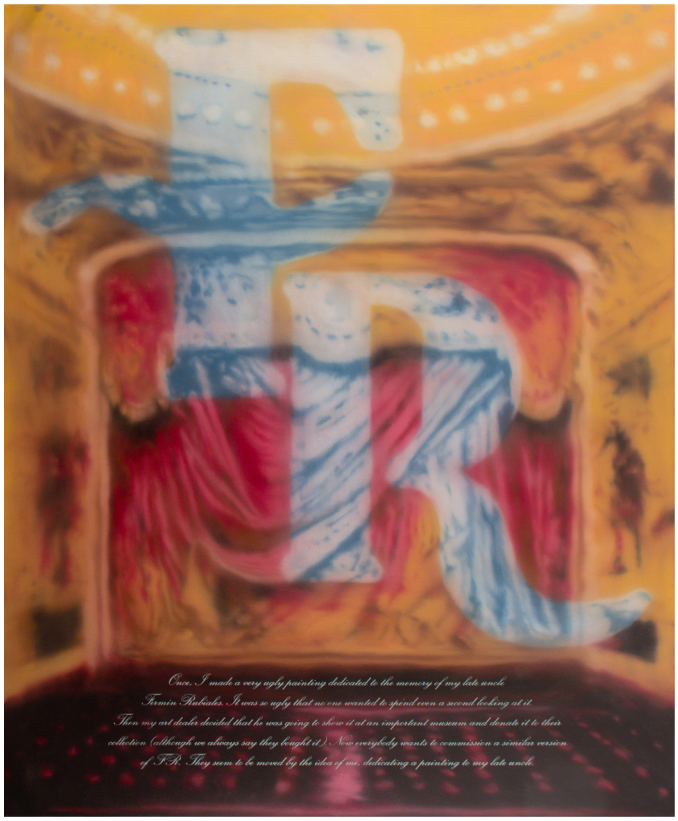
Conversation between Raúl Cordero and Cy Schnabel

December 20, 2018



Raúl Cordero, *FR (I)*, 2013, oil on canvas, 230 x 190 cm, (91 x 75 inches)

In 2016 I moved to Mexico City for a period of time. The multidisciplinary Cuban artist Consuelo Castañeda, a close friend of mine who was also in Mexico at the time, had mentioned the name of other Cuban artists living in Mexico City; that included Raúl Cordero and others such as Flavio Garciandía and Marta María Pérez Bravo. I met Raúl during an opening at the CCEMX where I was working as an assistant curator, shortly after I saw his work in person for the first time at the Zona Maco art fair in 2017.

This conversation is motivated by my desire to have a more in depth understanding of Raúl Cordero's artistic practice. The questions and answers one will find here address a variety of themes ranging from personal history to more general issues regarding his creative process.

Cy Schnabel: What is your most remote memory, the first thing you can recall? Memory in its most subjective sense.

Raúl Cordero: I had an uncle named Fermín Rubiales. He was married to my great aunt. I was really fond of him. He was a painter. A painter of buildings and houses. But he was probably the closest relationship to anyone who would do anything that I liked. My father worked for the Government-he was involved in the military-and my mother worked for the Communist Party in Cuba. Ultimately, I was not attracted to what my parents did. However this guy was different. The first time I saw him at work I was walking by a building and there he was in this seven-story high scaffold painting it. He became my hero, immediately.

He had street knowledge and a good amount of life experience. I loved that. He was totally different than the rest of the people I knew. I was attracted to his personality;

I wanted to be like him. Rubiales was probably the most influential person for me. Later on I made some paintings that included his initials FR, I´ve created fake stories about that.

Raúl Cordero, *FR (II)*, 2013, oil on canvas, 230 x 155 cm, (91 x 61 inches)

CS: Would you say that making art is a necessity rather than picking an option in life?

RC: It must be. It has to be. If there is something that occupies your head all of the time and it is the only thing for which you would stop anything to do... It is the only thing you can be doing; it doesn't matter if it goes well or bad.

