



VISIONARY  
APONTE:  
ART & BLACK  
FREEDOM

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY FINE ARTS GALLERY  
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*Visionary Aponte: Art and Black Freedom* takes as its point of departure an extraordinary—and now lost—historical artifact: a so-called “Book of Paintings.” Its creator was José Antonio Aponte, a free black carpenter, artist, and former soldier who was also the leader of an ambitious antislavery conspiracy in Cuba in 1812. During his trial, Aponte was forced to provide testimony describing each of the pictures in his book. They portrayed a wide array of subject matter, from Biblical scenes to landscapes to episodes in the history of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Using those descriptions, twenty contemporary artists have reimagined Aponte’s book for our present, inviting us to think about the role of art and history in making social change.

*Visionary Aponte* was first presented in the Little Haiti Cultural Center of Miami. It then moved to New York University and Duke University in North Carolina. In 2019, it was exhibited in Santiago de Cuba and Havana, the city where Aponte was born, before arriving at Vanderbilt University.

## ARTISTS

Grettel Arrate	Emilio Martínez
José Bedía	Emilio Adán Martínez
María Magdalena Campos-Pons	Nina Mercer
Juan Roberto Diago	Clara Morera
Édouard Duval-Carrié	Glexis Novoa
Alexis Esquivel Bermudez	Vickie Pierre
Joëlle Ferly	Marielle Plaisir
Teresita Fernández	Asser Saint-Val
Alberto Lescay	Jean-Marcel St. Jacques
Tessa Mars	Renée Stout

Curated by: Édouard Duval-Carrié and Ada Ferrer

José Antonio Aponte was a free black carpenter, soldier, and artist in Havana.



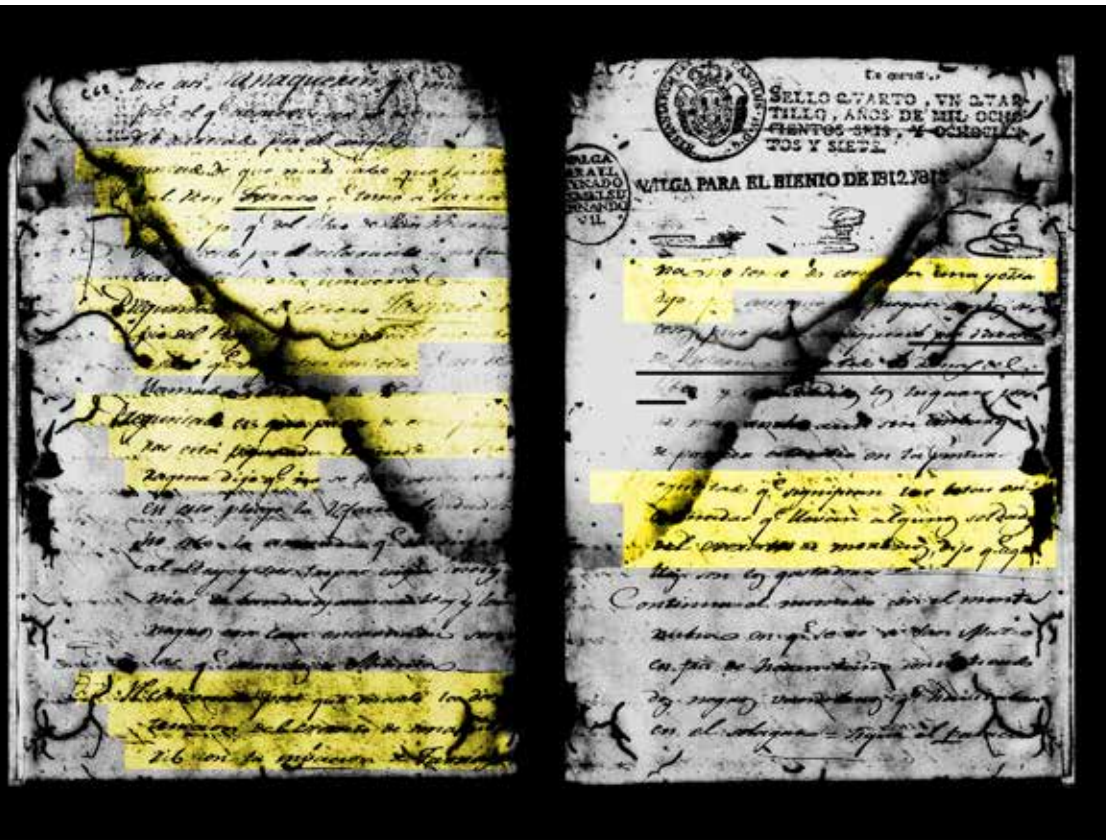
José Nicolas de Escalera, *Uniform of the Battallón de Morenos de la Habana*, 1763, drawing. Courtesy of the Archivo General de Indias (Fondo Mapas y Planos, 25).

In 1812, he was accused of masterminding a major conspiracy and rebellion against slavery in Cuba, then one of the most profitable sugar plantation economies in the world. As the island’s Spanish authorities investigated Aponte, they found hidden in his house an unusual work of art, made by Aponte himself.

Authorities called it a “Book of Paintings,” though the term is somewhat misleading. It featured 63 images that combined painting and drawing with collaged cutouts taken from decorative fans, engravings, and books. His intricate compositions portrayed Biblical stories and lush landscapes; black men as emperors, warriors, and librarians; scenes from Egypt and Ethiopia, Rome and Spain, Havana and the heavens.

Though Aponte testified that he made the book for the King of Spain as a gift, in the run-up to the rebellion he used the book for a very different purpose. He showed his co-conspirators the book’s battle scenes to illustrate how they should organize their own rebellion in Havana, and he pointed out pictures of powerful black men and of himself as a would-be king to show them that other worlds were possible.

During his trial, Aponte was forced to describe the pictures in his “Book of Paintings.”



“Expediente sobre el declarante José Antonio Aponte y el sentido de las pinturas que se hayan en el L. Que se aprehendió en su casa. Conspiración de José Antonio Aponte, 24 de marzo de 1812.” Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Asuntos Políticos, legajo 12, expediente 17. Courtesy of Archivo Nacional de Cuba.

Convinced of his guilt and the threat he posed to slavery, authorities hanged Aponte in public on April 9, 1812. His head was severed from his body, secured on a post, and placed in a cage about a block from his house at an important crossroads in the city. There it would serve as a warning to other potential rebels. Then sometime after his execution, the “Book of Paintings” disappeared.

Aponte’s trial testimony is thus all that remains of his fascinating book. The page above is reproduced from that testimony, housed in the Archivo Nacional de Cuba. The interrogator’s questions are highlighted in yellow. Underlined is Aponte’s answer to the question of why he drew what he did: “for reason of history like everything else in the book.”

A transcription of Aponte’s testimony about his “Book of Paintings,” prepared by Jorge Pavez, is available on the digital humanities website Digital Aponte. The site includes other important information about the book, Aponte, and his Havana.

Visit <http://aponte.hosting.nyu>.



Aponte’s story did not end in 1812.



Aponte’s Return in its proposed location outside Havana. Courtesy of Alberto Lescaj.



Commemoration in Havana on the anniversary of Aponte’s execution, 2013. Photograph courtesy of Amílcar Ortiz Cárdenas.



“Aponte Vive” banner at *Misterios de Vudu* performance, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Caridad Diez.

In twentieth-century Cuba, the phrase “más malo que Aponte”—more evil than Aponte—was a common insult. Yet many drew inspiration from Aponte and kept his memory alive over generations. In the 1930s, a street was named for Aponte; in the 1940s, he was honored with a commemorative plaque. Today, the Cuban government’s Aponte Commission develops antiracist cultural programming.

Renowned Cuban sculptor Alberto Lescaj recently designed a monument to Aponte that will be erected in Peñas Atlas, site of the slave rebellion plotted by Aponte and his colleagues. Titled “Aponte’s Return,” the sculpture symbolically undoes Aponte’s violent execution. Rising 30 feet from the earth, it depicts Aponte breaking out of a cage, holding his own head high.

