



ART REVIEW: Manuel Mendive Breaks New Ground in Miami

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by Elisa Turner

Rarely does one encounter such a revelatory exhibition as “Things That Cannot Be Seen Any Other Way: The Art of Manuel Mendive,” at Miami’s Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum of Florida International University. Shedding brilliant light on fascinating, still often misunderstood artworks, the exhibition is interlaced with innumerable international connections, underscoring the creative heritage at the heart of Afro-Caribbean culture.

“Things That Cannot Be Seen Any Other Way” brings together more than 50 paintings, as well as drawings, sculptures, tapestry and performance art to examine the 50-year career of Cuban artist Manuel Mendive, whom many consider the most prominent contemporary artist of Cuba and the Caribbean.

This magnificent exhibit clearly illustrates why Mendive should be welcomed with hosannas of praise into the so-called mainstream art world.

First in the United States

Curator Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz explains in the principal catalog essay that this is the first show in the United States to examine how Mendive has long incorporated visual and material culture of Afro-Cuban religion into his art. Martínez-Ruiz—the director of the Orbis Africa Advanced Research Center, Department of Art & Art History of Stanford University—points out that this show affords a unique opportunity to see a range of Mendive’s art, with works from the artist’s own collection in Cuba as well as from collections in the Caribbean, United States, and Europe.

Mendive’s art reveals a lavishly imagined, mythic world, populated by his interpretation of Afro-Cuban religious spirits and their stories of regeneration and reverence for nature itself. Such spirits represent a particularly affecting instance of New World syncretism, the combining of different, often seemingly contradictory beliefs through the blending of practices of various schools of thought.

In their transformed existence in Cuba, African spirits were often intermixed with Catholic saints, once West African Yoruba religious customs had migrated to Cuba after surviving the so-called Middle Passage. This cross-cultural migration began when captured slaves were transported from their homeland in West Africa to work in sugar cane fields in the Caribbean.

Dancing with Luminous Beauty

Inspired by this brutal history studded with its own tales of survival and perseverance, Mendive

creates artworks dancing with luminous beauty, color and texture. The exhibit charts the evolution of his style from early works wholeheartedly committed to a flat perspective, such as *Oshun* (1970), to later ones employing an atmospheric, slightly less flattened sense of space. In *Oshun*, a work of tempera on heavy paper, there's little trace of Mendive's later, tender treatment of form, space and color in such paintings as the 2007 work, *Se alimenta mi espiritu* (My Soul Is Nourished).



"Oshún" by Manuel Mendive, 1970. Tempera on heavy paper, 16 1/2 x 21 1/4 inches. Courtesy of Pan American Art Projects.



"Se alimenta mi espiritu (My Soul is Nourished)" by Manuel Mendive, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 65 3/4 x 95 inches. Courtesy of Ramon and Nercys Cernuda Collection.

Adopting a bold composition briefly flirting with abstraction, *Oshun* presents a female figure and a peacock gazing into each other's eyes. Fittingly, the work is named for a Yoruba deity associated with love. The figures, portrayed in colorful, patterned forms, are placed in a forest and are surrounded by trees depicted primarily as green, flat, ovoid forms dotted with red, outlined in black to heighten the composition's lack of spatial depth. Ironically, Mendive's signature flat perspective has led to misleading interpretations that he's an untrained, naïve artist. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Mendive, born in 1944, belongs to the first generation of Cuban artists to study at Cuba's National Fine Arts Academy, San Alejandro, following Fidel Castro's rise to power in 1959. His early drawings from this period show the mark of a formally-trained artist, such as 1962's *Retrato de Matilde - mi mama* (Portrait of Matilde - My Mother). He was also born into a family with close ties to Yoruba religious customs.



"Retrato de Matilde- mi mama (Portrait of Matilde - my Mother)" by Manuel Mendive, 1962. Pencil drawing on paper, 9 x 6 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

Frost Museum Director Carol Damian contrasts Mendive to Cuban artists better known for their Modernist aesthetic, such as Wifredo Lam. Mendive “was the first artist to work from the knowledge and vision given through religious initiation into Yoruba religions,” she writes in her essay “Manuel Mendive Hoyo: Art and Spirit for the exhibit catalog.”

