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Myths, Legends and Cuban Culture

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER JULY 29, 2011



MULTICULTURAL "KachIreme," a video and installation by Leandro Soto. Credit Leandro Soto

One thing you will learn at "Ajiaco: Stirrings of the Cuban Soul" is that Cuba contains an extraordinary mix of cultures, derived from many African ethnic groups, Europe, Asia and the native Amerindians. What is not apparent in this exhibition, on view at the [Newark Museum](#), is that contemporary art associated with Cuba — that is, made by artists living in Cuba or who are Cuban-born but living in the United States — is similarly heterogeneous.

The exhibition, which was organized by [Gail Gelburd](#) and originally mounted in late 2009 and early 2010 at the [Lyman Allyn Art Museum](#) in New London, Conn., takes its title from the anthropologist and ethnomusicologist [Fernando Ortiz](#) (1881-1969), who described Cuban culture as an “ajiaco,” after a stew that contains many ingredients.

Wall labels throughout the show expand on Mr. Ortiz’s statement, describing the syncretism that exists in Cuban culture, in which two or more belief systems are combined. The art here, however, does not follow this same ajiaco pattern. Most of it springs from the same lineage of Surrealist-inspired midcentury modernism, updated with installation and identity politics, both of which flourished in the 1980s and ’90s. Throughout, there is a heavy emphasis on pattern, craft and what has been pegged in literature as magical realism, much to the dismay of many Latin American authors stuck with the label.

Photo



CHARACTERS "Cia Cara," a 2005 Polaroid on panel by Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, is part of the exhibition “Ajiaco: Stirrings of the Cuban Soul” on view at the Newark Museum. CreditCollection of Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

Early in the exhibition, we meet the patron saint of modern Cuban art, [Wifredo Lam](#) (1902-82), whose work appears next to a wall label titled

“Syncretism and Wifredo Lam.” Lam’s father was a Chinese scholar; his mother was Afro-Cuban; his godmother was African. More important, Lam was active during an era when myths and legends were key for artists, bolstered by writers and thinkers like [Carl Jung](#), [Joseph Campbell](#) and [Edith Hamilton](#), as well as [Lydia Cabrera](#), a seminal writer on Afro-Cuban folklore, religion and culture who was a good friend of Mr. Lam’s.

Three modest works by Lam are here. “Rostro con Máscara y Eleguá (Face With Mask and Eleguá),” from 1947, is a small oil on canvas that shows the influence of Surrealism with its biomorphic shapes and squiggly marks that look like they might have erupted from the unconscious; Eleguá is a Yoruba deity. (Not only did Lam study in Spain with the same painter who taught [Salvador Dalí](#), but he also spent four months in Haiti with the French Surrealist [André Breton](#).)

Another small canvas, “Personnages sur Fond Vert Clair (Personages on Light Green Background)” and a ceramic plate, both from the 1970s, when Lam was living in Paris, show him working in a similar vein. However, his style here, like that of Picasso’s late work — the plate actually looks as if it were made by Picasso, who was a great influence on Lam — has become overly familiar, even rote.

Photo



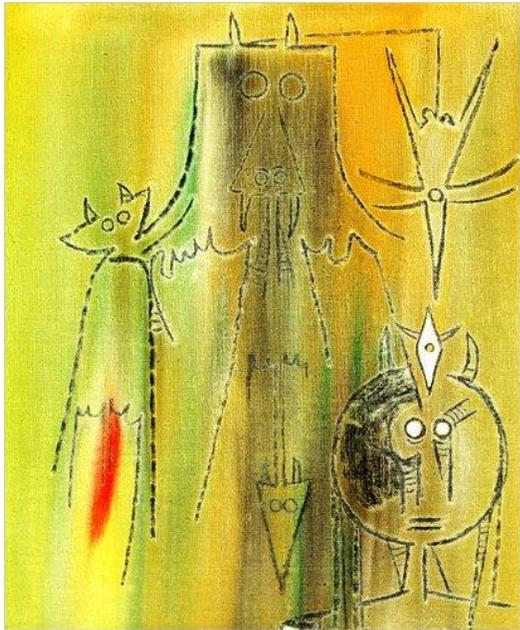
An untitled 1983 photograph from the "Silueta (Silhouette)" series by Ana Mendieta. Credit Collection of Sherry Buckberrough

The rest of the exhibition is divided into sections dedicated to specific cultural heritages. And yet, much of the painting updates Lam's Surrealism to include influences like [Frida Kahlo](#), [Julio Galán](#) or 1980s Italian Expressionists like [Francesco Clemente](#), [Sandro Chia](#) and [Enzo Cucchi](#).

