkloric way, but using conceptual ideas. Ana Mendieta's one and only visit to Cuba in 1981—after being exiled as a child through Operation Peter Pan—was also influential for the artists of that generation.

**Opposite: Ernesto Oroza, *Documental Decorativo (Decorative Documentary)*, 2005. Metal strainers, 150 x 300 cm. This page: Saidel Brito, *Thirteen*, 1995–2007. 13 flower crowns, installation view.**

**Right and detail: Glexis Novoa, *Landscape of Events (battering ram)*, 2003. Marble, graphite, gold leaf, and metal structure, 60 x 36 x 122 in.**



Juan Francisco Elso (1956–88) became a cult figure in the '80s for work that challenged the hypocrisy of the government and tackled the relationship between religion and politics. *Por América* (*For America*) portrays the poet and national hero José Martí as both a revolutionary and a saint in the Catholic tradition. Even though Catholicism has been connected to issues of imperial control, in Cuba, it is re-articulated through Afro-Cuban syncretic rituals in which dominant dogmas are recontextualized through less mediated psychic and cathartic expressions. Luis Gómez, a pupil of Elso and an important sculptor during the 1990s, shared his practice of Afro-Cuban religion, and after Elso's death in 1988, he continued the foundations of his work.

Artists such as Tomas Esson, Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas, and Glexis Novoa also used the sacred and the profane as a way of honoring artists and other martyrs of the revolution. The late 1980s was dominated by collaboration, particularly groups such as Puré, Provisional, Arte Calle (Street Art), Art-De (De: Derecho, Art-Right, Law), and Independent Group La Campana, which used conceptual and formal ideas to create socially critical installations and performances. Novoa's recent work addresses the game of power in a global arena. *Landscape of Events* (*battering ram*) (2003), for example, shows a marble slab as a war vehicle on wheels. The marble was taken from the Villa Casuarina, Gianni Versace's former mansion in South Beach. Random images of political parades, war, and terrorist acts juxtapose capitalist opulence with brutality and death.

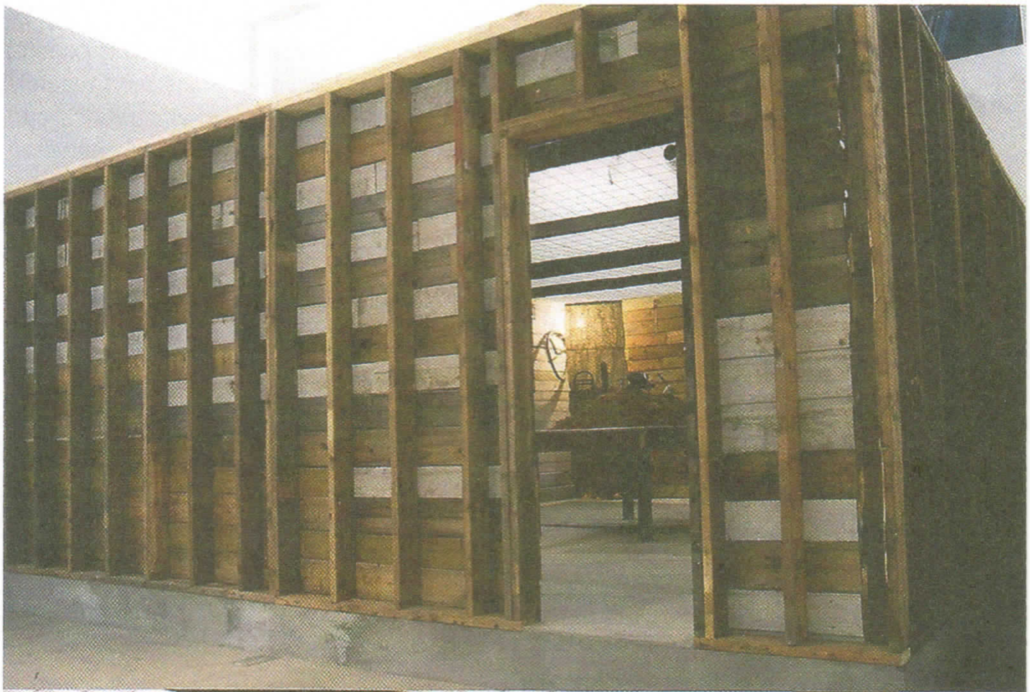
Throughout the last three generations, local artists' groups have created works that integrate sculpture with installation and performance. Lázaro Saavedra, from the '80s generation, was the initiator of ENEMA Collective (2000–03), one of the more recent groups, with 13 young artists as participants. As Cuban art historian and curator Yuneikys Villalonga writes in her catalogue essay for the Exit Art exhibition "Killing Time" (2007), "ENEMA proposes a methodology for the study of performance based on the collective interpretation of pieces in the history of art. Their projects evince an interesting critical commentary on mass phenomena." ENEMA uses parody as a strategy of subversion. *Jeans* (2001), a performance and installation, depicts members of the group bound together by their jeans. The work parodies a socialist ideal of collective effort, as well as the detachment associated with the laissez-faire attitude adopted by jeans-wearers in global culture.

