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Art and Faith: The Essence of Gordillo

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The figure of the creator of the fine arts, Francisco Gordillo Arredondo (Havana, September 11, 1964), stands out in the contemporary panorama of painting and drawing in Cuba, not only for his undeniable talent, but also for the depth of his work, which transcends the ephemeral fashions of Afro-Cuban art.



From right to left: Rogelio Martínez Furé, Ivor Miller and Francisco Gordillo. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

On many occasions, superficial and stereotypical art images, recreated by deities from the pantheons of Yoruba, Congo and Palo, among others, have occupied private galleries and markets, especially for tourism; Gordillo's artistic production, however, is presented as a moving testimony to his lived experience and his inner world. His work is an intimate reflection on the religious and aesthetic traditions of African origin, which form a common thread in Cuban culture and are passed down from generation to generation.

A descendant of ancestors who were enslaved and brought to Cuba from Central Africa, this prolific artist embodies the intersection between personal and collective history in his iconographic compositions. Like many of his compatriots, his ancestry is deeply rooted in the mythologies of Santería and Palo Monte, two Christianized religions that have evolved over the centuries. These spiritual practices, based on African traditions, are particularly significant in his work, which offers a complex and enriching view of the role of these beliefs in everyday life on the island.



Gordillo's art invites a deeper understanding of the complexity and richness that make up the Cuban social fabric. Photo: Laura Gómez Aurióles.

Traditions and mythologies in a rich and nuanced visual language

In the artistic environment of recent years, "Afro-Cubanism" has experienced a modest rebirth, attracted by the demand for images and forms of expression that represent Afro-descended cultural identity. However, this phenomenon has been accompanied by a multitude of stereotypical representations that, while visually appealing, do not have the depth and authenticity that characterize the work of many artists committed to their roots. In this sense, Gordillo's work stands out for its ability to authentically integrate traditions and mythologies into a rich and nuanced visual language that invites reflection.

While other artists have chosen to depict simple allegories of the Afro-Cuban, this creator delves deeper into an analysis of his experiences and the history of his ancestry. His art is not only a celebration of African heritage, but also a critique of the limitations imposed by reductionist

narratives that superfluously address the complexities of the lives and spirituality of Afro-descent people in Cuba.

Depth of Afro-descendant experience

His paintings are steeped in allusions to the mythologies of Santería and Palo Monte, which are not only integral to his personal experience, but also reflect the rich cultural tradition of the Greater Antilles. Through the brilliance of color, the complexity of the metaphor, and the symbolism surrounding ritual practice, his work reveals the vitality and dynamism of these traditions. With his rich iconography that alternates between figuration and abstraction and his vivid rituals, his extensive mastery of Afro-Cuban religion serves as a vehicle or reference to explore themes such as family, spirituality, and cultural resistance.

Based on the traditions of West Africa, where the family is considered a sacred institution, Gordillo's art conveys a vision of lifetimes enriched by intimate family interactions. Through names, expressions and actions inspired by oral literature of Yorubá and Congo origin, her work becomes a visual narrative that addresses social ills and highlights the importance of intergenerational dialogue for the preservation of cultural identity.

Her family history is a powerful testimony to this connection. Their ancestors, who came to Cuba from Africa centuries ago, brought with them a number of religious beliefs and objects, including the so-called *Prenda de Fundamento*. These legacies have been taught from generation to generation, giving life to a unique Cuban religion, Palo Monte, that integrates elements of Congolese traditions. This background becomes the pillar on which Gordillo builds his artistic practice and creates works that combine the past with the present.



Way to Faith, charcoal on 35 pieces of cardboard, organized in 5 rows of 7 each and grouped together like a puzzle, 2.4×4.8 meters, one of the largest works in the collection of the Appleton Museum of Art in Ocala, Florida, USA. Photo: Cort

From science to personal discovery

Gordillo's artistic journey began in 1984, when he entered the Academy of Fine Arts in San Alejandro with the initial desire to dedicate himself to landscape painting. However, as he immersed himself in the study of Cuban culture, especially through the National Folkloric Ensemble, he began to understand the richness of his family traditions as a source from which to

draw inspiration. This discovery changed her artistic approach and allowed her to explore her personal experience and identity through a visual language connected to her roots.

Wifredo Lam, considered a pioneer of Afro-Cuban art, opened the door to the exploration of African identities in Cuban art, while Manuel Mendive continued this tradition, bringing symbolism and spirituality into his work. Like these masters, this artist has incorporated elements of Santería into his practice, but he does so from a deeply personal and unique perspective.