*Visionary Aponte* is a different kind of monument to Aponte. Drawing on Aponte’s own descriptions of his book, its artists envision, as Aponte himself did, black history and freedom beyond a single place and time, and they consider the role of art in an ongoing struggle for freedom and justice.



**GRETTEL ARRATE  
HECHAVARRÍA**  
Born in 1964 in Santiago de Cuba  
Lives and works in Santiago de Cuba

*Lámina 42*  
“The pyramids of Egypt with the number six hundred eighty two on the bottom... The left figure demonstrates the incorruptible mortality of the corpses that exist in the cemetery comprised in this painting. The representation of childhood and innocence follows. Then, the Pantheons that safeguard the pyramids and culminate in a mosque.”

Grettel Arrate graduated in painting and drawing from the José Joaquín Tejada Provincial Academy of Plastic Arts of Santiago de Cuba in 1983, and in History of Art from the Universidad de Oriente in 1990. She has participated in more than 14 solo exhibitions in important museums and art galleries in Cuba and international venues. She has also participated in more than 35 mural painting projects. She was also part of the team that built the Antonio Maceo Revolution Plaza of Santiago de Cuba. She works as director of the Provincial Center for Plastic Arts and Design of Santiago de Cuba where, since 1992, she has curated, organized, and coordinated more than 600 exhibitions of Cuban and international artists. She worked as vice-president of the Provincial Council of Plastic Arts in Santiago de Cuba from 1994 to 1996. She was also vice-president of the Association of Plastic Artists for the Writers and Artists Union of Cuba (UNEAC) between 2005 and 2010, and its president from 2010 to 2014. She was again president of the association from 2017 to 2019, after which she was elected vice-president of the Provincial Committee of Santiago de Cuba. Her works are part of private collections in France, England, Germany, United States, Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Luxembourg, Spain, Austria, China, Colombia, Haiti, Denmark, and other countries.

This piece is inspired by Aponte’s testimony about his lámina 42, which represented the pyramids of Egypt. Arrate tries to recreate Aponte’s narration, recontextualizing and appropriating the pharaonic atmosphere by using the symmetry and synthesis of forms the Egyptians so masterfully applied in their ordinary lives. In the piece, Arrate represents the three great pyramids existing one within the other in perfect geometry. Its varied texture symbolizes the mixture of civilizations that coexist and connect in time and space, whereas the blue and metallic gold leafing represents the sumptuousness and richness of Egyptian civilization. The numbers, and the straight and circular lines, are linked to mathematical knowledge. With the use of contemporary tools and materials, Arrate tries to bring the language and legacy of ancient Egyptian civilization to the present. At the same time, she translates Aponte’s thoughts from her point of view.



*Lámina No. 42, Testimonio de Aponte.* Mixed media/cardboard, 40 x 33.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



José Bedia Studio

**JOSÉ BEDIA**  
Born in 1959 in Havana, Cuba  
Lives and works in Miami, FL  
<http://josebedia.com>

*Láminas 24-25*  
“... the author of the book presents himself in this portrait displaying on his chest a Laurel of fidelity, a palm for victory, what seems like a compass to the left is seen the carpentry bench where he made said Book... and childhood represented by a figure of a boy tied to a column and in the foreground the face of an old man... also shown on the bench are an inkwell, rulers, and pots of paint.”

José Bedia is an internationally acclaimed Cuban painter whose art is inspired by many sacred sources, including initiation into the Brillumba lineage of the Afro-Cuban religion Palo Monte. Bedia’s work often critiques colonial histories by combining myths, symbols, and ritual elements with references to nature and global warfare. His time in Angola as part of the cultural brigades that supported the Angolan-Cuban War against Namibia and South Africa (1985) amplified his quest for the African and indigenous roots of American cultures. He has conducted extensive research in Peru, Mexico, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Zambia, Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania and Laos. Bedia studied at the San Alejandro Art Academy and the Instituto Superior del Arte. He participated in the first Havana Biennial (1984) and first showed abroad in Paris in Magiciens de la Terre (1989). He represented Cuba at the 1990 Venice Biennale and received a Guggenheim Fellowship (1992). Bedia and his family moved to Mexico in 1991 and settled in Miami in 1993. His art has since been exhibited in the Havana, São Paulo, Venice, and Beijing Biennales. His work is featured in numerous collections, including the Museo Nacional Palacio de Bellas Artes (Havana); MoMA, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney, and Guggenheim (New York); Tate Modern (London); Hirshhorn Museum (Washington, DC); La Colección Daros (Zurich), MEIAC, DA2, IVAM, CAAM (Spain); and MOCA and PAMM (Miami).

Bedia’s “*Júbilo de Aponte*” responds to several images in Aponte’s “Book of Paintings,” among them Aponte’s self-portrait, the battle scene between white and black armies, depictions of Havana fortresses, the Virgin of Regla, and the Abyssinian lion. Bedia arranged the piece to suggest a construction, a monument or mausoleum, to Aponte’s memory. All of the elements are interlinked and united by a black ribbon—white ribbons are mentioned several times throughout the text as one of the objects that authorities confiscated in his house—so he turned them black instead to allude to a state of mourning.



*Júbilo de Aponte, 2017,* mixed media on mixed papers, 106 x 143 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



## MARÍA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS

Born in 1959 in La Vega, Matanzas, Cuba  
Lives and works in Nashville, Tennessee

### *Láminas 32-33*

*"The figure printed with blue ink located high between Nigero and Cojimar pulled by two eagles means [the agora] of Air: the other between Santelmo and Cabaña is Neptune that surfaces from the sea."*

María Magdalena Campos-Pons was born in the town of La Vega, in the Cuban province of Matanzas, in 1959. She grew up on a sugar plantation, and in a family of Nigerian, Hispanic, and Chinese roots. Her Nigerian ancestors were brought as slaves to Cuba in the 19th century, and since then have transmitted their traditions, rites, and beliefs. Campos-Pons' work is autobiographical. Her polyglot heritage deeply influences her artistic practice, which combines diverse media, including photography, performance, painting, sculpture, cinema, and video. She researches themes of history, memory, gender, and religion, and how they all inform identity. Through deeply poetic and eerie images, Campos-Pons evokes histories of the transatlantic slave trade, the indigo and sugar plantations, Catholic religious practices, Santería, and revolutionary uprisings.

The works of Campos-Pons are part of more than 30 museum collections, including the Smithsonian Institution, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery of Canada, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Pérez Art Museum in Miami, among others. She has had solo exhibitions at MoMA, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Peabody Essex Museum, the National Gallery of Canada and other distinguished institutions. She has presented more than 30 exhibitions commissioned by institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum and the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery. She has participated in the Biennials of Venice, Dakar, Johannesburg, Documenta 14, and the Triennial of Guangzhou. She is also included in Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA and the Prospect 4 Triennial. In October 2017, she became the Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.



*Five Apparitions*, 2019. From the *A Piece of Sea* series. Watercolor, ink, and gouache on paper, 22.5 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



## JUAN ROBERTO DIAGO

Born in 1971 in Havana, Cuba  
Lives and works in Havana, Cuba  
Pan American Art Projects, Miami, FL  
<http://panamericanart.com/portfolio/roberto-diago>

Úrsula Lambert

### *Láminas 44b-45*

*"... the black King named TARRACO ... is the one who invaded Tarragona from which he took that name: he appears with black soldiers, some in red boots, all with spears and Swords, carrying six yellow flags."*

Juan Roberto Diago graduated from the San Alejandro Academy in Havana (1990) and began to exhibit his artwork soon after. Diago comes from a family of artists and the work of his grandfather, after whom he is named, was a big influence. The senior Roberto Diago, despite his short life, was one of the pivotal voices of Cuban art in the 1940s. From the beginning of his career, Diago has been preoccupied with the theme of identity, which he renders and conveys through social inferences. Thematically, the unifying thread in his oeuvre has been his critique of racism in Cuba; something that does not "officially" exist but is present in daily life. His early pieces were distinguished by the use of materials such as discarded wood and metal, as a reference to the living conditions of black people. Although black people do not exclusively endure these conditions, they have historically lived in the poorest neighborhoods and thus subjected to the worst overall living situations. This inspired Diago to make numerous installations that represent scaled-down houses that look real. Since the 1990s, Diago has participated in numerous exhibitions in Cuba and abroad. He represented Cuba in the 1997 Venice Biennale. His art is represented in prestigious collections globally, including the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana, Cuba; the CIFO (Cisneros Fontanals) Art Foundation in Miami, Florida; and the Rubin Foundation Collection, New York. The artist explains that Aponte inspires him "because he is a warrior, an angel of resistance, and of love."