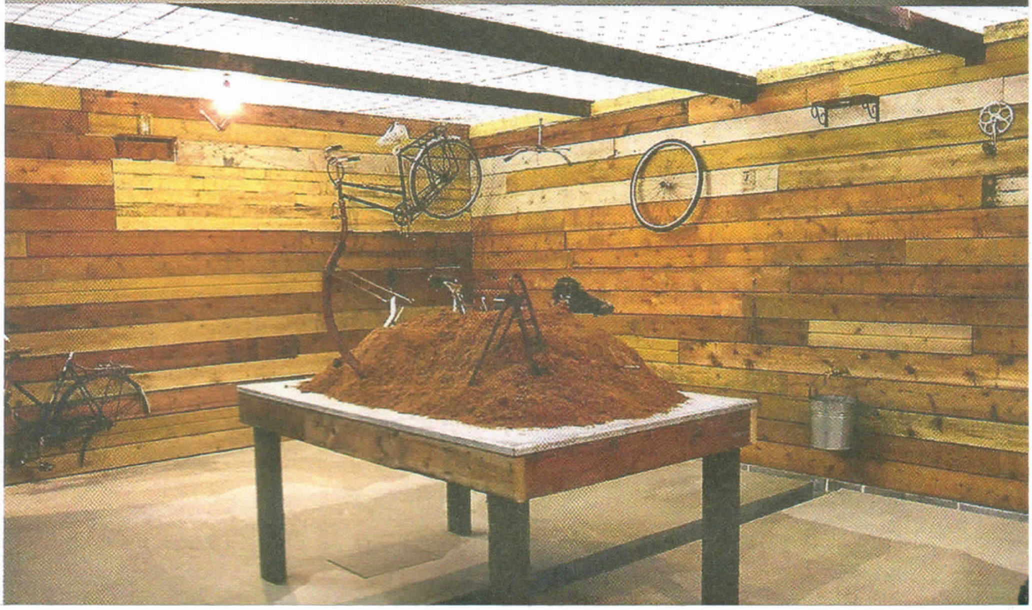
Francisco Lastra Adorno, who left Cuba in February 1990, has called the period between 1991 and 1996 the real period of *Cuba Libre* ("Free Cuba"). After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Russia, Cuba entered a state of political and economic disorientation and ideological crisis. In Lastra's argument, this disorientation allowed for open-ended possibilities, conceptually and philosophically. His ephemeral sculpture, *Contenido neto: 2000 kg de jabón rosa* (*Net weight: 2000 kg of Pink Soap*, 1997), exhibited at the Museo Universitario del Chopo in Mexico City, parodied the Cuban obsession with record-setting. A life-size model of the *Granma* (the yacht that Castro used in his campaign for power during the Batista government), Lastra's ironic construction was intended to be the largest boat ever made of soap, worthy of the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Every Cuban knows about Castro's grandiloquence, and in the 1980s and '90s, artists used it to mock the status quo. Cuban curator Elvis Fuentes observes that "Cuba holds several Guinness World Records," including "the longest speech in the history of the United Nations"—Fidel Castro's—as well as "the cow that produced the most milk in a day." As Fuentes points out, "A society that fought to eradicate the 'vestiges' of capitalism persevered nevertheless in the culture of excess and records." In Lastra's piece, the ephemeral character of the soap served as a metaphor for the sinking of boats traveling from Cuba to Miami. Lastra, who donated the 2,000 kilos of soap to an institution for children with cancer in Mexico City, also used the notion of the gift to explore mechanisms of dissolution, insertion, and circulation. He organized eight months of interviews, articles about the piece, and meetings with critics and journalists, mocking and manipulating the dynamics of media spectacle. The same tactics were used to raise popular consciousness before and during the Cuban revolution. Lastra's meetings with critics and journalists were held at the Café Havana, in Mexico City, the same place where Castro met with his comrades before sailing to Cuba on the *Granma*.

The work of Antonio Eligio Fernández, known as Tonel, merges popular culture and art. His room-sized installation *A Tribute to Water and Sugar* (1996–2000) featured a table with a mound of brown sugar, the skeleton of a bicycle, and bicycle parts hanging on the walls. The piece highlights the economic hardships on the island during the "Special Period" (1991–96), emphasizing the end of trade programs with the Soviet Union such as oil-for-sugar—sugarcane being one of Cuba's most important cash crops—which forced a diversification of local agriculture to supply food and shortages of hydrocarbon fuel and oil derivatives, which led to a change in living standards and the replacement of cars with bicycles. Tonel's installations are frequently based on "the physical environment inhabited by Cubans with less economic resources, for instance, the dilapidated buildings and apartments in Havana known as 'Solares.'" The sound of dripping water and the smell of urine, which were part of the installation, accentuated the connection to impoverished living conditions. Water-filled glasses placed on each shelf of the four iron and glass shelving units installed in the room referred to the drinks offered to thirsty spirits in Afro-Cuban religions.

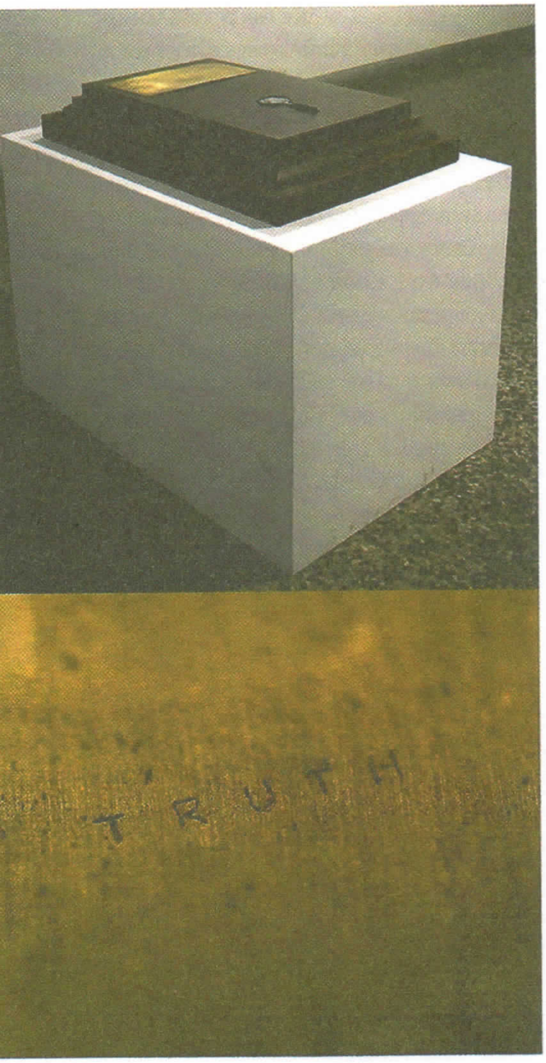
The 1990s also marked a void in the arts on the island, with leading artists leaving and exiled artists staying abroad, which reduced the number of art educators and important artists in the biennials and forced government officials to search for younger artists as replacements. According to Yuneikys Villalonga, this period was also marked by other changes, as "convertible currency was allowed, and the foreign art circuit experienced a sudden interest in what was happening on the island. Meanwhile, art started to open to the world: by means of migration and by means of invitations to participate in exhibitions, scholarships, and grants outside of Cuba." Among the emerging artists of the 1990s were Fernando Rodríguez, Los Carpinteros (Alexandre Arrechea, Dagoberto Rodríguez, and Marco Castillo), Carlos Garaicoa, and Saidel Brito. Concerns of globalization, marginalization, and spectacle expanded horizons for artists on the island. The Havana Biennial gave Cuban artists wider exposure, increasing the reach of their work.

