

Puerto Rican Sun - artnet Magazine

PUERTO RICAN SUN

by Walter Robinson

In early April, the weather in Puerto Rico is almost sinfully pleasant, especially at the beach, where the heat of the sun in a cloudless blue sky is tempered by cool breezes off the turquoise Caribbean. Inside the high-ceilinged, super-cooled **Puerto Rico Convention Center**, the mood was good for the third installment of **Circa Puerto Rico**, Apr. 11-14, 2008, where more than 40 dealers from Europe, Australia and the Americas set up along four spacious aisles.

Well-organized and welcoming, Circa presented an intimate collection of mostly emerging but sophisticated art. This year, the fair's artistic directors, **Celina Noguerras Cuevas** and **Paco Barragán** -- both returning from the 2007 edition -- invited interesting European galleries like **Air de Paris** (Paris), **Contemporary Fine Arts** (Berlin) and **Museum 52** (London) along with mainland U.S. dealers including **Samson Projects** (Boston) and **Spencer Brownstone** (New York) and a handful of Puerto Rican spaces such as **356** and **Walter Otero Gallery**.

Circa also provided booth space for six solo artist's projects, seven museums and governmental agencies, and eight publications. They even set up a modest "container village" out in the parking lot, sponsored by **Coca-Cola**, dubbed **Circa Labs** and featuring a deejay, free haircuts -- of the barber's own design, of course -- free tattoos designed by artists, and art installations, including one assembled by artist, critic and *Artnet Magazine* contributor **Pedro Velez**.

During the opening party, **Ulrich Voges** of the Frankfurt gallery **Voges + Partner** posited Circa as a stop on a specifically Latin American circuit that includes **ARCO** in Madrid in February and **MACO** in Mexico City in late April. Latin collectors like to take their time, he said, dressing up for the opening gala, coming back for a second look on the weekend and then finally making their purchases, after a little bargaining, on the fair's last day.

Voges managed to contradict his own formula, however, when he sold not one but two examples of *Swinging San Juan* (2008) by **Wolfgang Winter and Berthold Hörbelt**, an oversized designer swing that hung from the rafters and proved to be popular with fair-goers. The price: €18,000. He also found buyers for €3,500 experimental paintings by the 30-year-old Berlin artist **Rainer Neumeier**, who embeds string, doilies and other items in the paint of his dark-side portraits of alien saints.

"Collectors can find good things here that are harder to get at the larger fairs," said **Alberto de la Cruz**, one of the island's top collectors. He specifically cited the large works by German expressionist artist **Jonathan Meese** at Contemporary Fine Arts -- Meese has a big following in Puerto Rico -- and by the U.S. artist **Aleksandra Mir** at **Gavlak** from West Palm Beach.

Florence Bonnefous of Air de Paris, which was founded in 1990, was a first-time Circa participant who said she was drawn to the fair because she likes to do "smaller fairs in sunny countries" between January and June. Her booth featured esoteric, "conceptual" artworks by **Trisha Donnelly, Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno** and the Paris-based collective **Claire Fontaine**, whose painting *Untitled (One Is No One)* (2007) overlays an image of **Andy Warhol's Marilyn** with the words "one is no one" done in the style of **Christopher Wool** (the price: \$11,000).

Carsten Höller (b. 1961), the Belgian artist perhaps best known for the giant metal slides he installed at the **Tate** in London, was represented by a comic pair of sculptures using plants -- a kind of Adam and Eve of the vegetable kingdom. *La Fumée de la Pastèque* (1994) is a watermelon with a ceramic

pipe stuck where a mouth might be (if melons had mouths, that is), and *Plant on Pill* (1994) is a tomato vine that has been fed some human birth control pills, which according to Bonnefous acts something like Miracle Gro. At least on plants. Both objects are \$19,000.

At the booth of the three-year-old **Federico Luger Gallery** from Milan was a large black-and-white painting of *Jackson Pollock at 16 Years Old* by Milan artist **Gabriele di Matteo**, 50, a new work in a series devoted to Pollock's life. Di Matteo is known in Europe for a multiple-episode life of **Marcel Duchamp** carved on cameo shells, as well as for an extensive 900-painting cycle depicting "the history of humanity in the nude" -- a nude **Karl Marx**, a nude assassination of **JFK**, a nude **Roy Lichtenstein** standing in front of *Wham!* -- all painted by a commercial artist he hired.

For his new series, Pollock won't be nude. This painting, which depicts the famous New York School pioneer as a Jazz Era schoolboy, is €15,000. Di Matteo is slated for an exhibition at the gallery in January 2009.