*Tarraco*, 2017, mixed media on canvas on cardboard, 34 x 22 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Pan American Art Projects, Miami.



Associated Press 2009

**ÉDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ**  
 Born in 1954 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti  
 Lives and works in Miami, FL  
 Pan American Art Projects, Miami, FL  
<http://www.edouard-duval-carrie.com>

*Lámina 1*  
 “. . . the print that represents the Eternal Father upon a mirror is the creation of the world when God made the Firmament along with all things, and so the illustration is inscribed with the W[ord] that says “beginning” . . .”

Édouard Duval-Carrié was educated at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, in Paris, France; and at the University of Loyola Montreal, in Quebec, Canada. Duval-Carrié’s art belongs to many prominent museum and private collections globally, including the Davenport Museum of Art (Davenport, Iowa, USA); Pérez Art Museum Miami (Miami, Florida, USA); Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens (Paris, France); Musée du Pantheon National Haïtien (Port-au-Prince, Haiti); and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey. In his work, Duval-Carrié portrays a “Marvelous Reality,” as defined by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier in the prologue for his book, *The Kingdom of this World*, a story about Haiti that strongly influenced the artist. As a result, Duval-Carrié enfolded into his art the fantastic world of his country—by rendering its illustrious myths and legends—in ways that clearly critique the prevailing social and political order within Haitian society. Duval-Carrié’s art also features important aspects of Haitian history, including revolutionary heroes and other relevant figures. He references them to comment on the vital impact of Haitian history on contemporary society, including the legacy of slavery and independence and its weighted imprint on the country’s development up to the present. Duval-Carrié and his art also emphasize the neurological effects of immigration, exile, and displacement on daily Haitian life, at home and abroad.

Duval-Carrié has long been interested in connections between Haiti and the Spanish Caribbean, and José Antonio Aponte is key for understanding the Haitian Revolution’s impact in Cuba. Duval-Carrié was also drawn to other aspects of Aponte’s “Book of Paintings,” from his depiction of the biblical story of creation, to the representation of goddesses such as Minerva to the presence of Prester John and Ethiopia. The four paintings here, which respond to two of Aponte’s *láminas*, convey a sense of how Aponte condensed in his book not only his own history, but that of the whole of the Black Atlantic—a feat in itself and a unique enterprise unfortunately lost to us.



*Prester John and His Emissaries*, 2017, mixed media on Arches watercolor paper in artist frame, 36 x 26 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Pan American Art Projects, Miami.



**ALEXIS ESQUIVEL**  
 Born in 1968 in La Palma, Pinar del Rio, Cuba  
 Lives and works in Spain and Cuba

*Láminas 18-19*  
 “From Aponte to the King [God] and the Fatherland love like fire burns in living flames. Hidden to our sights its burning heat breaking out of the Waters the solid wall breathes flames in pure smoke.”

Alexis Esquivel’s paintings critically address racial problems, politics, society, and history in Cuba. In the 1990s, he was a proponent for pioneering exhibitions on race and racism in Cuba, such as *Queloides* and *Neither Musicians nor Athletes*. His works have been part of numerous collective exhibitions in and outside of Cuba, including the 13th Biennial of Havana and Prospect 4, Triennial of New Orleans. He has presented solo exhibitions at the Atlantic Center for Modern Art of Las Palmas (Canary Islands) and the Domus Artium (Salamanca, Spain), among other venues. His works are part of museum collections including the National Museum of Fine Arts of Havana, the Jorge Pérez Museum of Miami, the Afro-Latin American Research Institute of the University of Harvard, and Smith College Museum of Art. Esquivel graduated from the Enrique José Varona Higher Pedagogical Institute with a degree in Arts Education in 1991.

*Like fire burns in living flames* interprets Aponte’s certainty that an effective and lasting emancipation could not be achieved without the creation and defense of a racial historical discourse, which is infused with positive values so as to generate collective self-esteem. Aponte’s construction of a unique identity—depicted via a self-portrait in his book of paintings—went unnoticed by his arrogant and sarcastic captors. This self-portrait is re-imagined by Esquivel as a vengeance against Aponte’s executioners. The artist presents a possible face from among all of Aponte’s apocryphal faces, reincarnated in the body of Jean Baptiste Belley, as appropriated from the 1797 painting by Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson. Here, Esquivel aims to portray the human and political forces that inspired and shaped the character of Aponte as we know him today.



*Like fire burns in living flames* 2018, acrylic on canvas, 55 x 78.75 inches. Courtesy of the Afro-Latin American Research Institute, Harvard University.



Alain Cassang

### JOELLE FERLY

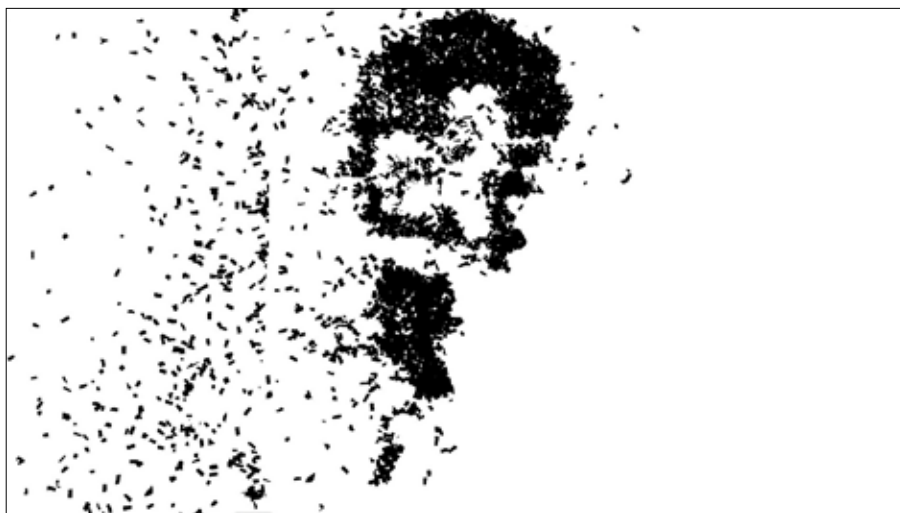
Born in 1970 in Paris, France  
Lives and works in Guadeloupe

#### *Lámina 31*

*"... and [King Carlos III] ran his finger along his forehead to verify if they had been, as he was, persuaded by news."*

Joëlle Ferly is a Guadeloupean artist. She obtained a M.S. in Photography at the University of Paris 8 and a M.S. in Fine Arts at the Saint Martins School of Art in London. She was educated in photography before pursuing a career in contemporary art. She does not privilege any media, but maximizes the transdisciplinary nature of art in different projects: photography, video art, presentations, and, most recently, writing and sound restitution. The themes most present in her work are absurdity, the condition of the artist in a "dominated country," and the social injustices to which the artist proposes aesthetic and poetic answers. Ferly's work has been exhibited in Europe, Africa, Central America, the United States, and the Caribbean at venues including the Biennials of Havana, Venezuela, and Aruba; the Pérez Art Museum and the Little Haiti Cultural Center in Miami; the Festival of Black Arts in Dakar, Senegal; the La Regenta Art Center (Las Palmas, Gran Canaria); the Museum of Contemporary Art (San Juan, Puerto Rico); the Clément Foundation in Martinique and the VI Transcultural Forum of Contemporary Art in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. In 2009 she founded *L'Autocarpe*, a collective of artists that promotes contemporary art in Guadeloupe.