Another important artist of the '90s generation is Ernesto Oroza whose influences come from contemporary media culture, the local "culture of necessity," and industrial design and architecture. He is also inspired by the poet Samuel Feijóo (1914–92), the anarchic music of José Luis Cortes and his band Timba, as well as by the conceptual language of the Italian architect Andrea Branzi and his followers. Oroza was a founding member of Cabinet Ordo Amoris (1994), a collective of designers and artists who graduated from the Superior Institute of Design in Havana in 1993. Together with Juan Bernal, Diango Hernández, and Francis Acea, Oroza was one of the few artists from the '90s whose education derived from industrial design. His book *Reinvented Objects: The People's Creation in Cuba* (2004) encompasses eight years of research into the island's material culture, with 200 pictures and texts on architecture, objects, interiors, and graphic communications. Oroza's first project dealing with the relationship of space, sculpture, and documen-





**Right, top and bottom: Tonel, *A Tribute to Water and Sugar*, 1996–2000. Wood, cement, water, pump, brown sugar, urinal, and mixed media, 4 x 6 x 10 meters.**



**Left and detail: Iván Capote, *Lost*, 2006. Metal, wood, and magnifying glass, 49 x 72.5 x 12 cm.**

tation was an exhibition at the Foundation Ludwig in Cuba. There, he featured collected ornamental objects, calling them *Decorative Documentary* (2005). In *Statements of Necessity* (2004), he relates local conditions of building and economic hardships in the 1990s. *Moral Modulor* (2006) revises Le Corbusier's modular architecture. Instead of focusing on the physical relations between individual and space, Oroza's project refers to the moral aspects of the relationship. The installation includes a car parked within the interior of a house and a video showing, in real time, the effort required to get the car into the constrained space. *Fifo and Le Corbusier* (2006) explores the relationship between the architecture of Le Corbusier and that of Fifo, a Cuban who used wooden sticks to hold up the walls of his house. The video *Petróleo* (2006), made in collaboration with Magdiel Aspillaga, uses two cameras to film the transformation of rural land into a baseball field. Oroza says, "I like to see the landscape assuming a human logic by transforming the rural area into a baseball field, and into a televised game. The placement of both sequences taken by separate cameras enables the viewer to realize the relationship between the new and old spaces, and the symbolic implications of the local architecture of necessity."

Compared to the '90s generation, artists from the beginning of the 21st century are clearly more influenced by art history, from Dada and conceptualism to ephemeral art and post-conceptualism. According to Yuneikys Villalonga, their works extend "beyond local discussions and situations. They are very aware of international currents and have found good referents for their works all over the world. Meanwhile, these international referents always existed in Cuban art, still before you found a group of youngsters collectively 'learning' from the avant-garde of the '60s, '80s, and '90s around the world, which became their heroes or saints. But at the moment, artists are more individually determined to go for their particular interests. They find their own readings, they find an artist, say in Norway, who is working similarly, and his/her case suddenly becomes closer than the work of other Cuban colleagues." Fidel García, mentioned by Villalonga in her "Killing Time" text, explores the world of hacking, "utilizing technology to create a resistance to any possible form of control in society. He interrupts telephone cables, radio hams, computer networks, etc., all in a very precarious way." She also states that the work of young contemporary sculptors living on the island, such as Yoán Capote, Iván Capote, and Alain Pino, surpasses local interests: "I find that sculpture is very close to installation art nowadays. Moreover, artists' poetics are resolved in a variety of genres, which makes it more and more difficult to talk about a pure sculptor today."

The Capote brothers share the sensibilities of artists such as Gabriel Orozco, Joseph Kosuth, Tom Friedman, Maurizio Cattelan, Mona Hatoum, and Jeff Koons, as well as of artists and poets from the forefront of Brazilian concrete poetry of the 1950s and Mexican poets such as Octavio Paz. But, even though their work is post-conceptual, focusing on ideas, not simply on materials, processes, or mediums, their training is very academic. As students in the late 1990s, the Capotes absorbed more from international artists than from local ones. Cuban artists who emigrated to other countries in the late 1980s had difficulty adjusting the local content of their works to the expectations of an international audience. As Yoán states, "The term 'local' is a challenge for artists today when the art world is even more global. We have more art biennials everywhere, international events, art fairs, and art fellowships...Of course, there are Cuban artists whose work we respect a lot and local topics connected with the sensibility of our work. But from the beginning of our careers, we were always worried about finding equilibrium between local and international concerns." As students, they joined the group DUPP (Desde Una Pragmática Pedagógica), led by René Francisco Rodríguez. DUPP, which has been active for three generations of ISA (Instituto Superior de Arte de la Habana) students, promotes dialogue among individuals and raises art issues that have been marginalized by the contemporary scene. Thanks to the work of these collectives, younger artists are given the opportunity to absorb some of the subtle subversions in the local scene.

Iván Capote's work crystallizes transcendental and existential meaning into terse messages, such as NACER (to be born), MORIR (to die), LIFE, and TIME. "Aphorisms," a recent solo exhibition, included sculptures and objects with text. In Yoán's work, on the other hand, the object has a specific relationship with the body; titles such as *Stress, Relax, Fear, Paranoia*, and *Nostalgia* are grounded in human experience. *Dyslexia, Point of View*, and *Smell Me* anticipate the viewer's interactive role. In *Stress* (2004), the weight and volume of the sculptural object are reduced to language and meaning, suggested by the imprints of human bite marks cast in bronze squeezed between five stacked blocks of concrete. The work combines action, psychology, and stillness, highlighted by the sculptural form. The bite marks were collected from various denture molds at a dental clinic in Havana, emphasizing a collective anonymity. *In Love* (*after Brancusi*) (2004), which is inspired by *The Kiss*, combines formal geometry with meaning provided by the action and representation of kissing. The point is also to make a parallel between modern art history, with its ideals of Platonic love, purity, perfection, and truth, and contemporary art's sexuality, specificity, human imperfection, beginnings and endings, and everyday life. Yoán's piece is interactive and open ended, using the simplicity of the cube as its point of departure.

Glenda León sees Duchamp, Yves Klein, Miró, and Magritte as important influences for the use of imagination as a tool of social transgression. She cites her other influences as Francis Älys, Yoko Ono, George Brecht, and Spanish artist Joan Brossa. Like the Capote brothers, León also began as a member of DUPP. She says, "A new challenge for the artist is how to transform a personal concern into a more widely understandable language, how to go from the local social context issue or problem to the international one. The art must be understandable by anyone who doesn't...know our problems. That's art for me." Her outdoor installation *Inner garden* (2001) draws from the ephemerality of early Cuban art but also addresses current issues of mass consumption and gender with its garden of lingerie bows. Collected from various women that the artist met, the bows give the work a gesture of intimacy and signal individual female bodies. *Music Box* (2004) refers to sound departing from silence, while *Longing* (2004) addresses the lack of freedom in a more universal way. In León's work, the gesture has a very different intention than in Abstract Expressionism, for example, in which the act or gesture served as a masculine sign of individuality. In León's work, the gesture is transitory and subtle, almost invisible, leaving only traces, as in the work of Félix Gonzalez-Torres.