The affable Luger had also brought photographs by the Cuban artist **Diango Hernández**, who frames pictographic images used in Cuba's communist educational system within schematic line drawings of diamonds. Hernandez associates the gemstones with **Jacqueline Kennedy**, and thus he considers these photos as somehow reflecting on the role that the U.S. embargo plays in keeping **Fidel Castro** in power. The Dusseldorf-based artist was included in the **2005 Venice Biennale** and shows in New York with **Alexander and Bonin** gallery.

Several Berlin galleries made the trip to Circa, including **brot.undspiele galerie** (bread and circuses), which was opened three years ago by **Kay Neubert**. On hand were some color photographs by **Wincenty Duikowski** of mounds of balloons being attacked by two tiny plastic figures -- a knight on horseback and a grenadier with fixed bayonet. In *Only a Few Have Survived*, the wall of balloons is fairly deflated. Smaller prints are \$1,850 in editions of 15.

On the outside wall of the booth was a grid of framed glamour ads from fashion magazines, looking quite alluring, over which is drawn a large skull with rabbit ears, done in white sequins sewn onto the pages. It's by **Kinga Duikowski** -- Wincenty's daughter, and Kay's wife -- and priced at \$15,000.

Sally Breen, director of the new **Breenspace** gallery in Sydney, devoted her booth to large woven tapestries of polyester and nylon rope with gold thread, brass chains, metal braids, beads and crystals by **Dani Marti**, a Spanish artist who lives in Australia. The price range for the works, which Marti considers to be portraits -- an all black example with delicate tufts of thread portrays his mother, for instance -- is \$13,000-\$54,000, and another dealer had snapped up two of the works during the opening. Breen is opening a large new space in Sydney in June, and plans to show Marti's work there in August.

Blow de la Barra, which was founded in London three years ago by **Detmar Blow** and the Mexico City native **Pablo León de la Barra**, presented an "intersection" of gallery artists with invited guests from Puerto Rico, including **Jesús "Bubu" Negrón** and **José "Chemi" Rosado**. Among the offerings was a conceptual word piece by **Stefan Bruggemann** reading, in capital letters, "tropical critique," and a row of red-bladed machetes by **Carolina Caycedo** with handles stamped with the names of revolutionary groups.

On the outside of the booth hung a large painting of bikinied Puerto Rican "beauties," pointedly presented along with glitter-emblazoned emblems of supermarket products, by **Edgardo Larregui**, a 30-something artist who lives in La Perla barrio near the Moro fort, where he works with children in community programs. "We're trying to find a place where he can show his work," said de la Barra. A machete was \$2,000, while Larregui's painting was a bargain at \$5,000.

Plenty of art at the fair addressed the history and culture of Puerto Rico. One artist with a distinct tropical flavor is **Carlos Betancourt**, the Miami-based Puerto Rican artist whose image of his flower-draped, sun-bathing mami and papi was a centerpiece of Circa's 2008 marketing (as was a similar image last

year [see "[Puerto Rican Sun,](#)" Apr. 10, 2007]). Betancourt has also produced a tour de force for this year's show, the 18 x 4 ft. *The Hedge* (2007), an inkjet photo-frieze-on-canvas of some 24 figures, displayed on the outside of the booth of Miami's **Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts**. It reads a little like a pop Puerto Rican subconscious.

Charged with sexual energy -- as the best camp usually is -- the lineup centers on a tall bleached blonde woman in a bikini, her arms covered with blue paint and glitter, barbecuing a steak with one hand and holding an African fetish in the other. The frieze also includes mooning men, a ballerina, a little girl wearing beads, a guy in a tux and tennis shoes, bananas, coconuts, a pineapple and a rooster. The price: \$45,000.

At the booth of Walter Otero Gallery was a new painting and half a dozen drawings on the theme of the *Little Prince* by the Puerto Rican artist **Quintin Rivera Toro** (b. 1978), who surrounds the image of the blonde storybook pilot with words from a famous Reggaeton song, reading "yo sé que yo soy la fuckin' moda," which means "I know I am the thing," more or less. It's a witty twist on Latin macho, associating it with a little French boy, and was sold for \$5,000, as were several of the drawings, at \$1,500 each.

In the center of the booth was one of **Fabian Marcaccio's** 3D paintings, this one representing a mobster's table, complete with a butt-filled ashtray, the leftovers of a plate of spaghetti and a six-shooter, all made of canvas (on an aluminum form) and slathered with Marcaccio's signature latex brushstrokes. The price: \$50,000.