*Revealing Aponte* is a kind of reconstitution of Aponte. Today, Aponte is known for his bravery, which has transcended his tragic fate. More than a legend, he is now a hero in the pantheon of activists who fought for the freedom of the New World's afro-descendants.



*Revealing Aponte (After Kentridge)* 2019, digital mute video. Courtesy of the artist.



Teresita Fernández Studio

### TERESITA FERNÁNDEZ

Born in 1968 in Miami, FL  
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY  
Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York, NY  
<http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/teresita-fernandez>

#### *Láminas 10-11*

*"...the planet Jupiter in the sign of Sagittarius, its star bright. Father he of Vulcan, the first blacksmith, who was cast with a kick to the Pyrenees[?] mountains, and looking for the best metals, he found gold, made a forge, and fashioned rays sending them to his Father to return to his grace, of which he still had hope..."*

Teresita Fernández is best known for her prominent public sculptures and unconventional use of materials. Her work is characterized by an interest in perception and the psychology of looking. Fernández's experiential, large-scale works are often inspired by a rethinking of the meaning of landscape and place, as well as by diverse historical and cultural references. Her sculptures present spectacular illusions that evoke natural phenomena and engage audiences in immersive art experiences and conceptual way-finding. Fernández is a 2005 MacArthur Foundation Fellow and the recipient of numerous awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a NEA Artist's Grant, and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Biennial Award. Appointed by President Obama, she is the first Latina to serve on the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. Fernández's works are included in many prominent collections and have been exhibited both nationally and internationally at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; The Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; and Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy, among others. Fernández received her MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University and her BFA from Florida International University.

For *Visionary Aponte*, Fernández reflected on Aponte's understanding of the cosmos as a space of both personal and political reprieve, a space inherently democratic because it could not be colonized. The piece, in pyrite, oil, graphite, and gold, also evokes West African alchemy traditions, with which Aponte and his co-conspirators may have been familiar.



*Aponte (Láminas 10-11)*, 2017, pyrite, oil, graphite on wood panel, 21.5 x 36 x 2 inches overall. Courtesy of the Artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York; photograph by Yolanda Navas.



**ALBERTO LESCAÝ**

Born in 1950 in Santiago de Cuba  
Lives and works in Santiago de Cuba

*Lámina 53*

*“The number fifty three manifests the lakes of hell according to the fables the canseaverio the seven deadly sins and the capture of Proserpina by Pluto.”*

“I’m a sculptor and painter, I was born on the last day of Scorpio, mid-twentieth century, at the top of the Martens hill, close to Santiago de Cuba. My mother: spiritualist, embroiderer, tailor, maraca player, party-goer, faithful wife, good friend, and, best of all, mother. Daughter of *mambí*, who had kidnapped my grandmother, from the dark mountains of Baracoa. My father: *tresero*, chauffeur, dancer and incessant lovebird. Childhood and adolescence went by in the country and the city. Whenever I could, I chose the country. Perhaps because, despite the pastoral, there I possessed a workshop full of strange equipment—invented by my uncle to fulfill all the things the town needed—such as beautiful furniture, a sewing machine, a toy, even a coffin. At night we talked about the news of the world, of the world below, and more frequently of paradise, where the good ones would go to. In the city all was alien to me, except my mother’s somersaults, among the incense, to ward off evil spiritual influences from me. When I took the aptitude test for art school, it was because I wanted to be a scholar like all of my contemporaries, since ‘student’ was the password during the Cuban revolution. The persistent memory of encountering the bronze monument to the *Unknown Mambí*, on the hill of San Juan where I played hide and seek, makes me suspect that it was during that childhood moment that the artist path opened up for me.”

The capture of Proserpina is the evocation, in figurative abstract language, of that tender and tragic legend.



*The Lakes of Hell*, 2019, 20 x 27.5 inches, mixed/cardboard.



**TESSA MARS**

Born in 1985 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti  
Lives and works in Port-au-Prince, Haiti

*Lámina 57*

*“The fifty seven Polinia Goddess of memory.”*

Wendy Desert

Tessa Mars was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1985. She completed a B.A. in Visual Arts at University Rennes 2, France, in 2006. Her art engages identity and its construction in individuals, collectives, and groups. By engaging identity from a gender perspective, as well as through history and culture, Mars questions the notions of belonging, sacrifice, transformation, and resistance. Her most recent projects center on the theme of self-examination. Through the figure of *Tessalines*, a feminine hybrid of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, leader of the Haitian revolution, Mars seeks to reintroduce women in historical narrative, and at the same time, to take control of her own history. Connecting past and present, the pieces reimagine traumatic narratives—new and old, collective and personal—to achieve empowerment and healing. Through the representation of her body, Mars reflects on self-examination, transformation, and narration as strategies for survival.

The work of Mars has been exhibited in the United States, Canada, France, Italy, and most recently in the tenth Biennial of Berlin in 2018.



*Goddess of memory*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 50 inches.





### EMILIO MARTÍNEZ

Born in 1981 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras  
Lives and works in Miami, FL

#### *Lámina 67*

*“ . . . represents Nerpomene Goddess of battles.”*

Emilio Martínez is a Honduran-born American artist who embraces painting as a means of expression. He was born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras in 1981. He immigrated with his family to Miami in 1994, where he has resided since. His work comes to life through his depictions of dream realms and reoccurring childhood memories. He represents the spiritual world through icons, symbols, and texts from an unknown past of ancient indigenous descendants. On a daily basis, he uses a sketchbook to record his obsessions, passions, and fears. Martínez’s work has been exhibited at the University of Syracuse, the Purvis Young Museum of Art (Miami), the Little Haiti Cultural Center (Miami), and the Instituto Cultural de México (Miami), among other institutions.

Martínez’s piece for *Visionary Aponte* takes up the figure of Nerpomene, who appears in lámina 60 of the “Book of Paintings” and whom Aponte calls the “goddess of battles.” Martínez interprets Nerpomene as a beast-like creature, a whirlwind figure composed of many spirits around her, all heeding her call to wage total war against unjust rule. The piece strives to reach back into a faded history to extoll a heroic visionary, while inviting others to survey Aponte’s world view and legacy.



*Nerpomene*, 2018, mixed media on paper, 38.5 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



### EMILIO ADÁN MARTÍNEZ

Born in 1954 in Cienfuegos, Cuba  
Lives and works in Miami, FL

#### *Láminas 24-25*

*“ . . . . . portrait of José Antonio Aponte, laurel, palm, compass, carpentry bench, child, column, old person, inkwell, paint pots, Indians, Havana, Morro Fortress, Providence Island [New Providence], boats, black batallion, customs dock, Fuerte Castle ...”*

Emilio Adán Martínez, a painter and sculptor, was born in Cienfuegos, Cuba, in 1954. In 1961, he migrated to Miami, Florida, where he continues to live and work. Although Martínez was born in Cuba, his ethnic background also includes African, Asian, and Native American ancestry. These cultures serve as primary sources of inspiration. He strives to understand natural forms at their cores, and to communicate this through his artwork. His earlier work, using paper, string, and pine branches, pertained to the concept of travel through life, space, and dimension—and to the fleeting passage of time. Two examples of this work, *Andan Volando* (2009) and *Ando Volando* (2017-18), are currently installed at Miami International Airport. Recently, Martínez has been constructing intricate pieces from reclaimed wood and metal. These pieces, when seen together as an installation, bring to mind a deconstructed, and sometimes self-destructive, future. Martínez earned his BFA from Florida International University. His work can be found in public and private collections throughout the United States, Latin America, and Europe.

Láminas 24-25 inspired Martínez to work with a large piece of oak. Throughout history, the oak tree has come to symbolize many things: towering strength, wisdom, endurance, and nobility—all qualities that Aponte represented. In his research, Martínez became aware that the early Spanish explorers were so enamored of Cuba’s natural forests that they brought specimens of several species back to Spain. Another element of the piece—the crossed welded steel—symbolizes the entrapment of all men of color and the pain and suffering of the enslaved, often in shackles and chains. The shape of the piece, with its round body, its cavity, and steel bars, is a nod to the gruesome end Aponte himself suffered. The fine black sand in the cavity depicts the depths of the living hell that the Black man was subjected to and invokes the sugar industry in Cuba, the catalyst for the slave trade on the island.