When I am doing that its the only time I feel powerful, I really feel like myself. It is the only situation in which I kind of know anything that could happen. In other situations in life I am a lot more helpless. In any case, you always make art in the midst of fear…you have to feel fear also. You should feel that every time you start making something. Once that is lost you are just producing things. But that combination of fear, pleasure, the challenge of making something you always think may go wrong, but again pushing to make it not the right way, but the way you want… That is what drives me.

The way I see life is through what I do. Everything I do, either painting or other things, relates to a moment in my life. If I spend three or four months making this painting, I can remember what my daughter did during those months, the things she started to say that she wouldn't say before. It is a memory. Everything is a memory. My life is composed of the memories of having made all these things. And that's what I see my life through.

CS: You were born in Cuba, your formal training was first in painting then in graphic design, split between Cuba and the Netherlands, you lived in New York and spent time in the West Coast of the United States as well. As an artist, what would you say is the most crucial thing about traveling and constantly shifting your cultural surroundings?

RC: Nothing teaches you more than that. I always say that traveling is what really shapes your way of seeing the world. You cannot think about what you haven't seen. Maybe you read about it in a book, maybe you watch it in a film, but is not the same as experiencing it in person. There is nothing more beautiful than being able to see how people behave in different places, countries and cultures. it's a great opportunity, since you are constantly changing the way you think while you travel and experience things. It is a new you all the time. You have to adapt to places and situations.

CS: Time and space changes your perception of things and individual growth.

RC: Even your approach to learning. I used to not like Picasso. And now I'm a total Picasso lover. I don't know what happened in me that one day I saw it with different eyes, and the more I see it now, the more I like it.

I can see the poignancy of his work. Now in art I see the how, and for me that is 80 percent more important than the what, and that´s Picasso's work. It doesn't matter if it is a flower or a woman. That is not relevant. It's the how. I think that when you are very young, you pay a lot of attention to the what. The more experience you get and the more you grow, you start paying more attention to the how of things. It is not what people do, but how they do it. I would say everything is the how in life. Or most things are the how.

For instance, the way Mondrian or Joseph Albers made things just by playing with colors and forms shaped the look of the world for later. If you see furniture, architecture, cars, clothes, these painters – and another 20 maybe – changed the world for the future without thinking about it. On the other hand, artists' that tried to do something transcendental by speaking about political situations, those artistic statements became irrelevant once the issues they were referring to changed.

CS: You have been recognized as a pioneering figure in Cuban video art, although for more than a decade now you have dedicated most of your time to painting. Can you talk about this transition a little bit?

RC: Well, it was not really a transition. I was always a painter. I started painting very early. I've painted since I was 5 years old, almost every day. When I was 20 in Cuba I did not have a camera. Even if I would find one, I did not have access to monitors or projectors.

Then I went to Europe to study and for the first time I had a camera and some editing facilities. I started making videos. When I went back to Cuba, I was probably one of the few who were able to do that. I guess that is why I was labeled as a video artist. In Cuba, people love labeling. Kind of shocking: during the 8 or 10 years I made videos, I never stopped painting. I made installations with paintings and videos. Most of the videos were a mixture with other media as well.

Raúl Cordero, *Lo que pasaba en el banco de los bajos mientras yo pintaba un retrato de Yuri Gagarin*, 2001, oil on canvas + video, 160 x 125 cm (canvas) / 3h 25min (video)

Moreover, if you see it as part of my entire body of work, I would say its probably 20 per cent. However, in Cuba, when they saw video art for the first time it was probably through my work – although I have always denied that I invented anything in this regard. I was just experimenting. The problem for me was that I ran out of interest very quickly. I would say the most interesting works in video were made in the late 60's, during the 70's and the beginning of the 80's. In retrospect, there is something significant about the lack of accessibility to this media. During those times when you were going to make a video work, even the best ones, were made in film, because it was cheaper. Bruce Nauman's work was mostly made in film. They did not even call it a video camera; they called it a TV camera. So you had to rent a TV crew and it was very expensive. Then when you were going to use it, you probably only had one day; you had to have very concise, polished ideas of what you wanted because it was only one or two shots. Now people acquire their cameras first, they start recording and then they ask themselves: what do I want to do? It is a totally different approach.