Groomed in the socialist arena and informed by '80s and '90s ephemeral art, this younger generation has learned that even the most transitory works are viable in today's art market. Yoán Capote observes that "the art market is an omnivorous machine and even the super-experimental, the super-conceptual, or the super-ephemeral can be absorbed by it." For Glenda León, there are generational differences in the attitude of artists in relation to the market, and younger artists are not ashamed to use the market as a promotional venue. With only two galleries active internationally in Havana—Galería La Casona and Galería Habana—artists lack a real understanding of how much their works are worth.

Although Cuban art is clearly endowed with specific social concerns and motivations, its aesthetic developments over the last 30 years clearly demonstrate that it has constantly traversed its "borders," as set by the socialist regime. Recent Cuban sculpture incorporates the general trends of ephemerality and post-conceptualism, but recasts them for itself, especially in the shifting relationships it creates between object and space in its sculptural poetics. There is something very exciting going on in Cuban art—its desire to sustain a critical language that is both subtle and rich with social meaning.

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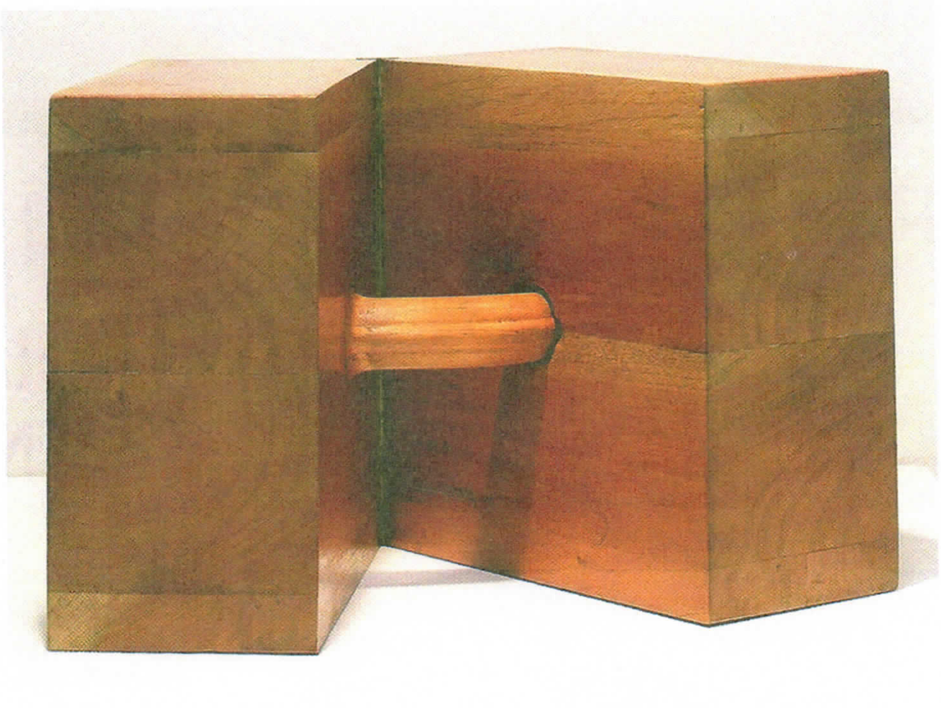
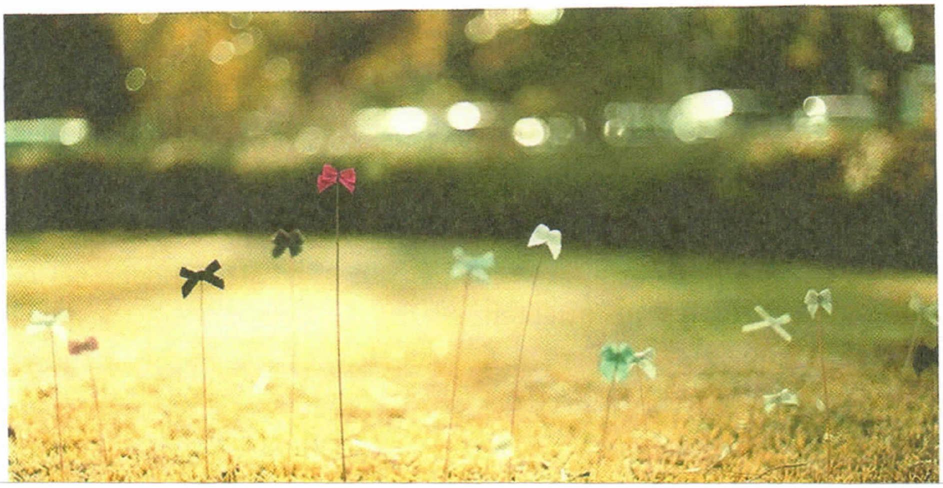
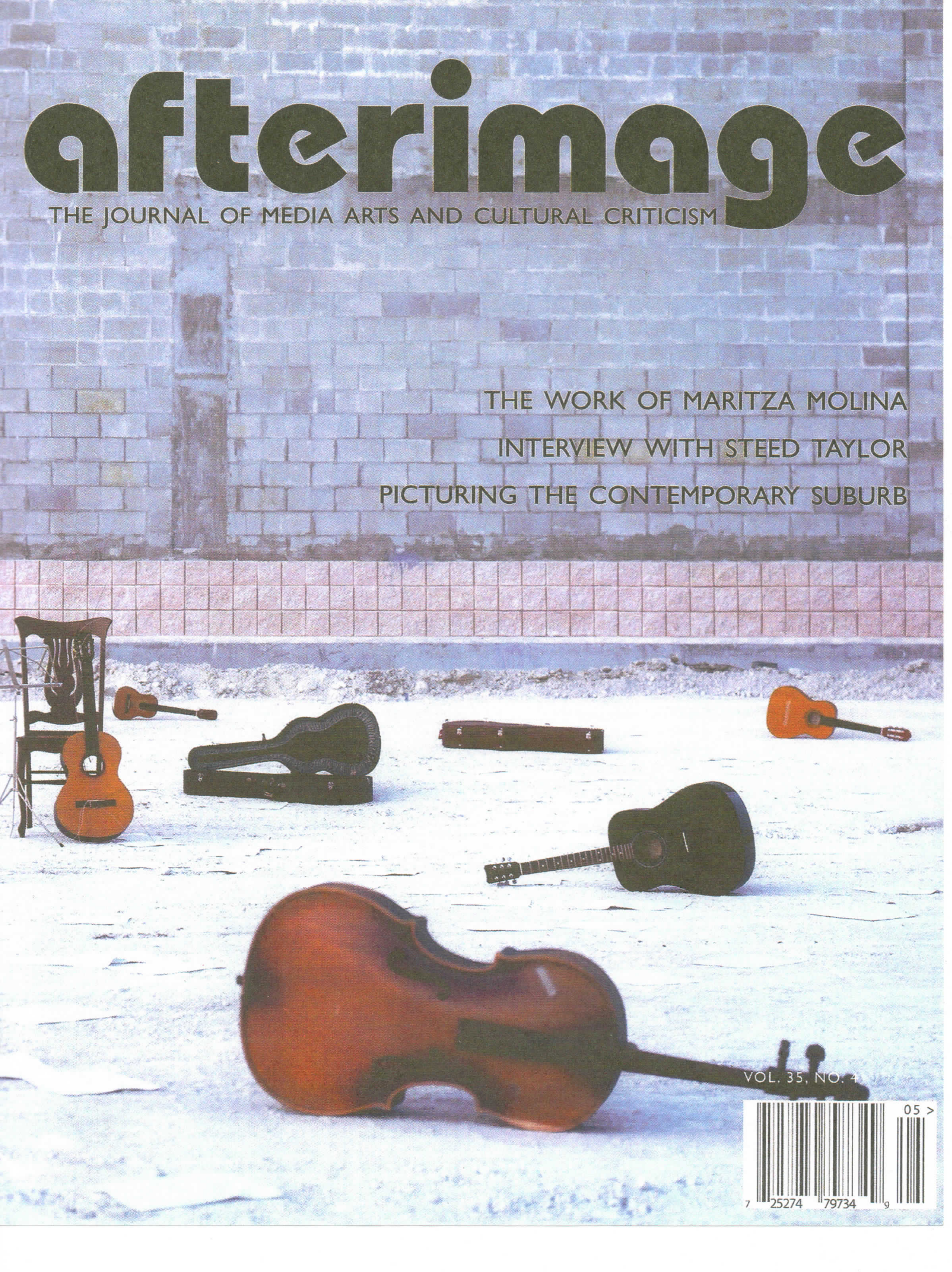




