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LA MILAGROSA: A VISUAL ESSAY ON RITUALS AND AESTHETICS OF AFRO-CUBAN SYNCRETISM



LA MILAGROSA

24'07", 2016

directed, image, editing and production: Rui Mourão *interview:* Reina "Santera"
location: Casa de Reina "Santera"; (outskirts of Havana, Cuba), Cristóbal Colón cemetery (Havana, Cuba), National Sanctuary de S. Lázaro (Cuba).
soundtrack: Canto para Chango (choral and drums for rituals of Santería, performed by Abbilona); sacred choral music recorded in religious celebration in the National Sanctuary of S. Lázaro

LA MILAGROSA transports us through the *Santeria's* visual universe, a religious syncretism between African deities and Catholic religiosities that was generated throughout the Spanish colonization process in Cuba. Black slaves, in an oppression context, developed their own languages and religious-cultural processes that resulted from their assimilation as they expressed a significant resistance through the subversion of iconographic and performative senses.

Given that African rituals were forbidden, slaves would disguise these rituals as Catholic saint adoration, with whom they established secret formal, symbolic and mystical correspondences relating to their ancestral gods – the *orixas* (Linares 1993). Such beliefs and religious practices were not only developed during the slavery period but they were historically perpetuated after slavery abolition, independence from Spanish colonialism, white elite domination connected to North American neocolonialism, and continued to exist in an officially atheist communist political context.

As a visual witness of the perpetuation of the Ioruba mythology, brought from Africa to a “New World” island, the video reveals a subtle but vast pantheon of tribal gods through saints, street corners and colours present in flowers, fabrics, sweets, candles, doves, clothing, bead necklaces and bracelets, amongst several objects of appropriate mystical purpose (for example, dolls, shells, drums, maracas, living plants, aquariums, pots, fans, boomerangs, money, billiard balls, beer cans, golden or copper objects, etc.). At that level, religious practices appear related to symbolic elements with their own aesthetical characteristics (Casanova 2012; Glean 2011): water and the colour blue (correspondent to the sea and motherhood goddess – Yemaya – syncretized with the Virgin of Regla, who also wears a blue mantle); subtle chromatic variations of yellow (for example, bananas, that correspond to the love and sensuality goddess Oshun); wood elements, percussion instruments and red and white (corresponding to Shango, the thrones, bolts, justice, dance and fire *orixa*, evoked by chants and drums, like “Canto para Chango” that can be heard in this visual essay soundtrack, interpreted by Abbilona, historical reference in *Santeria's* ritual music; here the syncretism happens between Saint Marcus and Saint Theresa).

LA MILAGROSA drives the spectator through domestic altars of a *santera* (woman that works with *Santeria*). The track includes the bigger altars of *Santeria* apparatus (with colourful typology normally present at home entrance halls), as well as other more discrete ones in the backyard, that also display rawer nature-related elements (for example, sticks, stones, shells and water) hidden in a dark cloth covered hole (similar to the ones hidden in the bottom of *senzalas*, where slaves would secretly practice their rituals).

The visual narrative later leaves the Afro-Cuban ritual's private domain and goes through a Catholic typology's public space, which equally became a *Santeria* iconic place: the *Cementerio Cristóval Colón*, in Havana, nominated during the colonial time in honor of the European "discoverer" of America. It is frequently considered one of the world's most beautiful cemeteries. In the video, we see a woman walking in search of a grave, amidst an expressive Carrara marble funeral statuary, from the period of white and post-colonial elite's great wealth. Along the way there is an ethnographic record of all those that work, restore and visit the cemetery (which has been gaining tourist interest). The performative quotidian at the cemetery received a choreographic dimension on the video after its edition.

After a continuous tour followed by a long search through the cemetery, the camera stops at a grave that was considered miraculous by the local population. It is the grave of a woman buried in 1903, Amelia, who was entombed after giving birth to a child that died during labour. Legend says, when the tomb was exhumed 13 years later, the mother and child's bodies were not only intact but also they had moved to embrace each other. The belief in that grave miraculous powers started after that story, and nowadays it is a popular pilgrimage place for wishes for fertility, pregnancy and child-birth.

Finally, the video shows nocturnal images of one of Cuba's biggest processions, with thousands of people, first towards Saint Lazarus sanctuary and later already inside it. The sanctuary importance is owed to Saint Lazarus, which corresponds to Babalu-Aye *orixa*, infirmity healer. The video documents the existence in that procession of a series of Catholic practices impregnated with a black cultural presence connected to body performativity and elements such as water (church holy water and water in glasses to offer to saints, as in *Santeria*) or fire and smoke (lighting purple candles and smoking cigars at the temple). There are those that wear burlap to evoke Saint Lazarus, the beggar. It is noteworthy to point out that the candles and flowers offered are also purple because it is the colour that corresponds to Babalu-Aye *orixa*.

In summary, this visual essay documents a series of actions, experiences and environments that support the importance of ritual as a symbolic communication cultural system that has standardized sequences, which are expressed through several media, agents and performativities. In that sense, as in any other ritual sequences, these also "have content and arrangements characterized by various degrees of formality (conventionality), stereotype (strictness), condensation (fusion) and redundancy (repetition)" (Peirano 2003: 11).

From a formal point of view, the video appeals to double image games side by side aiming at combinations of meaning, where it is not only:

image A + image B = meaning AB; but instead: image A + image B = meaning ABC. That is, the purpose is that the meaning of the simultaneous combination of images is not only superior to the mere meaning of the same individual images presented separately, as it reverberates new meanings generated by that combination.

Within the artistic line developed by Rui Mourão, this work adopts video art as a medium, visual anthropology as a process and performative dimensions of cultural practice as an object of analysis.

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- Mourão, Rui. 2016 (Vídeo HD H.264, 16:9, color 24'07"), Direction, camera, edition and production. Interview. Reina "Santera"; location: Casa de Reina "Santera" (outskirts of Havana, Cuba), Cemetery Cristóbal Colón (Havana, Cuba), National Sanctuary of S. Lázaro (Cuba); soundtrack: Canto para Chango (choral and drums for rituals of Santeria, performed by Abbilona); choral music recorded in catholic celebration (National Sanctuary of S. Lázaro); Link <https://goo.gl/7DarRt> – senha: moving
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RUI MOURÃO

Rui Mourão (1977, Lisboa) studied Arts (UAB+CECC, Barcelona; Maumaus, Lisbon; Malmö Art Academy, Malmö-Sweden). He holds a graduate degree in Digital Visual Cultures and a Master's degree in Anthropology (both from ISCTE, Lisbon). He is a PhD candidate in Artistic Studies at Universidade Nova, Lisbon). He makes video art and was selected for *LOOP – Video Art Festival* (Barcelona) and for *FUSO – The Video Art International Annual of Lisbon*, where he received the *Audience Award, 2010*. He presented a film at Portuguese Cinematheque (nominee for Best Documentary in Queer Lisboa Cinema Festival – 2013). He did art residencies, performances, conferences, wrote papers, two books (one of individual and another of collective authorship). He had more than 50 exhibitions presented in 16 countries (ex: Spaces, Cleveland; Iklektik Art-Lab, London; MNAC, Lisbon; Palazzo Albrizzi, Venice; National Museum of Ethnography Museu Nacional de Etnologia, Lisboa; Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin).

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