Strange, hybrid creatures appear in many of the works. [Manuel Mendive's](#) painting "Se Alimenta Mi Espíritu (My Soul Is Nourished)," from 2007, features conjoined humanoids nestled in the tail feathers of a peacock, which is sprouting out of a blue human's back. [Belkis Ayón's](#) "Dormida (Asleep)," from 1995, includes nightmarish figures with hollow eyes that hark back to [Goya's](#) Black Paintings — although Ayón's work is included in the "African Ritual Practices" section, which touches on [Santería](#), a religion that blends Yoruba and Catholic beliefs and practices.

Installation art, which grew out of 1970s practices and became popular in the 1980s and '90s, provided a sculptural platform for musing on cultural identity. [Carlos Estévez's](#) "Nadie Puede Ver por Mis Ojos (Nobody Can See Through My Eyes)," from 1994, consists of a carved human figure — presumably the artist — standing on a circular bed of earth, with a canopy of bent sticks radiating from his eyes. Juan Boza's "Coronación de la Tierra (Crowning of the Earth)," from 1990, a year before the artist died in Brooklyn, also includes a bed of dirt on top of which are placed found objects suggestive of the Caribbean: hard candy (representing the sugar trade), little rum bottles, coconuts, cigars and an armature hung with colorful, shaped paintings.

Photo



"Personnages sur Fond Vert Clair (Personages on Light Green Background)" by Wifredo Lam. Credit Collection of Ramon and Nercys Cernuda Ajiaco

A more recent installation, mounted in the tiny "Postmodern Cuba" section, includes performance, which has grown increasingly popular over the past decade. What you see in [Leandro Soto's](#) "KachIreme," from 2008, is a long, colorful scroll painted with playful patterns and wrapped around the gallery wall; a suit, painted in similar motifs, laid out on the floor; and a video showing the artist, masked and clad in the suit, dancing like a shaman as he waves a scroll around him.

If Lam is Cuba's modern master, [Ana Mendieta](#) (1948-85) is its postmodern mistress. She is included in a section titled "Spirit of the Amerindians," although her work, like much on view, could have been slotted into another category. Photographs from the "Silueta (Silhouette)" series in the 1980s serve as simple but powerful reminders of why she is such a revered artist. Shaping mounds of earth into a silhouette mirroring her body, and adding pigment outlines or doing other interventions (sometimes literally scorching the earth), Ms. Mendieta connected the long history of fertility objects and religious practice with newer phenomena like performance art, feminism, earthworks and Conceptualism, for which photography was a primary vehicle.

Ms. Mendieta was born in Cuba, although, like many of the artists here, she did not remain there. Her work might also be described as "syncretic," although its spiritualism is somewhat submerged, since religion was not a hot topic in postmodernism. In fact, as with Lam, her significance in the greater art world might be the fact that her work does not necessarily look Cuban, but instead celebrates the global art idioms popular at the moment.

And this is the paradox of "Ajiaco." Because, while it argues for the diversity of Cuban culture, the exhibition also makes the case for a singular "Cuban soul" derived from a particular lineage of mystical, magical realism-surrealism. It feels rooted in ideas from an earlier era. We miss the effects of the revolution and later developments, and how these made art of the Cuban diaspora even more of an ajiaco.

"Ajiaco: Stirrings of the Cuban Soul" is at the Newark Museum, 49 Washington Street, Newark, through Aug. 14.

newarkmuseum.org or (973) 596-6550.