With current video technology, there is a high level of access and few interesting ideas. Nowadays you can project a 50-meter-wide image over a building, or make a very big installation. But you are just taking advantage of what technology allows you to do. It is not like when you see a Chris Burden video, or a Vito Acconci from the sixties, a small blinking screen in black and white and a great idea. Their approach to this media and how they used it was so powerful. It was something that no one ever thought about before; that gave it a lot of value.

CS: I would say in your work video and painting are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, there is a harmony. A lot of references to moving images are found in your paintings.

RC: Mostly, the time-based idea. Either in sound or music or video or film, there is a time line. You have to wait for the whole video to run to get all the information. You can spend a minute, half an hour, two hours; whatever. But the video has an amount of time already defined.

CS: As oppose to painting?

RC: Yes, as oppose to painting. But after conceptualism different considerations arose. When you see a painting by Tapies it is all about impromptu; maybe a painting took only five seconds to be made and that's a statement of time. But when you see a painting by Rothko, maybe you find out that it took him a year to make it; that is also a statement of time. But I think it was video and other time-based media

that made people recognize that in painting. Before, what people saw in a painting was all about interpretation; its meaning, the story behind it, the anecdotal side of it.

After TV, video, radio, people started having a different approach to the amount of time spent making a painting. They became more sensitive regarding time. Just like photography. After the invention of photography, most paintings did not want to look like a painting, but like a photograph. As I was saying, that is one of the properties of painting: it has been adapting itself and it has been able to be seen from different points of view. Now for example, almost every single painter I know uses a computer in the process. Does that mean computers swallowed painting? Definitely not, they embraced it. Imagine Rembrandt with a computer. He would have been unstoppable.

Raúl Cordero, *Mambo de la conquista*, 2008, oil and polyester resin on canvas, 193 x 148 cm, (76 x 58 inches) (Contains a fragment of Meindert Hobbema's *The Alley at Middelharnis*)

CS: It gives a whole new set of possibilities…

RC: Exactly. Painting did not die because of this; I would say it's the opposite. It acquires all these new qualities and becomes even more interesting.

CS: It's very flexible, while other media is limited within its own confines…

RC: Painting is like a tyrant everyone wants to kill, but no one can. People keep painting, and painting, and painting. Painting is still here, it enriches itself with new inventions. For instance, I even use the IPhone in the process. It is quicker. Painting does not see new things as enemies while other media might. Painting is a natural human mode of expression. It is an activity that is so organic for human beings that it can acquire many kinds of values without becoming a problem.

CS: Can you talk about the use of images in your work? What are the different sources you get your imagery from?

RC: Every kind. But what I am more interested in these days is particles. I have been struggling lately with this idea of developing my work towards abstraction. I love abstraction and I think it is the purest kind of painting possible. In this transition, I started with some non-defined forms and they evolved into marbles, dots, etc. Then one day I went to an exhibition and there were several microscopes showing the composition of different types of organic matter. I realized we are compounds of particles, even the air. So I thought: what if I start representing particles which in the end is like representing everything? I am very excited these days with the idea of representing what's inside of things, not outside of them. What I imagine is starting from the most microscopic way of seeing things and ending up in the most philosophical way of writing or expressing things with a text.

