

# Art



## A Tale of Four Cities

Two exhibits dabble with distant notions of art

BY CARLOS SUAREZ DE JESUS

**W**hen speaking with the boyish yet erudite David Castillo, one senses the art dealer is poised to gain traction on some of his gray-beard competitors.

"Paris, Barcelona & Miami," on exhibit at his recently opened, eponymously named gallery, features a handful of works by the Cuban vanguard generation and is anchored by an unusual piece from modern master Wifredo Lam that has never before been publicly displayed.

The show is the first in a yearly series Castillo plans to organize around historically significant paintings that will be complemented by the works of contemporary artists. Others represented include Cundo Bermúdez, René Portocarrero, Amelia Peláez, Fidelio Ponce de León, and Mario Carreño, all artists who garnered recognition during the first half of the Twentieth Century.

Eschewing the sardines-in-a-can approach of shoe-horning dozens of paintings into a catchall exhibit that bigwig Cuban art hucksters here seem to favor, Castillo has elegantly displayed nine works in the main gallery. Completing the second part of the show in an adjacent room is contemporary Cuban artist Quisqueya Henríquez's multidisciplinary installation *Intertextualidad*.

"At the end of the day, I wanted to feel like I curated this show, focusing on the historical importance of the work rather than on the commercial end of the business," Castillo explains.

The soft-spoken Castillo, who earned an art history degree from Yale, has been a private consultant for years and shuns being lumped together with Miami's gaggle of chest-thumping Latin art experts.

Still one can't help but marvel at how he quietly sneaked off this coup in a local market rabid for this type of artwork. All the

works on display originate from what Castillo terms "one of the world's most important collections of the genre."

Lam's rare piece on display, *La Table I (Coin d'Atelier)*, was created in 1938 at the end of the artist's fifteen-year sojourn in Spain. Few other examples exist from this period of his career. The work is based on Matisse's 1914 painting *Intérieur, Bocal de Poisson Rouge*, housed in the collection of Paris's Pompidou.

Given pride of place at the center of the main gallery, *La Table I* features a still life on one side and a stylized portrait on the other. Considered one of Lam's uncommon puzzle compositions, the still life depicts what appears to be an overhead view of a tabletop with two fish on a wooden cutting board rendered in a geometric pattern. On the flip side, *Portrait*, is a picture of a woman that seems to augur Lam's mature work known for its Afro-Cuban influences.

Lam, who fought on the Republican side in defense of Madrid during the Spanish Civil War, drew the Spanish flag as the figure's right eye in an act of solidarity with the party's cause. The artist became ill during the war and fled

Barcelona with several paintings, including this double-sided work that helped introduce him to Picasso when he arrived in Paris in late 1938.

During this period, many of the painters whose works are featured in this exhibit looked to Europe for inspiration and legitimacy. Part of Castillo's proposal is to show how in recent years these artists have entered a universal context in art history.

*Still Life with Fish*, a gouache-on-paper from 1961 by Amelia Peláez, represents the popular work of this early Cuban modernist. Boldly saturated in brilliant yellow, blue, orange, red, and olive hues outlined in thick black lines, the abstract work has a strong graphic quality and is suggestive of the stained-glass windows and transoms common in old-fashioned Cuban homes.

*Três Niñas (Three Girls)*, painted by Fidelio Ponce de León in 1937, is among the show's more arresting pieces. The lesser-known artist's work exudes a dynamic sense of individuality that places him poles apart from his contemporaries. Working

with dense-impastos and coarsely mixing dirty whites with earthy ochres, he seems to scrape his models into the paint, making the viewer strain to see their slightly deformed figures.

A young girl on the right side of the composition carries what appears to be a rabbit nestled inside a basket in the crook of her elbow. Behind her a taller young woman pets a dog whose

mouth is suggested by a minuscule slash of red. A third girl, seated to the left in the background, is nearly imperceptible. Details such as ribbons, flowers, and broaches have been gouged into the spackled layers of paint with the tail end of the artist's brush.

This piece teeters between the genuinely ugly and seductively compelling and lingers on the senses with mystical undertones. Although it is the oldest work

in the exhibit, it ironically seems the most contemporary because of its overwhelming sense of psychological tension.

A Mario Carreño painting from 1946 depicts a man strumming a guitar and a couple dancing in a sugar-cane field. This piece bears striking similarities to Lam's well-known Afro-Cuban paintings of the same period and reminded me of Manuel Mendive's current work. The figures are rendered with little modeling and are deceptively folkloric in nature. The trunk of a palm tree is suggested by a pair of swift vertical brush slashes, while the fronds appear heart-shaped and childlike in execution. The figures' faces allude to African art or masks.

Engaging the show's works in what amounts to a museumlike setting, Castillo has crafted a nifty, impressive exhibit. Even more admirable is his provocative approach to engaging the public. Although he had plenty of wall space to set up a strictly commercial venture, he seems less concerned with cranking out the sales.

And Quisqueya Henríquez's remarkable three-minute video loop of a rooster strutting across cobblestone Caribbean streets smartly pecks out a reminder that, rather than being the exotic stepchildren of their European elders, these often underrecognized modernists left a mark all their own and continue to inform art history debates today.

"Paris, Barcelona & Miami" Through March 31. David Castillo Modern and Contemporary Art, 2234 NW 2nd Ave, Miami; 305-573-8110. [www.castilloart.com](http://www.castilloart.com).



Wifredo Lam's *Portrait*