*El Roble Noble*, 2018, oak, welded steel, and black sand, 10.25 x 17.5 x 19 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Kelly Anderson-Staley

### NINA ANGELA MERCER

Born in 1973 in Washington, DC  
Lives and works in Bronx, NY  
<http://windowsdoorsclosetsanddrawers.blogspot.com>

#### *Lámina 26*

*“Informed of this, King Don Rodrigo, represented below, commanded Diogenes to come out of the jar [and Diogenes] answered that as long as his Majesty the King did as he himself did, in his poverty, he would obey him.”*

Nina Angela Mercer is a cultural worker. Her plays include GUTTA BEAUTIFUL; RACING MY GIRL, SALLY; ITAGUA MEJI: A Road & A Prayer; GYPSY & THE BULLY DOOR; and MOTHER WIT & WATER BORN, a trilogy, including BETWEEN WHISPERED BLOOD-LINES. Her work has been shared at the former Warehouse Theatre and The Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company (Capital Fringe Festival, Washington, DC); Rutgers University-Newark and New Brunswick (New Jersey); and in New York at Wings Theatre, Brecht Forum, The Classical Theatre of Harlem, Dr. Barbara Ann Teer’s National Black Theatre, The Nuyorican Poets’ Café, Abrons Arts Center/ Henry Street Settlement, Dumbo Sky, and The Little Carib Theatre. Mercer’s writing is published in *The Killens Review of Arts & Letters*, *Black Renaissance Noire*, *Voices Magazine #SayHerName Edition*, and *Continuum: The Journal of African Diaspora Drama, Theatre, and Performance*. She has performed in collaboration with Betty’s Daughter Arts Collaborative, Angela’s Pulse, Abigail DeVille, and Charlotte Brathwaite, BWA for BLM, and others. Mercer is a co-founder and co-director of Ocean Ana Rising ([www.oarinc.org](http://www.oarinc.org)). She is currently a doctoral fellow of Theatre and Performance at The Graduate Center-CUNY. She holds an undergraduate degree from Howard University and a MFA from American University. She currently teaches at Brooklyn College.

Mercer’s *Invocation for José Antonio Aponte* calls on the energy that emboldened Aponte to channel The Word into a transnational, visual manifesto of liberation for black Cubans. But Mercer also calls out to ancestral multitudes at the diaspora’s threshold and birthing space—the ocean, Yemonja, Mami Wata, Our Lady Regla—transcending time and perceived national boundaries. We are here now, and before before; we are future, and the living embodiment of sacred cosmologies always returning to push us forward.



*Invocation for José Antonio Aponte: Lámina 26*, still, 2017, HD digital video with audio, written and performed by Nina Angela, video by Toshi Sakai. Courtesy of the artist.



Clara Morera/Dorfsman Fine Arts

### CLARA MORERA

Born in 1944 in Havana, Cuba  
Lives and works in Winston-Salem, NC and New York, NY  
<http://www.dorfsmanfinearts.com/blue-door>

#### *Láminas 6-7*

*“Governing Claudius, also called Prester John, who wore Lion’s Claws as boots and is painted at right ...”*

Clara Morera studied at the National School of Visual Arts and graduated from the San Alejandro Academy, both in Havana. Throughout her studies she focused on painting. She has also worked for many years in a range of disciplines including tapestry, soft sculpture, drawing, and multimedia installations. Morera is a member of the Afro-Cuban Art group and Grupo Antillano. Her work was featured in the Grupo Antillano exhibition, *Drapetomania*, at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD, San Francisco, CA). Morera has also exhibited in noted public collections such as the Museum of the Americas in Washington, DC (1992); the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana (1970); and recently at Castle Galleries, New Rochelle College (NY); the Lyman Museum (CT); Newark Museum (NJ); the Lowe Museum of Art, University of Miami (FL); and Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African American Art, Harvard University, Cambridge (MA). Morera’s work has been written about in *Small Axe: a Caribbean Journal of Criticism and Revue Noire*, among others. “A specific feature of Morera’s oeuvre,” writes Ana Belén Martín Sevillano, “is the recurrent depiction of feminine figures . . . represented in unconventional attitudes in an attempt to break down the traditional imaginary.”



*The Preboste Juan (King Juan)*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 72 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Dorfsman Fine Arts, Miami; photograph by Yolanda Navas.



Glexis Novoa Studio

## GLEXIS NOVOA

Born in 1964 in Holguín, Cuba  
Lives and works in Miami, FL and Havana,  
Cuba David Castillo Gallery, Miami, FL  
<https://davidcastillogallery.com/artist/glexis-novoa/>  
<http://www.glexisnovoa.com/>

### *Láminas 8-9*

*“ . . . jumping to the dock, greed meets death;  
there is also virtue as the right of Commerce and  
farther down happiness, cut from an engraving  
and superimposed on the paper, in execution of  
the idea the declarant expressed above.”*

Glexis Novoa was born in Holguín and grew up in Havana. He received a degree from the National School of Arts (1984). While Novoa has lived in Miami since 1995, he maintains a studio in Vedado (Havana) and works on site-specific murals and ephemeral projects globally. Since 1987, Novoa has had solo exhibitions at the Cheekwood Museum (Nashville, TN); in Miami at the Lowe Museum of Art (University of Miami, FL), Locust Project and the former Miami Art Museum; at the Worcester Art Museum (Worcester, MA); the Snite Museum of Art (University of Notre Dame, IN); and in Havana at Espacio Aglutinador, Castillo de la Real Fuerza, El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, and La Galería Habana, among others. Novoa's work has been featured in many group exhibitions globally, including *Lost in Landscape*, Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (Trento, Italy); *Politics: I do not like it, but it likes me*, Center for Contemporary Art Laznia (Gdansk, Poland); *Perder la forma humana*, Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, (Madrid, Spain); *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, El Museo del Barrio (New York, NY); *Crisis | América Latina | Arte y Confrontación (1910-2010)*, el Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes (Mexico City); and *Arte ≠ Vida: Actions by artists of the Americas, 1960-2000*, El Museo del Barrio (New York, NY). Novoa's awards include grants from The Joan Mitchell Foundation and Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation. His work is featured in important private and public collections. He has also completed several notable public art commissions.



*Fatality*, 2016, sumi ink drawing on Arches watercolor paper, 30 x 22 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.



## VICKIE PIERRE

Born in 1970 in Brooklyn, NY  
Lives and works in Miami, FL  
[www.vickiepierre.com](http://www.vickiepierre.com)

### *Lámina 35*

*“ . . . means the dream for a woman who has a  
sleeping man lying on her body.”*

Vickie Pierre is a Haitian American, mixed media artist born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, where she studied at the School of Visual Arts. Pierre's practice includes various techniques and materials such as painting, drawing, and collage, as well as assemblage and installation. Her continued focus is on the exploration of self-identity, with references to feminine tropes and historic and contemporary cultural politics, while concurrently observing and considering latent associations to Haitian culture and mythologies. Pierre has participated in exhibitions worldwide, including those at National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington DC); Miami Art Museum (Miami, FL); White Box (New York, NY); Boca Raton Museum of Art (Boca Raton, FL); Musée International des Arts Modestes, Sete, France; and Museo Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (San Juan, PR); among others. Her artworks can be found in private collections as well as public institutions, including Progressive Art Collection, Cleveland; Millennium Partners Collection of Contemporary Art at The Four Seasons, Miami; Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland; and the Liza and Arturo Mosquera Collection, Miami. In 2017, Pierre was a recipient of the South Florida Cultural Consortium Award for Miami-Dade County.

In Pierre's piece, titled *Lámina 35*, the anthropomorphic forms represent a female and a male (José Antonio Aponte) reposing in a dream state. The figures are bejeweled and bound by elements of the natural world, evoking the Yoruba religion believed to have been practiced by Aponte. The length of rope around the black form foreshadows the capture of Aponte by the Spanish government in Cuba and the subsequent hanging and decapitation of the revolutionary leader.