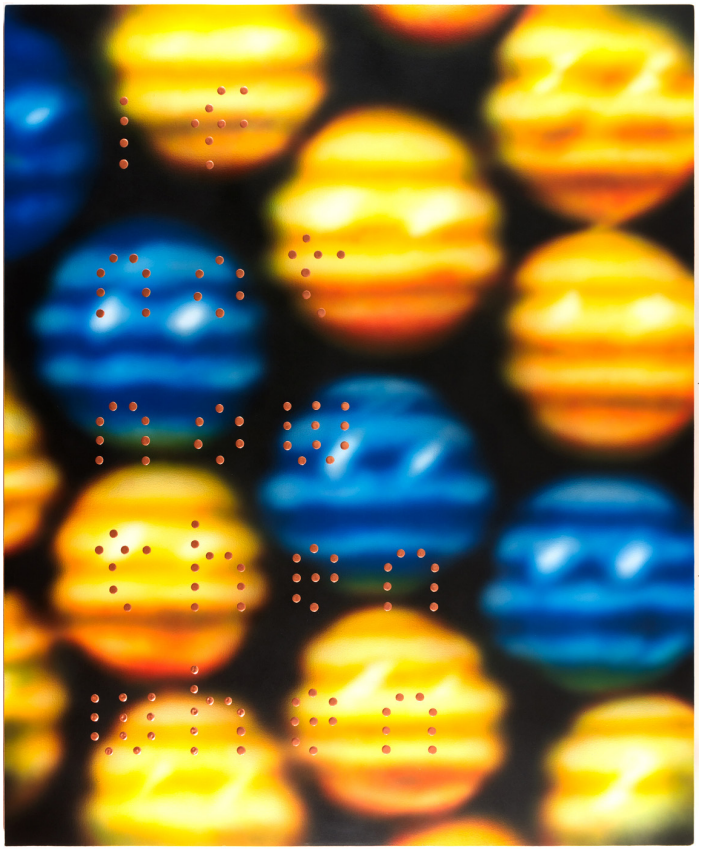
Right now I am involved in creating these pieces that go from the smallest parts of reality to the widest ones. That's my idea of representation these days.

CS: It's interesting what you just said about going from the smallest to the largest parts of reality, there is this notion that Pascal the French philosopher came up with of the two infinities, infinitely smaller and infinitely larger. That is kind of manifested in this idea of yours.

RC: There is also another theory that states that the whole universe is composed of spheres. Even when you see things with different shapes what you find on the inside are spheres. There is a whole philosophy about spheres which is very interesting. Peter Sloterdijk wrote three volumes only on this subject. A very serious study about how the world and everything got shaped, including a spherical philosophy on development and how things ended up

looking the way they do.

But in the end it is not an interest of mine to show people that life is made of particles. It's just an inspiration, an idea that makes me imagine things in a different way.



Raúl Cordero, *Untitled (If Not Now Then When...)*, 2019, acrylic, polyester and metallic pigments on canvas, 230 x 190 cm, (91 x 75 inches)

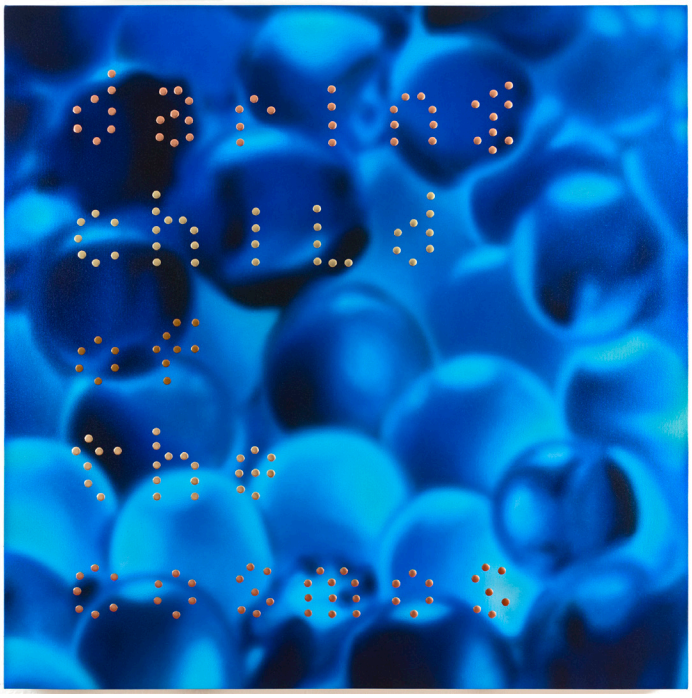
CS: Another aspect of your creative process is that you use different image processing programs on the computer to alter images. What is your main point of interest when manipulating certain pictures this way before executing them as traditional oil paintings?

RC: I would say the whole idea of making art is shaping what you are going to represent. The more art has developed, the more important shaping things has become. Before, it was all about meanings, about rendering things in a way that would look as close as possible to reality, but probably with modernism it is more about how you shape things.

CS: Would you say shaping is like editing?

