

# ArtNexus

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paintings, like *Arca* (Ark, 1994), in which one arm extends becoming a paddle. Other motifs that he integrates into his artistic vocabulary are: tires, used by migrants as boats, and sharks that signal the imminence of death. In *Arca*, the treatment of these elements demonstrates Cruz-Azaceta's great versatility. By including rope in various parts of the tire, the artist makes the tire resemble a lifeguard, while a loose rope denotes its precariousness. Sharks appear in photo collages and Polaroids superimposed to the tire and the head of the man-paddle. A third one appears at the top, and from a large brown stain that emanates from it drips the center of the box covering the face of the artist. For the exquisite visual way of resolving the image, this is one of the strongest works in the group.

But it is not alone. *Pared 4* (Wall 4, 1999), also a large work, presents a double self-portrait: two tilted heads on a square concrete wall standing against a background of irregular horizontal lines where several white circles scattered across the picture space can be observed. A reddish stripe by the side of the wall descends and expands to the floor, and continues to the left of the painting forming an inverted L. It looks like an arm that extends and sharpens like the tip of an insect. Two thin ropes are perpendicularly lowered from the top left end and intersect more than about half of the frame. These simple lines on the lined background create a similar constructs Jesus Rafael Soto optical effect. The visual game pauses in the compact form of the wall, where the heads denote isolation and death appear.

While in this work Cruz-Azaceta appears to respond to existential concerns of an abstract nature, in others he reacts to specific historical events like in *Atentado de Oklahoma 2* (Oklahoma Bombing 2, 1997) and *9/11 WTC* (2001); events particularly related to the senseless violence of terrorism and war. More recent works have continued to explore in-depth the social traumas stemming from his firsthand experience of the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Expanding the use of materials and found objects as carriers of the marks left by the disaster, Cruz-Azaceta reaffirms his interest in anguishing contemporary themes. The quality of the selection of works undoubtedly succeeded in offering a clear idea of this ample spectrum. But

the layout could have been more careful. For a monographic retrospective exhibition, chronological organization remains the best model, and although it should not be applied as a straitjacket, nor should it be ignored completely.

Elvis Fuentes

## NEW YORK / NY

### Carlos Cruz-Diez

#### Americas Society

From February to March 2014, the Americas Society hosted one of the first exhibitions dedicated to the photographic practice of Carlos Cruz-Diez. Not only was this body of work wholly unexpected from the master colorist and kinetic artist, the gallery presentation also coincided with a period of intense rioting and social unrest throughout Venezuela, making it a bittersweet testament to a bygone era. The majority of the black and white photographs on display featured documentary images of folk festivals and daily life in rural communities. Beautifully composed and printed and exquisitely mounted, the photographs added another layer of complexity to the career of one of the most celebrated postwar Latin American artists and shed new light on the transition between social realism and geometric abstraction in Venezuelan art.

Curated by Gabriela Rangel, the exhibition was the second solo show dedicated to the artist since 2008. The first, *(In)formed by Color*, featured his geometric and kinetic work. Rangel discovered the photographic oeuvre on a visit to the artist's Paris studio. "When I saw his photos, I saw all the social and participatory aspects of his later work came from here," she commented in a *New York Times* interview (March 7, 2014). Indeed, the photographs, produced for the most part between the 1940s and 1950s, emphasize community and ritual. Only a handful feature single individuals or spaces devoid of people. Instead, social interaction is a primary concern.

Through didactic materials displayed in cases, the viewer learns that Cruz-Diez explored different modes of figuration around 1950. *El Hatillo Watercolor: The Children of Ezequiela and Ramón* depicts two simply dressed, barefoot young boys rendered in

pastel tones and posed against an almost blank background. Sharing an affectionate embrace with one of the boys smiling and both looking towards the viewer, the drawing elicits a sympathetic response. *El Diablo José Domingo*, from the same year, with its bold palette of oranges, greens, and blues and anatomical distortions, could not be more different in style. A man with an elongated neck holds a mask of one of the dancing devils of Yare against his chest and gazes out of the picture plane. What the two images have in common is the desire to engage the spectator, a feature that remains a constant in Cruz-Diez's work, as noted by Rangel.

Cruz-Diez took up photography as a teenager, first using a pinhole camera and then upgrading to a Rolleiflex. Before embracing abstract painting, he turned an ethnographer's gaze to the traditions and changing landscape of his native Venezuela. One of his most memorable photographs is *La Burriquita, El Silencio, Caracas, Venezuela*, featuring a typical folkloric dance involving a male performer wearing a skirt with a big bustle and a donkey's head and neck attached near the hips. The artist captures a moment when the dancer pauses and stares outwards, while the musicians continue to play. Behind them are the modernist buildings of the district of El Silencio, designed in the early 1940s by Carlos Raúl Villanueva. The photograph is a study in contrasts, between modernity and tradition, movement and stasis, and forms and textures. The smooth, unadorned walls of the buildings juxtapose the baroque straw hats decorated with flowers worn by the performers. The gaudy flower prints of the dress oppose the cool elegance of the architecture.