Samson Projects brought works by two artists -- attractive plaid-like spray-paint abstractions by **Jeffrey Gibson** (b. 1972), and dramatic sculptures of cockfights by the New York-based Norwegian artist **Rune Olsen** (b. 1971). Done in welded steel covered with paper tape that's animated by a lively graphite line, the fighting birds are given glass eyes based on Rune's own. Perhaps all manner of exciting cruelty will someday be replaced by representations. These are \$12,000 each.

Puerto Rico's Catholic roots are the subject of **Favián Vergara** (b. 1958), a Mexican artist who lives on the island and whose extensive photographic series of "Saints and Impossible Saints" were on view at the booth of **Primer Piso Galería**, opened two years ago by **Michael Williams** in San Juan's Condado tourist area.

Vergara's *Sagrado Corazon*, for instance, is a notably contemporary Jesus of arguably unearthly beauty, who literally wears his heart printed on his shirt. For "impossible saints," Vergara posits a Saint Condom as well as a saint who knows how to spank children and get good results (!). Small photos, with custom-made colored cast-resin frames, are \$1,800 in an edition of eight, while a large print is \$4,500.

Five artists are represented by the **Storehouse Group**, a collective "gallery without a space" whose director, **Anna Astor-Blanco**, boasted that it is "the newest gallery in Puerto Rico." Among the works on display were **Karlo Andrei-Ibarra's** wheelbarrow with DVD player and speakers attached (playing a kind of Boricua rap) and **Jason Mena's** poster of a clogged Puerto Rican highway lined with shabby commercial buildings -- not exactly the image of an island paradise -- over which towers a billboard reading (in Spanish) "everything is a lie." Prices for works at the gallery (which is looking to do an exchange with a U.S. space, incidentally) are \$1,000-\$5,000.

Probably the most pointed political critique at the fair could be found in works by **Josué Pellot** (b. 1979), a young Puerto Rican artist who was represented by the **Vane** gallery in Newcastle, England, which was launched three years ago by **Paul Stone** and **Christopher Yeats**. One of Pellot's works, titled *1493*, is a flashing neon sign of a conquistador standing over the prone body of a Native American, thrusting a sword into his victim. Pellot insisted that he wants to install this sign -- a "neon history" -- outside a Caribbean fruit and vegetable stand.

A second work by the artist is a large hybrid version of the Puerto Rican flag with its five alternating red and white stripes appearing as normal but its blue

triangle containing not a single star but 51 in all -- an emblem, Pellot said, of the "reverse colonization" of the U.S. by Puerto Rico. Called *Temporary Allegiance*, it is as well a symbol of the Puerto Rican diaspora. "People do get upset when they see it," Pellot added. "Many people are ready to join 'the war of the flags'." The two works are \$10,000 and \$12,000, respectively.

Like most successful fairs, Circa forged alliances with local collectors and museums -- many of the visiting dealers spent their mornings touring the former and started the evenings at receptions at the latter. The **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico** in San Juan's Santurce neighborhood, for instance, presented a special gallery-sized installation by **Victor Vázquez**, as well as an exhibition of work by women from the museum collection titled "Feminismos."

A host of satellite exhibitions also paralleled the fair, not least of which was "Hipódromo 610 Santurce," a show organized by four galleries (**Space Other** from Boston, **Cr3ma** from San Juan, **brot.undspiele** from Berlin and **Galería Candela** from San Juan) in a lovely, light-filled two-story frame house (recently reclaimed from squatting crackheads). Several of the rooms included mirrors, some quite large, on which the Berlin artist **Steve Schepens** had made a line drawings of the room's own reflection in lipstick.

In the kitchen was an impressive installation of silkscreens and woodcuts from **Space 1026** in Philadelphia, a ten-year-old co-op with about 30 dues-paying artist members in Philly's Chinatown neighborhood, with a gallery, a dozen or so studios and a communal print-making area. The group has a similar show lined up for this June at **Lobot Gallery** in Oakland; their invitation to "Hipódromo" came from Candela's **Pablo Rodriguez**, who skipped Circa this year to concentrate on this exhibition.

And in a room upstairs was a show of drawings and photos overseen by **Eric Laine**, a young curator and dealer who operates a "portfolio site" at www.bipolart.cc. Among the artists he works with is **Ania Siwanovicz**, a photographer who divides her works into two series, "What We Know" and

"What We Don't Know." A print of a closely cropped side of a tenement building, dominated by a poster of actor **Jennifer Garner**, is modestly priced at \$500. A Williamsburg artist who has been working for **Sarah Morris**, Siwanovicz is about to move to Los Angeles to attend Cal Arts.

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