RC:No. It is about the way you give things a certain aspect before they become a painting, or how you are going to design them before they become a painting. You don't just want to paint them the way they look. It is like what was behind the invention of cubism and impressionism or all those "isms". It is like asking: Do you really think Monet saw things the way he painted them? No, he saw things like you and me, but he decided to render them in a different way. Every painter has somehow imposed his way of seeing the world through his work. That's very much the modern ideal.

CS: Even if you are not representing it in an exact way, Monet's paintings, just to use your example, maybe it has more to do with an emotional way of seeing?



Raúl Cordero, *Untitled (Daring child of the cosmos...)*, 2018, acrylic, polyester and metallic pigments on canvas, 117 x 117 cm, (46 x 46 inches)

RC: Right. Alex Katz, for example. He has one of the most modern ways of rendering reality, he simplifies everything. Everything becomes flat. It's like seeing the world through his eyes. He decided to represent what he saw in a different way. I do that too.

In my practice, a computer is a very useful tool. To some extent, I see things the way pixels are shaped on a screen. I see they belong to some kind of organization that is not totally subjective, but objective. Pixel after pixel, after pixel. If you take away a computer from me, I will come up with a different kind of painting. Rembrandt used the dark camera which was the tool back in those days, these days the

computer is the tool for painters. Maybe not for everyone, but it is probably the most versatile tool one can use in the present.

CS: The horizontal lines that run across your canvases from the last couple of years and the blurred aspect of the image – although this blurriness does appear in earlier works as well – are kind of akin to the moving images of an old TV screen. It's an observation I had. Is there any meaning behind this?

RC: I know people with the information that I made videos before relate one thing to the other and develop this idea but it all started because I like paintings with a very low amount of information. That's probably why I like some of your father's paintings so much. When paintings are crowded with information or they yearn to tell you things, they don't interest me. I like paintings that are more emotional or have references to simple things that no one thinks about, like my uncle Rubiales. I like artists with the ability to point out something that is just that, and that's it. It may be relevant to whoever sees it, but you cannot control that. So I love paintings that have less visual information.

Regarding the blur aspect of the paintings. No one ever thought about blurring paintings before they saw an out-of-focus photograph because the blurring is a defect of photography. This is an activity, an approach to painting that comes after the invention of photography. So we are already framing a painting in a certain amount of time. I'm always very interested in art that portrays the time when it was made. And from that it can transcend the future and become timeless.

When artists started paying attention to all these problems brought to life by photography, by optics, blurred paintings began to appear.

CS: Obviously Richter's out of focus photographic paintings come to mind…

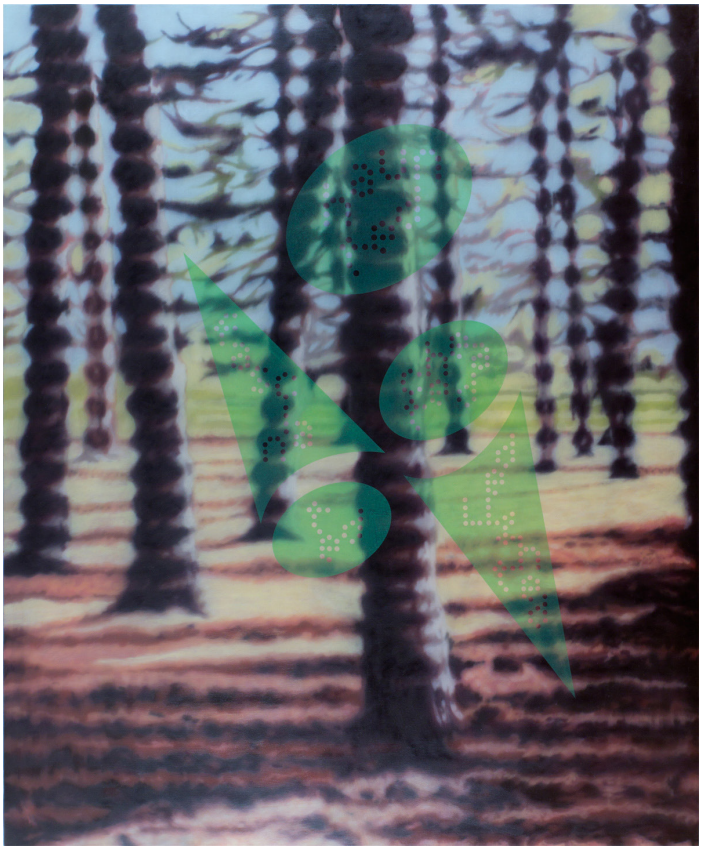
RC: In Richter's case, he used that at the beginning because he was using photos from the press. He wanted to blur them as a conceptual maneuver. Then it became part of his style. No one ever painted in black and white before photography, how can one even think in black and white before seeing photographs? There is not a single painting made before photography in grays. Nobody thought about it. Richter was referring to photography as a document; he was painting it, blurring it.