*Lámina 35: means the dream of a lady who has a sleeping man lying on her body*, 2017, acrylic, metallic paint and collage on Rives BFK paper, 15 x 22 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Marielle Plaisir Studio

### MARIELLE PLAISIR

Born in 1985 in Le Havre, France  
Lives and works in Miami, FL  
<http://marielleplaisir.wixsite.com/marelle-plaisir>

#### *Láminas 2-3*

*“... the Punishment and banishment from Paradise of our first parents, who as they leave encounter a demon in the figure of a monkey who throws their sin in their faces with the same apple, the Owl Administerer of death (is down below), the Serpent that deceived Eve ...”*

Marielle Plaisir is a French-Caribbean multimedia artist who spent her childhood and adolescence in Normandy (France), before settling in Guadeloupe (French Caribbean) and later in Miami. Her strong attachment to her island occurred after her studies during which time Plaisir searched for and, from reading history, learned more details related to her past and her identity. As a result, she combines painting, drawing and monumental installations with performance to present highly intense visual experiences. Plaisir's art blends life and fiction in both autobiographical and historical narratives from the Caribbean that touch upon universal themes like power, domination, life, and death. She is inspired by Italian quattrocento and Latin American and Caribbean literature. Plaisir incorporates textiles, fibers, and fabrics that are socially meaningful into her work. She uses her daily practice to examine the many roles of the individual within society. Her art conveys a sense of humor and beauty while exploring any evidence of society's humanity that she may discover in our increasingly digital world. Plaisir's art is poetic. Her essence is theatrical. Her work may appear in many forms, including monumentally-scaled installations or itinerant in-situ performances within exhibitions. Her compositions have been used as children's book illustrations and other publications and as drawings for animation. Since 2000, Plaisir has exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions worldwide. She has also participated in various international contemporary art biennials.

Plaisir was drawn to Aponte's story—which she saw as at once unreal, beautiful, poetic, formidable, tragic, and cruel—and to Aponte the man, who she imagined as a character filled with holiness, goodness, and humanity. Her series of drawings, titled “The Book of Life,” do not depict particular pages of Aponte's book. Rather they evoke the way Aponte escapes from the world by deconstructing his time and place, moving through mythology, religion, death, war, love. For Plaisir, Aponte's “Book of Paintings” represents a kind of beautiful exile, his process of dreaming about a better world.



*Aponte Lámina 23*, 2017, inks, gold pigment, pencils on 300g paper, 18 x 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Asser St. Val Studio

### ASSER SAINT-VAL

Born 1974 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti  
Lives and works in Miami, FL  
<https://www.assersaintvl.com>

#### *Láminas 12-13*

*“Asked about what idea he had for the meaning of the figure of a young woman with a paper in her hand, cut out and placed on top, with the following inscription: My son, Peace is made, he said: That as he considered said adornment fitting, he cut it from a fan and, just as he found it, put it to use in his work.”*

Asser Saint-Val is a painter, sculptor, and installation artist. Saint-Val's pictures, objects, and environments engage the aesthetics and metaphors of melanin (the organic compound responsible for human skin, hair, and eye color) and neuromelanin (a pigment found specifically in the dopaminergic neurons at the base of the brain). Saint-Val's images explore the metaphysical reality and materiality of melanin and neuromelanin in relation to identity, his conscientious artistic voice, and his understanding of the roots of racism. Saint-Val's paintings portray quasi-figurative images that evoke ideas central to modern debates on race and biology. Blending traditional and unconventional art materials (including coffee, chocolate, ginger, and tea), Saint-Val strives to create a surreal fantasia that activates the audience's imagination with multisensory environments.

Asser Saint-Val moved to South Florida in 1988. He earned BFAs in painting and graphic design from the New World School of the Arts. His work has been exhibited in Florida, New York, and throughout the Caribbean. His art is featured in prestigious private collections, including those of: Francie Bishop Good, Dr. Arturo Mosquera, the Rubell Family, and Carlos Sanchoo. Saint-Val has twice received the South Florida Cultural Consortium Fellowship Award. In 2012, he created *The Philosopher's Stone*, a large-scale interactive public installation and his largest work to date, with support from the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners.

In approaching Aponte's trial testimony and “Book of Paintings,” St. Val was particularly drawn to Aponte's use of Greek mythology. As a scholar, artist, and genius ahead of his time, Aponte was exploring ideologies of gods and goddesses from Greek Mythology as a tool for transformation, self-empowerment, and revolution. St. Val also believes that Aponte used these figures to make connections to himself as a spiritual entity, anticipating a new spiritual philosophy of Afro-Centrism, in which black scholars trace the genesis of the melanated people as far back as Atlantis and Lemuria, the Dagon people, and the star Sirius.



*José Antonio Aponte, Ada Ferrer, Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*, 2017, mixed media with kinetic motion on Masonite, 4 panels at 24 x 24 inches each; 48 x 48 x 3 inches overall. Courtesy of the artist; photograph by Yolanda Navas.



Atelier Jean-Marcel St. Jacques

## JEAN-MARCEL ST. JACQUES

Born in 1972 in Richmond, CA  
Lives and works in New Orleans, LA

### *Láminas 44b-45*

*“Several black nuns arrive at a temple named the resurrection, which was built in thirty days by Saint Matthew. He is shown to one side, converting those same women and also Saint Paulinus of Nola, of the same color as they are.”*

Jean-Marcel St. Jacques is a California-born, self-taught artist with deep Louisiana Creole roots and a couple of academic degrees in other subjects. His first love is music, and he spent much of his life as a poet and performing artist until Hurricane Katrina hit and sent him into a silent meditation from which emerged Jean-Marcel the visual artist. St. Jacques's great-grandmother made patchwork strip quilts and his great-grandfather was a hoodoo man who collected junk for a living. As a visual artist, he works mainly with wood and junk. His wooden quilts represent a way of being with the spirits of his great-grandmother who quilted and his great-grandfather who collected junk. They are also a way of finding a higher purpose for the pile of debris left by Hurricane Katrina, to find beauty in the ugliness of one of this country's worst human disasters and, on a more practical note, to save and rehab his house for him and his family. St. Jacques has pieces in the permanent collection of the American Folk Art Museum.

Jean Marcel's doorway—created in collaboration with Renée Stout's work for this show—is both an altar in homage to the spirit of Aponte, as well as a crossroads or portal between the mortal world and the spirit world, inviting Aponte's energy to enter and assist the people of the African Diaspora in our ongoing struggle for the right to be ourselves. It also functions as symbol of our ability to open the door to new possibilities as we discover the power we have to create a better world for ourselves. All of the wood used in this work is reclaimed from the artist's Katrina-damaged home in the Tremé neighborhood, built not too long after Aponte's execution.



*Portal for Aponte*, 2017, mixed media on French Creole double door with five weapons fabricated by Odinga Tychimba in homage to the Abakuá/Leopard Society in collaboration with the artist, 96 x 33 x 7 inches. Courtesy of the artist; photograph by Yolanda Navas.