**Top: Yoán Capote, *In Love (after Brancusi)*, 2004. Wood and hinge, 30 x 30 x 30 cm. Bottom: Glenda León, *Inner garden*, 2001. Lingerie bows and mixed media, installation view.**



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THE WORK OF MARITZA MOLINA

INTERVIEW WITH STEED TAYLOR

PICTURING THE CONTEMPORARY SUBURB

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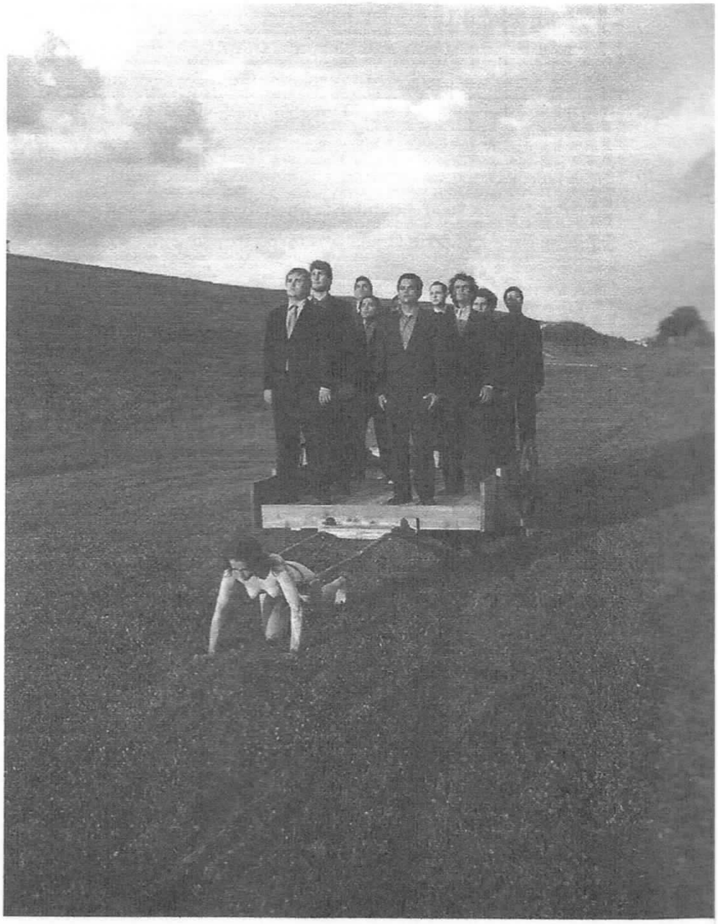
# A WORLD IN REVERSE:
# THE WORK OF MARITZA MOLINA

Maritza Molina is a Cuban-born artist who has lived in Miami since the mid-1980s. Gaining access to her work requires understanding the relationship between her early life in Havana, the circumstances of her move to Miami, and the social complexities affecting Cubans locally and abroad. It is impossible to reflect on her work outside her cultural scope as her work does not deal with essentialisms, but departs from the premise of being socially contextual. Encompassing photography, performance, and video, her work draws from three main influences: the ambiguous relationship between family traditions, her ritualized connection to nature, and the traumatic experiences suffered during her family's escape from Cuba.

Music has been a strong influence in Molina's life. Growing up in a family of classical musicians (her father is a classical guitarist and her mother an opera singer), Molina spent most of her childhood around concert halls, street performances, and family gatherings where musicians, artists, and family friends would get together to perform throughout the night. When she later moved to Miami, it was her father's artistic network that gave the young Maritza the support she needed to pursue a career in the visual arts. Along with "String Resonance" (an exhibition she curated featuring thirty-one artists), Molina's 2002 photographic piece, *Dreaming of a Composition #1*, was featured in the 2002 Sun Waves Guitar Fest in Miami which was sponsored by the Guitar Foundation of America, directed by Molina's father. *Dreaming of a Composition #1* displays the artist lying down on a concrete floor donning a short nightgown with a day-dreamy expression on her face, surrounded by guitars, a cello, and music sheets. The cello represents the artist's early music lessons as well as childhood memories of a world of music—an homage to her father. In the photograph, all instruments lack their strings. The strings are all tangled up near the artist's hands, and she tries to untangle them, as if trying to sort out her childhood memories. For the artist, the piece symbolizes a return to the basics, to a primal stage, as suggested by the ground of concrete. This barren stage is the foundation for the composition of a work of music and a work of art. Though Molina's main intention is to honor the sharing of music between father and daughter, it is also a more general tribute to the passage of tradition and heritage from one generation to the next. Additionally, there is also a reference to the more formalist perspective linking the physical female form to that of the string instrument—a harkening back to many male artists' interpretations throughout the ages.