I first tried making paintings with a low amount of details and blurring them, when I was a student. Of course everyone would say: Oh, it looks like a Richter. I dealt with other elements in my work though this way of painting was organic to me. I felt comfortable and really loved to paint this way and I started to mix that with other media, other drawings and texts. I tried many things.

Raúl Cordero, *Untitled (Trendy, smart, meaningful, wonderful...)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 230 x 190 cm, (91 x 75 inches)

CS: Would you say there is something conceptual about "how" you make your paintings or the manner in which they are painted? I guess what I am asking is if technique is something conceptual for you.

RC: I do not believe art can be conceptual at all. What is conceptual is the attitude in which you deliver it to the world, or the attitude in which you see it. That can be conceptual: the attitude, not the work itself. Even if I wanted or not, I was educated in a time when conceptualism was the highest way of thinking. I cannot escape from that. It is very difficult for me. On the other hand I come from Cuba, where there is an over analysis of every work of art, all the time, from every angle; it undermines freedom in the creative process. They leave no chance for accidents, for the unexpected. Ultimately in my country most art expires very quickly, because there is no chance for freedom and freedom is what makes it transcend time.



Raúl Cordero, *Untitled (Haunted, cheated, delighted, fascinated...)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 230 x 190 cm, (91 x 75 inches)

CS: Last time we saw each other in May, you said something that stuck with me: "anything neglected by contemporary trends immediately captures my attention. I believe in the symbolism of the obsolete." I was very intrigued by this idea. Do you think you could expand on this?

RC: Yes. For example, for the same reason that you would save a nice poster of a Braque exhibition from the 50's and you frame it and hang it in your house, the function of that poster was to announce that exhibition at that time; once it ended, it has no function anymore. However, it still exists for symbolic reasons and you love to see the picture with the work of Braque, maybe the typography, or the printing. As more time passes, things get printed in a very different technological way, and that old kind of printing gets even more special.

CS: Can you talk about the evolution of text in your paintings and this notion of transient poetry?

RC: Well, all my work or most of it always contains image and text. These are the two main basic means of expression for human beings. For some reason, human beings created representation as a way of materializing knowledge, but also created writing and language as a way of materializing and spreading knowledge, or content as they say now. The curious thing for me is that the two of them don't relate to each other. I mean, images and texts speak in a totally different language.

All knowledge is based either on images or texts, from libraries to museums. What is called culture is either illustrated or written.

In my work image and text are taken out of context; I put them into a work of art before they become communication. That is why it's still art for me.

CS: So it is the tension between these two things that have contrasting natures that you find interesting in your visual language.

RC: Exactly. For me, information is basic to human culture, to human nature. But art as in the way we were talking about it before, the moment it becomes communication its not art anymore. At least that's how I see it. The unique thing about art is not having to communicate. Art is something that contains many signs of information that people can see in a different way. When it reaches the level of communication people are supposed to understand it the same way. Art is totally the opposite. There is only like a hair of separation between one thing and the other. Before passing that thin line is where art should stop.

The texts I make are difficult to read because of the way they are rendered. Apparently it has nothing to do with the image, except that now they both belong to the same object and between both of them they create a new reality, which is now a painting. But this painting cannot communicate; it can only trigger many questions.

CS: I have always thought that the deconstructed way in which the text is rendered at times looks more like a drawing and it disrupts the uniformity of the pictorial image.

