

History of Cuba

Jacora Johnson

TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

The Boller Review: Vol. 7. 2022-23

“AS IF SHE WERE FREE”

For this first mask, I wanted to draw from one of my favorite readings from the course, “As if She Were Free.” The lived experiences of Paula de Eguiluz, while pre-dating the colonial era, is one that portrays the experience of (at the time) enslaved Africans as one of limbo. While Eguiluz was able to live a wealthy, affluent, and community-driven life, that wasn’t the case for all. The figures in the center of Eguiluz’s chest are representative of the communal practice of her love magic and religious practices, as well as the differing experiences for other enslaved (or at this time, formally enslaved folks). I attempted to portray them as paper dolls strung together, who due to the spectrum of experiences, were more susceptible to the increasing attitudes of inferiority, that were influenced through Spain’s colonial practices of religion, and increasing reliance on the transatlantic slave trade (which I depicted through the rising waters that threatened the paper figures). I also wanted to focus on the beauty of this experience as it acted as a counter narrative to what I’d initially believed was the experience at that time.

“SUGARCANE”

The second mask of this work contrasts the interpretive and symbolic nature of the first. By this point in Cuban history (colonial period), Afro Cubans were enslaved with rigorous legislation and codes that subjugated them under harsh conditions of brutality while harvesting sugarcane, which only increased, due to the Cuban economy being so heavily reliant on the crop, following the Hatín Revolution (1791). The scars on the face of the mask display the brutality of the harvesting process and the dehumanization endured.

“BALLOTS AND BULLETS”

Transitioning into the Neocolonial period, I wanted to capture the Afro-Cuban experiences within the political sphere and how that influenced life socially going forward. As Black veterans of Cuban independence struggles grew frustrated with the material conditions within their lives, the Independent Party of Color was formed as a response to the lack of social mobility and a lack of representation of Black politicians and solutions to address the inequities of Black Cubans.

However, due to residual attitudes of inferiority and the heavy influence of the U.S. and their policies of anti-Blackness, the Independent Party of Color and nonaffiliated Afro-Cubans were met with a massacre. This moment specifically created a rippling impact that is still felt and seen in the lives of Afro-Cubans. It silenced any monuments movement for Black Cuban equity especially set a precedent where non-Black Cubans created the marker for Lives and cemented the notion that to be Black and Cuban was not a marker of identity worthy of distinction, or to be catered to. It's a notion that bleeds into the ways some Black Cubans refer to themselves and their identity and culture, despite being significant to Cuba as a country.

“TO THE BEAT”

Building upon the ideas of culture and identity, I wanted to pay homage to the influence of Rumba by creating a mask that is inspired by the usage of drums within the music genre. Having been banned by President Gerardo Machado in 1925, the influence of Black Cubans was suppressed. Having been born out of the collision of African and Spanish influences melodies and dance, it's a piece of art that is inherently Cuban, and speaks to the autonomy and perseverance of Afro-Cubans in the face systemic suppression and racism and to the experiences of Blackness being celebrated as it pertains to entertainment.

“BLACK BUT CUBAN, CUBAN BUT BLACK”

I wanted to artfully display the Black Cuban experience through the usage of color within my design. Despite the prosperity and care that impacted all Cubans during this period and was seen as a result of the U.S. Cuban revolution, Black Cubans and their experiences were never fully acknowledged. While policies like the Agrarian reform, Housing policy, healthcare, etc. positively impacted the lives and conditions of Afro-Cubans, nothing has been done to address the widening economic gap among Black Cubans in comparison to non-Black Cubans, as discussed within “For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun” reading. It's stark within this lived experience that goes unacknowledged, the Black streaks “disrupt” the image of the Cuban flag and show this contrast of experience.

“HEAVEN IN REACH”

After the Cuban Revolution, Black Cubans benefited from social reforms, along with other Cubans, that positively impacted their health, access to housing, etc. Although, anytime instability was felt by the Cuban population at large meant that it would impact Black Cubans to the point of survival being at stake. A contemporary example of this would be the Special period, in which most if not all social services stopped, which left Black Cubans in limbo for survival. The stars represent the resources, independence, and autonomy that lie outside of reach for Black Cubans to truly be able to thrive and take advantage of what their government has to offer, which is something that impacts types of employment, access to necessities, education, etc.