Though Molina's early experiences of her country suggest a happy childhood in a creative and receptive environment, her early experiences with political turmoil were deeply traumatic during the months anticipating her family's escape from Cuba. When her father's plans to flee Cuba were leaked to the authorities, her family became a target of severe persecution at the hands of authorities and neighbors alike—even living under house arrest and constant threats. She recalls recurrent nightmares over the years in which she saw the faces of men outside her window and heard their voices screaming death threats to her father while they brutally pounded on the front door of the family home. After fleeing with her parents and siblings to Miami, Molina's life was strained with other sets of challenges. So shy that some thought her mute, the young Maritza, at a loss between malls and streets jammed with cars and people (polarities apparently too chaotic to swallow) struggled to adapt to the American lifestyle. Fortunately, her parent's connections in both music and visual arts eventually afforded Maritza a comfort zone. Miami offered both the economic opportunities and the familiarity of being among other Cubans while most of the traditions of old Havana were preserved.



**ABOVE**
*Carrying Tradition #2* (2005) by Martiza Molina; courtesy of the artist

*Bruised* (2001–2002) is a 40-minute installation/performance in which the artist lays on a bed made of pointed high heels from numerous shoes. Resembling a bed of nails, the shoes represent the various phases lived in the life of the artist. As Molina states, "They are the challenging experiences, identities, and roles, which are present in my memory."[1] Molina is dressed in nine outfits, one over the other, each of a different color referring to different emotions. At her bedside, a video shows the artist's face screaming phrases expressing self-blame and self-reproach, appropriated from life experiences in which she is blamed or reproached by acquaintances or relatives. Periodically, the video cuts to shoes being thrown at the white front door of a house, creating an echoing knock and leaving imprints on the door. During these cuts, Molina sits on the bed and removes her outfit, revealing a new color underneath, and lies back down. She repeats this act until the end of the piece, where she is left exposing the marks and bruises on her back from being crushed against the armature of pointed heels. The clothes are the shedding of time, the removal of painful memories. The final stage includes different endings according to the space and audience. In one ending, the artist pulls out a pillowcase and pen from a small wooden box under the bed and, with backward lettering, writes *Sticks and Stones May Break Your Bones, But Words Can Kill You*. Reflecting on the fragility of the human psyche, the bed becomes a field of interior battles rather than a place of repose. The endurance and sublimation of pain is also deeply connected to the expectations put on women by modern society. For centuries, the bodies of women have been silenced by both physical and emotional pain, forced by laws that do not protect women, or by the fostering of a patriarchal tradition that sees women as bodies: pure, young, beautiful, healthy, and unthreatening.

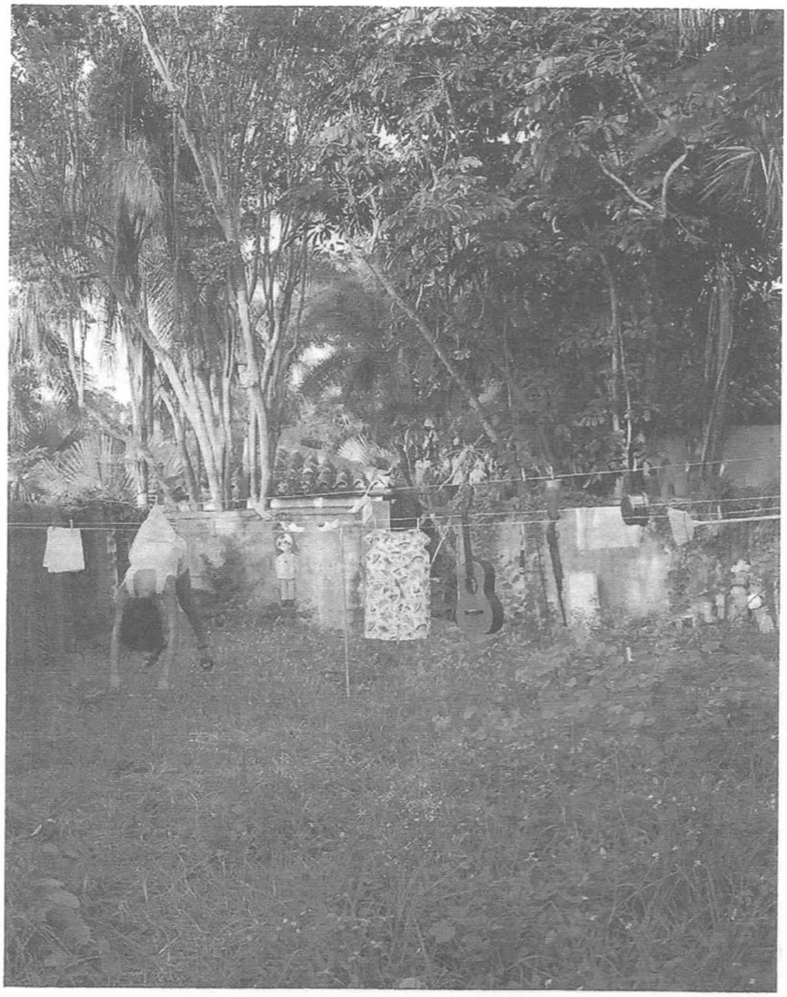
The photographic piece *Covered by Tradition* (2003) shows a woman lying on a field of dirt with her face covered by her white skirt and her arms bent upwards, reminiscent of the rigid body of a doll. Her body is covered with white powder, a material used in many of Molina's works. In Molina's childhood memories, her grandmother powdered her body after a bath, an act the artist associates with feeling clean and pure. Historically, the white powder's relation to cleanliness is also associated with whiteness, an ideal that many Latin cultures adapted from European and North American cultures as a manner of equating race with issues of class and social status. Even though Cuba is socialist and has been for more than five decades, certain cultural values have been made popular due to their easy economic access, rather than through the sharing of critical knowledge. A clean and sanitized society also makes references to early class divisions in other Latin cultures, with street cleaning signifying the scourging of homelessness and other threats. Thus, the concept of cleansing goes far beyond class divisions and is still present as part of xenophobic policies in many countries today. The connection with the work of the late Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta is intentional. The piece was a commission to create a conceptual portrait of a Latino icon, and Molina chose the work of Mendieta, whose references are the display of the body on the dirt, and the position of the arms, seen in Mendieta's "Silhouette" series. What remains is a conceptual self-portrait of Molina paying homage to her spiritual connection to Mendieta. Most importantly, however, is that Molina chose Mendieta because both artists experienced the feeling of bicultural displacement.