In the painting *Paño sagrado* (Sacred Cloth, 2007), Mendive transcribes his own narrative of transformation and beginning anew, evoking a parallel with countless stories folded into Afro-Caribbean culture over many years.

The composition is divided into three vertical segments. At the bottom, hybrid creatures float in a watery space. It’s a Darwin-defying mix of bird, butterfly, fish and human that includes an especially large fish-creature, comprised of curvilinear outlined forms, renderings of a fish colored deep blue, and collaged cowrie shells.



“Paño sagrado (Sacred Cloth)” by Manuel Mendive, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 56 3/4 x 65 3/4 inches. On loan from Alin Ryan Lobo.

This Mendive-invented creature is thought to evoke the Yoruba god of the sea, *Olokun*, usually represented in Yoruba lore as a large fish. In the middle segment, more fish-human creatures swim, an activity often associated with spiritual cleansing. Now they seem closer to the water’s surface. One possesses three female breasts; in the Yoruba pantheon, a three-breasted woman is associated with vitality and the cross-roads, an intersection in a journey that requires a life-defining decision.

In the third and largest segment, grass sprouts at the water’s edge and Mendive’s menagerie enjoys more breathing room after a long journey. Included is a large human-bird figure, dotted with cowrie shells, reaching out to another amorphous figure that’s part indigo-blue peacock, evoking creativity.

In the scholarly analysis of Yoruba deities and motifs provided in the show’s catalog, a human-bird figure is linked to the “exchange of messages from this world to the next.” With sophisticated formal skills, Mendive manipulates the picture plane to meld ancient, still evolving traditions within a contemporary art narrative.

Se alimenta mi espíritu (My Soul Is Nourished, 2007) provides a riveting panorama of Mendive’s magical view of the world, with a constellation of hybrid bird, human, and animal creatures levitating, kneeling, and touching one another, with one even balancing on another to nurse from a goat with three teats.

Colors are modulated shades of orange, yellow, red, indigo-blue, and forest green; stippling some

forms are lighter colors, perhaps nodding to patterns on African masks. It's a lush vision of an interconnected world, embracing humans and nature into one vibrant, undulating stream.

Soft Sculpture Linked to Quilts, Afro-Caribbean Traditions

The show also includes Mendive's soft sculpture, acknowledging his his interest in textiles since the early 1960s. As Martínez-Ruiz explains in his catalog essay, these soft sculptures recall American quilts as well as cloth banners created by Yoruba people in the West African Republic of Benin.

The sculpture also evokes Caribbean traditions: exquisite Vodou flags of Haiti and elaborate assemblages by Haitian artist Pierrot Barra. Again, it might be easy to misconstrue Mendive's soft sculptures as further examples of naïve art, but their simplicity acquires considerable resonance when presented in the context of this exhibit.

Consider the soft sculpture *El ojo que mira I* (Seeing Eye I, 1985). It's a lumpish form in mottled green, dotted with yellow, dangling, leg-like appendages. A single embroidered red-rimmed eye may suggest the watchful gaze of a participant in religious rituals, as well as an emblem of truthful guidance through life's vicissitudes.



"El ojo que mira I (Seeing Eye I)" by Manuel Mendive, 1985. Soft sculpture cloth and canvas, 47 1/2 x 21x 3 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Ramon and Nercys Cernuda Collection.

Mendive's soft sculpture is light years away from Claes Oldenburg but does invite subtle parallels with celebrated quilts made by African-American women of Gee's Bend, Alabama. Indeed, this exhibit demands further attention to the sweeping and astonishing legacy of Afro-Caribbean culture.

BASIC INFO: "Things That Cannot Be Seen Any Other Way: The Art of Manuel Mendive" is exhibited through Jan. 25, 2014, at The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum at Florida International University, 10975 S.W. 17 St., Miami, FL 33199. For details, visit www.thefrost.fiu.edu.

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