Mary Noble Ours

## RENÉE STOUT

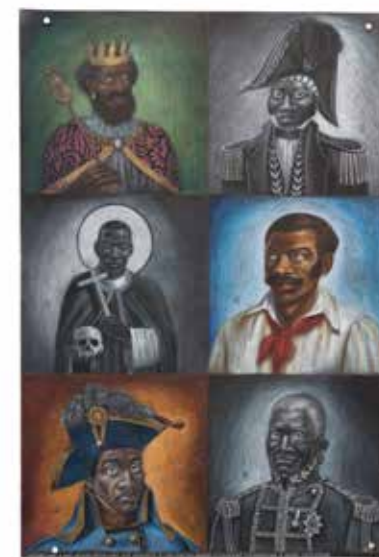
Born in 1958 in Junction City, KS  
Lives and works in Washington, DC  
<http://www.reneestout.com>

### *Láminas 44b-45*

*“Asked again why he mingled the destruction of the army of Senaquerib with the invasion of Tarragona when nothing connects one with the other, he said: that even though the two events do not go together, he included that of Senaquerib by reason of History, like everything else in the book ...”*

Renée Stout grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and received her B.F.A. from Carnegie-Mellon University in 1980 where her focus was on painting. However, in 1985, immediately after moving to Washington, DC, she began to explore the spiritual and cultural roots of her African American heritage through her increasingly sculptural works, which found their early inspiration in the aesthetics and philosophy of Kongo ritual objects. Stout's art attracted the attention of museum curators across the United States and led to her becoming the first American artist to have a solo exhibition in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. Inspired by the African Diaspora, historical and current world events, as well as everyday life in her DC neighborhood, Stout now creates in a variety of media, including painting, drawing, mixed media sculpture, photography, and installation. She has been the recipient of awards from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Bader Fund, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, the Gottlieb Foundation, and Anonymous Was A Woman. She was also the recipient of the Driskell Prize, awarded by the High Museum of Art (Atlanta, GA) and the Sondheim Award from the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts. Stout's work is featured in many museum and private collections, nationally and internationally, including the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

Renée's homage and contemporary reinterpretation of Aponte's "Book of Paintings" aims to create the same kind of focal object or talisman for a revolution that was Aponte's original intent for his book of collages, drawings, and paintings. And like Aponte, she has purposely left the imagery open-ended in order for it to be interpreted on many levels. It is her desire that re-imagining the book will help us to channel our collective energy to coax the original out from its hiding place.



*Book of Paintings*, folio, 2017, acrylic on wood panel, 22 x 15 inches. Courtesy of the artist; photograph by Yolanda Navas.

## Narratives of Freedom and Oppression

Édouard Duval-Carrié

Histories of the Caribbean are always full of surprises. European explorers and subsequent waves of colonists occupied and displaced locals almost to the point of extinction, while documenting their own advances against indigenous peoples. To this day, it is the conqueror's voice that dominates, as that of the vanquished has all but disappeared. Certain accounts did try to document the vast upheavals that resulted in the wake of the "discovery." One such document is the long letter written to King Charles I of Spain by Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, denouncing the horrors that followed that first encounter. His *The Destruction of the Indies* described in detail the horrors inflicted on the "docile and gentle Indians" by the conquistadores. The document found its way to the enemies of the Catholic Church: reformists and Protestants who published it in a widely-distributed, illustrated pamphlet. What is of great interest to me is that the pamphlet in question was illustrated by an artist and engraver (Theodor DeBry) who, as far as we know, never set foot in the Americas. His fanciful and Europeanized visual depiction of the Taino are still used today in contemporary representations of native Caribbean people.

Another example where art was used in defense of the downtrodden is the fantastic document sent to King Felipe III by one of his American subjects, Inca nobleman Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala. This extensively illustrated document aimed to inform the Spanish king about the injustices of colonial rule inflicted on Andean people and enslaved Africans. Guaman Poma described in words and images the humiliations to which he and his people were subjected. King Felipe never received the document. As an artist, I have been interested in this particular document for the powerful visual language created by Guaman Poma to illustrate a world in transition and already subject to a hybrid vocabulary.

Though referenced in a novel I had read and reread by Cuban author Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*, the name Aponte never truly piqued my interest until I read Ada Ferrer's *Freedom's Mirror*, in which José Antonio Aponte figures as a major protagonist. What became evident and surprising immediately is that Aponte, too, had created an illustrated book for the King of Spain. Again, the document not only did not make it to his highness; this time it was lost, and all that was left of it were the detailed descriptions Aponte provided during his trial and interrogation by Spanish authorities in Havana. Those descriptions reveal that this artist of African descent had created a new visual vocabulary that profoundly disturbed and confounded his European interrogators.

The challenge today is to find a way to reach through those descriptions into this man's vision, to recreate or interpret, more than a century later, Aponte's visions of a black world where dignity, freedom, and intellectual complexity were a given, and where they served to challenge the abject conditions to which they were subjected. *Visionary Aponte* invited a group of contemporary artists to consult this particular story and see if they, as artists, could translate the spirit of Aponte's "black worldview" into visual proclamations for our own time.

Co-curator Édouard Duval-Carrié is also one of the artists of *Visionary Aponte*. He is Artistic Director of the Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance (Miami) and curator of the Global/Borderless Caribbean Series.

## A Lost Book and the Historian's Archive

Ada Ferrer

I first encountered José Antonio Aponte not as an artist but as a revolutionary. The Aponte I first learned about from the seminal work of Cuban historian José Luciano Franco was the leader of the island's principal antislavery and anticolonial conspiracy during the Age of Revolution. But because Franco transcribed and published the trial testimony about Aponte's "Book of Paintings," he also allowed us to glimpse Aponte the artist.

I remember vividly my surprise on first reading Aponte's descriptions of his book. Image 6-7, which showed a black army defeating a white one, seemed potentially subversive and revolutionary in a slave society. But what of everything else in the book? What about the popes, saints, and kings; the Ethiopian eunuchs and Greek philosophers and Roman goddesses; the heavenly constellations and lush landscapes? What, if anything, did they have to do with revolution?

Aponte showed the book to his fellow conspirators as they organized their revolution. So we know that he and his companions drew connections between the images before them and the revolution they were plotting. But what were those connections? And where was the book?

To paraphrase C.L.R. James, what historians most want to see in order to understand a revolution—the diary of an obscure rebel leader or, in this case, a book of paintings that served as guide for an antislavery revolution—seems forever out of our reach. For years I held out the hope of finding Aponte's book. On a research trip to Spain in 2002, my then 7-year old daughter greeted me every afternoon with the question: did you find the book today? The answer was always no.

I learned to work around that absence, comparing the way Aponte described the book to inquisitioners to how he spoke about it with co-conspirators. For example, Aponte testified that lámina 37 was Rome, yet he told a companion that the picture showed Henri Christophe, King of Haiti, commanding people to execute what he ordered. Describing 8-9, Aponte mentioned the San Lorenzo without elaborating. But we know that the ship had spent time in revolutionary Haiti, once transported Haitian revolutionaries to Cuba, and even housed some of Aponte's own co-conspirators. Using other sources to help read Aponte's words about his pictures, I was able to glimpse not only Aponte's epic histories of Ethiopia, but other more subterranean histories that linked Havana and Haiti in 1812.

By the time I finished writing about Aponte in *Freedom's Mirror* in 2014, my daughter, by then a young woman, had stopped asking me if I'd found the book. Instead, she kept insisting that a group of artists needed to collectively reimagine Aponte's book. I am forever grateful to Édouard Duval-Carrié for setting that plot in motion, to Laurent Dubois for bringing us together, to Tosha Grantham for helping it materialize, and to Linda Rodríguez for co-conspiring. The artists of *Visionary Aponte* have offered me new and surprising insight into Aponte's vision and new ways to think about the "everything else" in the book as part of Aponte's artistic and political vision. I hope the show that has resulted from our collective effort honors Aponte's creativity and intellect, as well as his conviction that those things were—and remain—vital to making freedom real.

Ada Ferrer, co-curator, is Julius Silver Professor of History and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at NYU. She is the author of two prize-winning books: *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* and *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*.

## Aponte and the Possibilities of Art

Linda Rodríguez

The loss of Aponte's "Book of Paintings" felt like a weight. Its absence seemed to limit what we could know of him as an artist. How did he use color? What was his approach to composing each of his pages? Did figures overlap for some kind of textural effect? Aponte tells us, though, exactly what kind of artist he was. On the first day of his testimony about the "Book of Paintings," a Spanish judicial official asked him if the book was indeed his work. Aponte's response reads almost like a declaration of his artistic intent. "Not being a painter, he bought different prints and paintings to take from them, or from used fans, that which fulfilled his idea."