*Memory Line* (2005) is a photographic piece showing the artist and various objects from her childhood in Cuba, all hanging on a clothing line. Among the objects are a rag doll, a house dress made by her grandmother, a microphone referring to her mother's opera singing, cooking pots, and paper boats, which Molina and her sister sent down the stream at the curb in front of their house on rainy days. The piece was conceived after a dream where the artist was flying to the backyard of her family's home in Cuba and landing on a clothing line from where she watched, with great joy, her father playing guitar and her grandmother sweeping the floor. In the dream, suddenly everyone starts to disappear, and Molina, gasping for air, fears that her past is gone. This apparently playful and humorous piece reflects the dualities between play and loss and the frailty and fragmentation of memory. This piece was very difficult to compose since Molina did not manipulate her photographic work in the computer, but constructed it physically from scratch. To be able to hang herself from the clothing line, she consulted people in the circus to find the correct rope that would withstand her weight without slacking.

The photograph *Cutting the Pattern* (2005) stresses ongoing feminine clichés. Most of these clichés are created in the realm of female beauty, through female costumes and postures adapted from the Victorian era, such as the submissive cleaning lady, the sexy but dangerous vamp, the loud-mouthed bitch, the maternal bride, etc., all in postures that further instill their clichés. According to the artist, these patterns withstand generation after generation, despite the many social changes made by women for women: "These patterns are still the same, even though the world has evolved and women's positions are assumed to be different." The work's process follows a few steps. First, the artist photographs herself dressed in these costumes and their cliché postures. Then she projects them on batting and creates cutouts from them that are larger than life. The artist holding a machete is the missing "pattern," depicting strength and independence. Here, the machete is not implied as a masculine tool, but references the artist's upbringing in Cuba where the machete was used by both women and men to cut sugarcane in the fields. These cutouts are also done as molds for sewing, referring to one of the most typical low-paid jobs of women during the Victorian era—the seamstress—but also the female modes or models constructed by society for women to follow. The cutting of these patterns by the artist also serves to deconstruct their meanings, reinserting them into the field of visual language and culture. Finally, the artist mounts the cutouts on trees before doing her final photographs.

"You're Not Like We Are" (2003–2004) is a series of four photographs, done as an installation with sound. Each photograph shows a scene in which various women without underwear cover their heads with their skirts, circling the artist, who is dressed and composed. The women who surround the artist have voluptuous bodies, characteristic of femininity in many cultures. The work deals with the competitive tension among women to please men, which reveals not self-confidence, but that they are in fact threatened by each other. Their competition is based on who is the most womanly, the sexiest, and possessing the most curves. In this piece, the artist portrays herself in a period of transition between the innocent girl and the woman whom she is becoming, aware that she cannot trust the messages around her, but instead has to rely on herself. This piece is shown with a sound installation in which the voices of women chant in a childish manner: "You're Not Like We Are!" Their childlike voices and attitude emphasize their role in reinforcing their lack of connection and truthfulness—another cliché constructed by women and reinforced by society.

Molina's performances and photographs in the nude show her resistance against certain taboos still dominant in some Catholic circles. "Carrying Tradition," from 2005, is a photographic series dealing with the dichotomy present in tradition: no matter which culture one comes from, one's individuality is often threatened by mores and values instilled in society. In relation to Catholic religion, guilt can play an important role in keeping one from standing out within ritualized societal norms. The photographs portray Molina's nude body covered with white powder, on her knees, pulling a wagon filled with men dressed in business suits. Molina is here portraying a wild horse that exercises a self-induced control, since no one is actually controlling the horse. The wild spirit of the horse signifies the potential will toward freedom and self-expression, which all women have, but is often kept in check, unexplored, and unfulfilled.



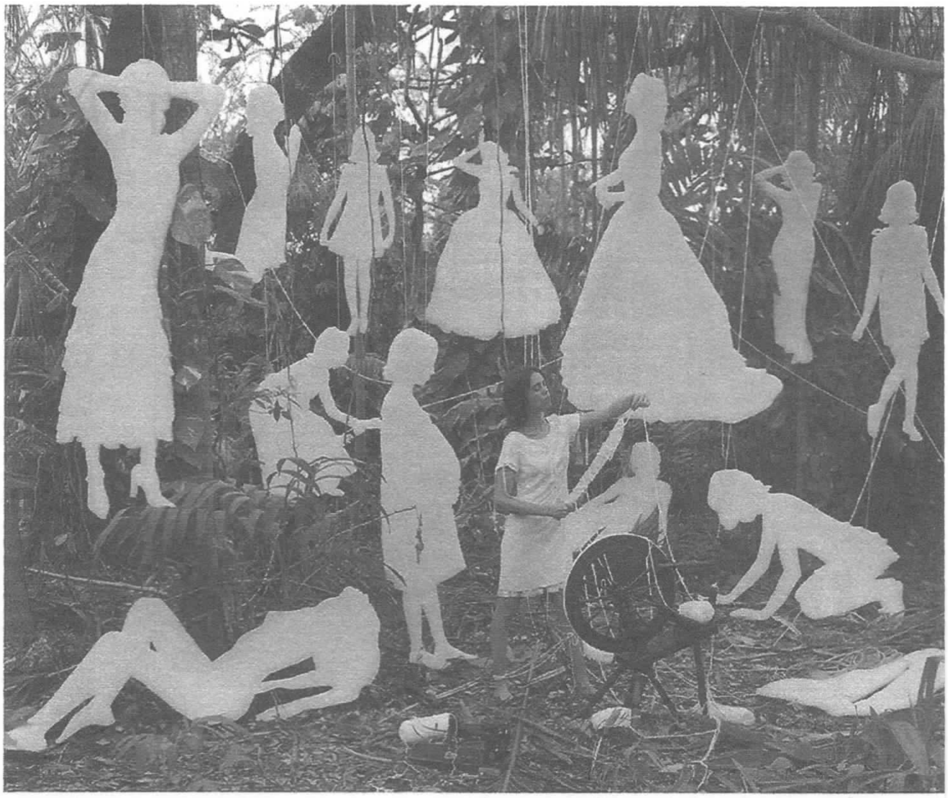
The relation between religion and art is a recurrent theme in Cuban contemporary art. Since the 1980s, artists such as José Bedia, Ricardo Rodriguez Brey, Juan Francisco Elso, José Manuel Fors, Flavio Garciamdia, Gustavo Pérez Monzón, and Leandro Soto—all of whom had work included in the controversial exhibition "Volumen I" (at the Centro de Arte Internacional, Havana in 1981)—made a critical point of inserting religion as an element of revolution into a period in Cuba when religion was strictly forbidden. Only once, in 1981, did Mendieta visit the Island after her exile in the late 1950s. Mendieta's work, which focused strongly on performance and ritual, became influential to many local artists of the next generation. One of them was Tania Bruguera, who created performances intended as continuations of Mendieta's work. The history of Cuban performance and its connection to ephemeral art seems related to the work of Molina. The 5-minute video *Conquering Space* (2004) depicts a strong relationship with performance. The video depicts a woman fighting an invisible fight with a sword against the impermeable energies surrounding her. According to the artist,