With this in mind, an in-depth article titled *Congo Cruzado: Cuban Lukumí and Kongo Identities in the Art of Francisco "Gordillo" Arrondo*, the renowned anthropologist and cultural historian with a focus on the African diaspora in the Caribbean and Americas, published by the University of Hampton – a private research center – historically black, in Hampton, Virginia, USA—, emphasizes that "one cannot meaningfully talk about the Afro-Cuban representation in Cuban art without Wifredo Lam (1902–1982; Apprentice of Pablo Picasso), who initiated the genre, and Manuel Mendive (1944), whose works are in important international collections. Both also had personal and ancestral connections to Santería traditions. His influence can be seen in Gordillo's works. For example, Picasso's *Girl in Front of a Mirror* is a visual reference to Gordillo's *Mother Alone*. In addition, Gordillo learned from the works of the Cubans Roberto Diago (1920–1955) and Pedro Pablo Oliva, as well as from the European Impressionists and Expressionists Manet, Monet, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse and Vlaminck.

Bearer of an admirable personality in which his simplicity and modesty stand out, as well as his spirit of solidarity with his fellow human beings, he transcends a great religious knowledge during the dialogues with Gordillo, assuring in his painting: "I superimpose cultures, I mix Yoruba elements with Bantu, represent through their symbolism and synthesis of their rites; He relies on signs and ritual elements. Often my works reflect facts and stories that spring from my imagination, accompanied by fantasy that is not far from reality."



You're not alone. Mixed media on canvas. 150x100 cm. 2018. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

His works, mostly in small formats (30×40 cm), although he also ventures into medium and large formats, are characterized by the use of mixed techniques (acrylic, ink, oil, watercolor, wax among others), which "gives me the ability to create, as a spiritual force, a mystical atmosphere that connects them to earth and nature. With color, I represent symbols, and also what I want to express, whether it's a feeling, an emotion, or representations of deities and ceremonies; it also helps me to balance the composition, control light and shadow, bring out the color gradations, their brilliance or strong contrasts. I use concrete and specific forms within realities that are made up of large areas of color, specific shapes that coexist and make these realities coexist," he said.



Grandpa accompanies you. Mixed media on cardboard. 27x2 cm. 2019. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

The complexity of symbolism

One of the most fascinating aspects of his work is the ability to infuse meaning and symbolism into the drawings and paintings, which are not only visually striking but also filled with cultural, historical, and spiritual references that invite the viewer on an interpretive journey. Thus, his work *Ochún Kolé Kolé* evokes one of the paths of syncretized Orisha with La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba. It is an image of the peacock fan, a recurring symbol in her work, linked to the beauty, feminine power and richness of Santería. However, unlike similar works that could be considered merely decorative, this work delves into an esoteric analysis that reveals layers of meaning related to his family's history and the contemporary struggles of the Afro-descendant community in Cuba.

By observing his creative process and listening to his reflections on the meaning of his works, one learns a lot about the central importance of religions of African origin in the everyday life of many Cubans. Gordillo emphasizes that her work aims not only to represent her ethnic identity, but also

to preserve the integrity of the multiple layers that make up her experience. In this sense, his art functions as a bridge between the past and the present, between the personal and the collective.



He accepts his fate. Mixed media on cardboard. 65x50 cm. 2019. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Invaluable contribution to Cuban identity

The main contribution of this creator to Cuban art lies in his ability to combine specific esoteric knowledge with his personal experiences, thus creating visual manifestations that are both impressive and deeply meaningful. Through his work, he gives us an intimate insight into how African traditions have not only stood the test of time, but continue to influence the way Cubans live, feel, and express themselves today.

As the world continues to acknowledge and celebrate the cultural diversity and richness of Afro-descendant identities, Gordillo's work is a reminder of the importance of paying attention to

voices that have been historically marginalized. His art not only challenges simple narratives, but also invites a deeper understanding of the complexity and richness that make up the Cuban social fabric.

He is an artist who not only inherits an invaluable cultural heritage, but also becomes a spokesman for his time. His work is a journey through history, spirituality, and identity, inviting everyone to explore and appreciate the depth of Afro-Cuban traditions in an ever-changing world. His contribution is, without a doubt, an indelible mark on the development of contemporary Cuban art and a balm for narratives that seek to rediscover the essence of its African roots on the island.

Link: <https://www.trabajadores.cu/20260228/arte-y-fe-la-esencia-de-gordillo/>