Aponte introduced a completely innovative method of aesthetic creation that transformed fragments into a whole. He considered his audience to be, yes, the Spanish king, but also networks of enslaved and free people of color in Havana. For all who saw his book, Aponte's novel technique matched the revolutionary content of its pages in which he visualized black militia members like his grandfather Joaquín Aponte along with black princes and queens in faraway and historic lands like Ethiopia. In colonial Havana, Aponte placed a new vision of an African diaspora in the hands of those who held and viewed his book. Aponte's actions as an artist suggest a need to invent, to move beyond known models of artistic practice and aesthetic form. That spirit has triumphed over loss as new imaginings of his "Book of Paintings" emerge in this exhibit, centuries later. Aponte's legacy reverberates in our contemporary world and asks us to imagine the possibilities of art in advancing freedom for all. Indeed, Aponte's legacy demands that we recognize artists as central to that goal.

Linda Rodríguez (1978-2018) was Visiting Scholar at the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at NYU. An art historian, she was lead scholar on the digital humanities website Digital Aponte and wrote about Aponte and other artists of color in colonial Havana.

<http://aponte.hosting.nyu.edu>



Unknown artist, detail, Calle Tacón 12, c. 1762-1768, fresco or semi-fresco, mural painting.

## The Book Is Here

Laurent Dubois

The book is here, just as Aponte intended. He imagined, after all, that the book would not just recount a history but also help create a new one. In ways he probably couldn't have predicted, it has, again and again. His interrogators and executioners were afraid of the book. They wanted to bury it and the project it represented. They used his art to condemn him. They succeeded, in a way. He was executed and his art was disappeared, too. In the process, however, his executioners left behind traces that allow us to revive Aponte, in our way. As historians, we are sustained by the fact that we can turn such sources against themselves, seeking to undo their intent. That is what Ada Ferrer does in her book *Freedom's Mirror*, the magical work at the basis of this exhibit.

Aponte understood that he was part of a subterranean history, that telling that history—a history of the Black world, a Black history of the world—was to remake that history, and the world. His book was pedagogy, exploration, pastiche, interpretation. He knew that images could tell that history perhaps better than text, for an image is always an invitation, a portal of sorts—an invitation to travel, and to dream. "What does this image mean?" his interrogators wanted to know. Did Aponte tell the truth? Did the interrogators understand the answer? And what can we, now, glean from what they wrote about what they heard?

That is the question this exhibit begins to answer. Lines of text, traces of distant work, turn out to be seeds. Planted in the minds of the artists gathered here, they have created bursts, visions, layers of color, echoes, new pages in an old book, old pages of a new book. When we look at them, gathered together—like those who gathered together at Aponte's house, around the book—we see into that past, and into the future. We are invited to tell stories, to make history. We are made ready—to travel, to dream. The book is here, and it is a wonder.

Laurent Dubois is Professor of Romance Studies and History and Founding Director of the Forum for Scholars and Publics at Duke. He is the author of six books, including *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, and *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*.



Visualization of Aponte's library, seized by the authorities searching his home and workshop.



# VISIONARY APONTE: ART & BLACK FREEDOM

**EXHIBITION JANUARY 9—MARCH 8, 2020**

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY FINE ARTS GALLERY

**Thursday, January 9, 4:00–7:00pm**

Cohen Memorial Hall, Room 203

**Artists' Talk and Opening Reception for *Visionary Aponte: Art and Black Freedom***

**4:00pm** A Q&A with artists **Edouard Duval-Carrié** and Cornelius Vanderbilt Endowed Chair of Fine Arts, **María Magdalena Campos-Pons**, who will jointly launch the opening of *Visionary Aponte: Art and Black Freedom*.

**5:00–7:00pm** Exhibition opening reception in Cohen Hall Atrium, featuring Batá drums by Yosvany Cordero.

**Thursday, January 23, 4:00–6:00pm**

Special Collections Gallery, Central Library

**Curator's Talk with Paula Covington, *Found in Cuba: The Ingenuity and Artistry of Edición Vigía***

**Paula Covington**, Latin American & Iberian bibliographer and senior lecturer in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt University, will deliver a curator's talk on her concurrent exhibit "Found in Cuba: The Ingenuity and Artistry of Ediciones Vigía." This display, on view at Central Library's Special Collections Gallery through March 2020, will spotlight handcrafted books originally produced by an artist collective and publishing house in Matanzas, Cuba. An opening reception will follow the talk.

**Thursday, February 20, 4:00–6:00pm**

Central Library, Community Room

**Alejandro de la Fuente: *New Perspectives on the Black Atlantic***

**Alejandro de la Fuente** is the Robert Bliss Woods Professor of Latin American History and Economics, professor of African and African American Studies and of History, and director of the Afro-Latin American Research Institute at Harvard University. A historian of Latin America and the Caribbean who specializes in the study of comparative slavery and race relations, de la Fuente will deliver the 2020 Black Atlantic Speaker's Series Lecture. His works on race, slavery, and Atlantic history have been published in Spanish, English, Portuguese, Italian, German, and French. He is also the curator of two art exhibitions dealing with issues of race: *Queloides: Race and Racism in Cuban Contemporary Art* and *Grupo Antillano: The Art of Afro-Cuba*.

**Thursday, February 27, 2020, 4:00–6:00pm**

Cohen Memorial Hall, Room 203 & Atrium

**Closing Lectures and Reception**

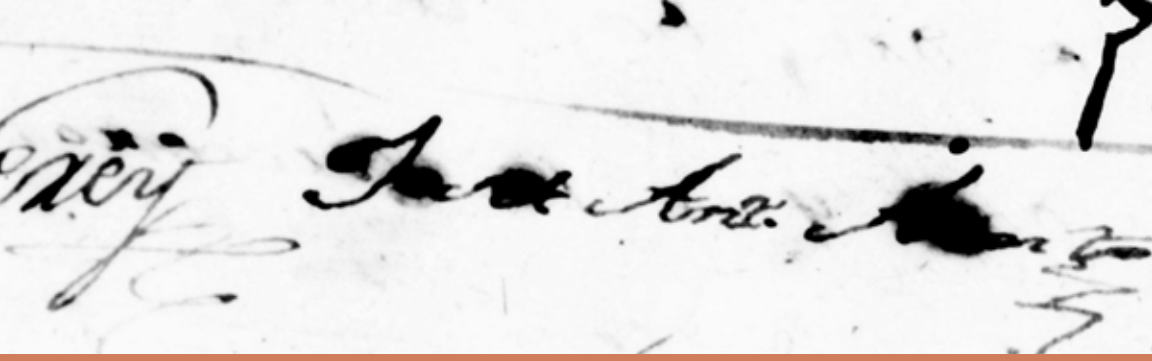
**Ada Ferrer, *Aponte: A Black Kingdom of this World***

**Jane Landers, *An Untapped Source for the History of José Antonio Aponte: The Slave Societies Digital Archive***

At this closing event, exhibition co-curator and NYU Julius Silver Professor of History and Latin American and Caribbean History **Ada Ferrer** will present on her historical research—which ultimately inspired the creation of Visionary Aponte as a contemporary art exhibition. **Jane Landers**, Gertrude Conway Vanderbilt Professor of History, director of the Slave Societies Digital Archive and lead faculty for the International Initiative for the Study of Slave Societies, will also speak on historical sources for the life and death of José Antonio Aponte recently discovered in the Slave Societies Digital Archive. A closing reception for the exhibition will follow.

<http://vanderbi.lt/aponte> • [gallery@Vanderbilt.edu](mailto:gallery@Vanderbilt.edu)





# VISIONARY APONTE: ART & BLACK FREEDOM

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY FINE ARTS GALLERY  
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE  
JANUARY 9 – MARCH 8, 2020

The Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery promotes engagement with the visual arts among students, faculty, and the greater Nashville community through its exceptional art collection and a wide-ranging program of exhibitions and events. The Gallery collection totals more than 7,000 works spanning the history of world art. This historical collection and gallery serves Vanderbilt University and the Nashville community as a vital, interdisciplinary resource.

The Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery is located on the Peabody Campus, in Cohen Memorial Hall, at 1220 21st Avenue South in Nashville. The gallery is open daily during the academic year: Monday–Friday 11am–4pm and Saturday and Sunday noon–5pm.

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