> *Conquering Space* deals with the notion of permanence/impermanence in my life. Empowered by a feeling of physical permanence, the fight with space is a fight with everything unknown that I want to grasp and control, and with all of the energies that oppose me, from the past, in the present, and the resulting future. It is a never-ending, never-winning fight against what I can't see or reach, and anger towards what I can't control, including my own destiny and mortality. It is the unwillingness to realize my own insignificance as a person in the grand scheme of the universe, no matter how important, present or grounded I may feel in the space and time when I am reflecting on my own existence.

Here, too, the assumed connection with ritual would seem undeniable, particularly between the woman warrior and the fight or dance of Orixás in Afro-Cuban rituals. However, the intention of the artist is not connected to this allegory; it entails her own struggle with memory, a memory that is both permanent and in constant flux. Despite the disinterest of trendy art in regard to religion, especially because of religion's ritualistic implications, and the centuries that separate high art from "primitive" art, or ritualistic art, which parallel the superiority of culture over nature, at least in the minds of Western art historical tenets, Molina's use of religion and nature shows a strong sense of individuality, while also broadening other social ambiguities in the relationship between Third World and dominant societies.

The iconography of Catholicism displays the religion through a great variety of visual metaphors—saints, angels, the holy trinity, the dove—all mixed with storytelling, dogmas, chanting, praying, singing, and recitation. This potential of visual representation in Catholic language has been a rich ground for the connection with syncretic religions such as Santeria. The bodily features of the saints, their clothes, and weapons become even more mysterious and fascinating when presented as Afro-Cuban deities, such as orixás. The orixás are associated with forces of nature, and the devout or the medium becomes the orixá's "horse" (a person in trance controlled by the spirit of the orixá), and dances and sings under the orixá's influence. Even though Molina stated that she never participated in a Santeria session, and her experience of Catholic traditions are now on the more superficial level, her work resonates with some of these cultural elements in its visual narrative. It is important to note that in socialist

Cuba, the Catholic schools have became inoperative; and even though no other churches were built during Fidel Castro's government, the ones already existing were not destroyed. Perhaps because Castro had been raised a Catholic, he allowed the existing churches to teach religious studies, but not to provide a full education as before.



The ambiguous influence of Catholic religion in Molina's work is also explored in her video *Domestication*, from 2003, showing several men walking in a line as they enter a gallery. The artist, the only woman in the video, follows the men as they enter and stand side-by-side facing an audience. Their position resembles that of police suspects standing in front of an invisible witness. The men then blindfold themselves and start reciting the prayer, "Our Father." In the meantime, the video shows the semi-nude body of the artist in a horizontal position being passed from hand to hand, man to man, as if the woman's body is the communion host, here representing the body of Christ, both as the sacrificial lamb and the nourishment of the soul. The communion host and the sacramental communion have both been used by several contemporary artists, including Cildo Meireles and Rosana Palazyan, as references to the process of social cannibalism through the evangelization and acculturation of native Brazilians by the Jesuit missionaries during the colonization of Brazil. This process of colonization, evangelization, and appropriation of land continues to this day, although its mechanisms and technology have changed, becoming more ideologically subtle and perhaps more cruel in its process of extermination. In Molina's work, however, the appropriation of the woman's body as a Communion host takes a patriarchal tone in which female sexuality becomes an object of male empowerment and market consumption. As the video continues, power positions seem to shift from the two genders, making the viewer even more confused. After the woman is passed to the first man in line, he carries her and lays her belly-down on a large mirror on the floor between the men and the audience. As the men keep reciting "Our Father," Molina repeatedly shouts the phrase, "One follows behind the other," using a louder voice each time, which forces the men to quiet down. She rises up in front of the audience and tries to muffle her screaming voice by covering her mouth with a bandanna. Finally, she walks backward until she has passed through the line of men, and marches off the stage behind them. Two interesting references are suggested in this sequence: first, the fact that it is intended as a sort of initiation and catharsis, and second, that performing these exaggerated gender roles highlights the sexual intricacies between the ritualized religion and the controlling patriarchy. This can also parallel master/subject relationships in which power works to maintain the interdependence of binary roles, to emphasize bondage over exchange, pain over pleasure. Ritualized masculinity in pseudo-advanced societies reinforces the socialization of a patriarchal system in such a way that it sublimates the division of roles to become purely symbolic, sustaining natural myths that have consistently placed women as commodities in a patriarchal society. In this land of visual metaphors, Molina seems to play an ambiguous role in which she is herself the bait and the controlling player. She seems to accept the traditions that placed her at the end of the line and as an object of the ritualized male system, while voicing hysterically her idiosyncrasies and shutting her own self by obstructing the sound of her voice, only to finally resign and return to the background and to oblivion. These well-known puns reflect the ambiguous situation of women and other oppressed groups in many patriarchal societies.

Maritza Molina's work is as powerful as it is complex, full of layers that reflect the reversal of our actions in society. Its references to the female body in today's world echoes the traps of ingrained taboos and mores that deny women their self-fulfillment and happiness. Molina's use of the body does not create a split between the body as an object of art and its social context. Instead, her presence in the work constitutes the same contextualized social environment that engulfs her whole body and life.

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*NOTE 1. All quotations from or references to statements made by Maritza Molina are from published statements by the artist or conversations with the author during 2007.*

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**FACING PAGE**
*Memory Line* (2005) by Martiza Molina; courtesy of the artist
**ABOVE**
*Cutting The Pattern* (2005) by Martiza Molina; courtesy of the artist