Another poignant image is one of the beloved Venezuelan poet Aquiles Nazoa looking out on the Valley of Caracas from the Barrio La Charneca. At this moment (1948), this was a sparsely populated hillside neighborhood overlooking an open expanse with fields and few low-lying buildings. Today, the barrio is so populous that the government built a system of cable cars to transport the inhabitants to and from their homes. The area of the city below became home to what were for a time the tallest skyscrapers in Latin America.

Through his exploration of photographic social realism, Cruz-Diez sought to develop

a visual language that would capture the idiosyncrasies of Venezuela. In an early image, *Catía La Mar, Vargas, Venezuela* (1949), the artist employs a Mexicanist aesthetic, posing a young couple against cacti and employing soft focus and a tonal range of grays. Images such as *La Piñata, El Hatillo, Estado Miranda, Venezuela* (1952) are more representative of his particular photographic vision. He captures a boy in mid-air swatting at a piñata while other children look on. The image emphasizes spontaneity, employing sharp focus, high contrasts, and cropped bodies, features evident in other works such as *Los Diablos de Yare, San Francisco de Yare, Estado Miranda, Venezuela* (1951) and *Hacienda La Marturetera, Capaya, Barlovento, Estado Miranda, Venezuela* (1953). Overall, the exhibition makes a convincing case for locating a common ground between representation and abstraction in the work of a master whom everyone thought they knew.

Tatiana Flores

## Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck

Henrique Faria Fine Art

I'm having trouble deciding whether I am sufficiently paranoid or sufficiently realistic to appreciate the assumptions in the work of Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck. It is likely best to accept both possibilities no matter the contradictions. But exploration is integral to learning—especially at the site of contradiction.

First, the invisible but integral background. (Paranoia always presupposes such.) The recent mood in the USA is one of mixed feelings over the 2008 recession when the forces of capital and the greed of investors created a perfect storm (again) and people lost a great deal of their personal wealth. Part of the recuperation was to elect a liberal president to help defend the "little person." However, the script has not been traditional and many feel not enough has been done; some argue that the same will happen again due to lack of stronger reforms.

The stage is set then for much of the meaning in Yazbeck's work, and, I argue, also establishes an over-reliance by him to carry the weight of his intentions, which, while timely and relevant, remain too generalized. For example, in the back room are strung handmade Venezuelan hammocks ("Chinchorro/Hammock" series, 2004-2013) each with a large, framed print of Venezuelan oil derricks sitting in them (Rolando Peña's 1989-90 silkscreens, "Oil Project"). That's an easy and well-known indictment to make: it's us, the common people in the hammocks, USA or Venezuela, versus them—large corporations, centralized political bureaucracies, capitalism—or is the socialism of Chavez? Or is it...? Move that oil derrick, I want to lay down!

But in other parts of the exhibition Balteo Yazbeck argues visually (and with some text) that the culprits are not so much them as us, or us with them. He expands the category

of "them" to include the art world, which means "us" is entangled with "them," or to use the generic title Balteo Yazbeck has given his decades-long project, it is a matter of "Modern Entanglements." Now that is the sort of complexity that is not only realistic but also admirable in its recognition. Yet it opens the door to the demand of specifics.

The title is also his working procedure, meaning that the entanglements are represented by strategically joining various contexts together to make, or at least imply, the connections he wants us to think about. Some of the connections are obvious and well established; other connections are not as clear. They rely more on his and our own preconceived assumptions about who is doing what to, and with, whom more than they address the complexity of the connections in the real world. In one work we can locate both impulses.

On a wall hangs a very large (8 by 11 1/2 foot; 252 x 357.5 cm) Inkjet replica of a color field painting ("Waldorf Astoria, 1961") from his series titled "Israeli Nuclear Arsenal" (begun in 2004 and on-going) with rather strange, decontextualized phrases recorded from a 1961 meeting between US President John F. Kennedy and Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. On the surface the quotations imply a coordinated cover-up between the two-countries to hide Israel's nuclear program. And to anyone who knows their modern art history, we know the first international tour of US Abstract Expressionist (Ab Ex) painting in the 1950s was financially

Carlos Cruz-Diez. *The Piñata, El Hatillo, State of Miranda, Venezuela*, 1953. Gelatin silver. 11 13/16 x 11 13/16 in. (30 x 30 cm.). Courtesy of the artist.



Alessandro Balteo. *Eames-Derivative (Small Version)*, from the series *Cultural Diplomacy: An Art We Neglect*, 2006-2013. In collaboration with Media Farzin. 1206 custom-made slotted cards, silk thread, 5 framed vintage magazine ads, narrative wall labels, vinyl wall lettering, glass and wood platform, tape. Variable dimensions. Edition 3/6. Detail.