RC: Yes. When I studied graphic design the thing that interested me the most was character design; typography. I learned that typography has to be direct, economical, and communicational; a good typography communicates with the least amount of traces and decoration as possible. Text informs you very quickly so you can either take action after, or if it's a book you keep reading. It is certainly not something you stare at it and stop there. I tried with this way of rendering texts – using these characters I created a long time ago – to make it the opposite.

More and more people see art at a very fast pace. There is so much art nowadays wherever you go, huge exhibitions, art fairs, Biennials; people are always thinking about what they are going to see next rather than what they are seeing in the moment. People are not fully engaged with the present, so my intention is to make viewers experience my art at a slower pace. See if they can decipher something. If I get to slow down the pace, and create some kind of attention from the viewer, I think I will be changing in some way this experience.

Raúl Cordero, *Untitled (Crappy, happy, curated, negotiated...)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 230 x 190 cm, (91 x 75 inches)

CS: You also said that "perspective and collage were two revolutionary things in the evolution of making art." Can you elaborate on this?

RC: In the history of representation, mimesis, even more perspective and then the invention of optics, allowed painters to use the dark camera to reproduce reality, not exactly, but as accurate as possible to create this illusion of space and the true dimension of things; that invention freed painters and representation in general. Before that, what was most important when making a painting was A THING, mostly things related to who commissioned the paintings, or asked for them, either religious or historical; painters had to deal with power in many ways. But then representation became attractive because it looked like reality and that turned into the reason to make a painting.

The question was: why would you make a painting if you are not going to illustrate a religious story or something similar? Well, I want to demonstrate how accurate I can paint. By deceiving the eye, painters were freed from having to paint for someone else and illustrate a story; for instance, Canaletto, who could show off how good his skills were by painting a landscape in Venice. That was it. And then one guy with a lot of money would buy it from him, because it was an illustration, it had become a record of something. But it was also because of this accuracy. Painting became a way of rendering in a two-dimensional plane how the eye saw things.

Raúl Cordero, *Untitled (After Hobbema: Matta Clark / Lázaro Vargas),* 2008, oil and polyester resin on canvas, 170 x 135 cm, (67 x 53 inches) (Contains a fragment of Meindert Hobbema's *The Alley at Middelharnis* and Gordon Matta Clark's *Splitting*)

Painting was important because it had to be done in a very elaborate way to illustrate how the eye saw. But then it became a sort of slavery, because depending on how good or bad you were able to do it, you were allowed or not to make a painting. Painters became slaves of their

own technique and were trying all the time to improve themselves and sometimes they couldn't. Then, collage comes from inside the process of painting. If you stare at a Caravaggio painting, there is a collage. Because you would have a couple of "servants" who would sit for you and you would use them as angels in the paintings, and a maid who would act as the Queen and you would paint the whole body first because the Queen would only have time to sit for one day, and you would paint the face that day, but it was a collage between the body of the maid and the face of the real Queen. From this procedure is that collage started to emerge.

Raúl Cordero, *Tropical Painting 5 (Contagious music, mosquitoes, mojitos, surveillance* and people ready to fall in love...), 2017, oil and polyester on canvas, 230 x 190 cm, (91 x 75 inches)

Painters realized that by collaging things they could create a story with paintings. At the same time this was not illustrating anymore how the eye would see as it did before, but how the mind thinks. So that was what freed painters from the slavery of having to represent how the eye sees as accurate as possible. It was like putting things together out of your own idea; it was a new way of making art.

CS: As opposed to the illusion of something representational…

RC: It was not so important anymore to make it as close to reality as possible but to make it work according to how the mind thinks about it; also as accurate as possible. That was a big shift.

CS: Is there a space in your practice that deals with your nationality?

RC: I am Cuban. I was born and raised there. That is my origin. I love my island and even more the Cuban people, the way we feel, think and behave (the warmest behavior you will ever find). Contrary to colonial art world theories, the notion that artists become universal while looking back at where they come from, my work is constantly about movement, evolution, and transformation.

Raúl Cordero, *Tropical Painting 4 (We make art about our problems for visitors who feel good not having them...)*, 2017, oil and polyester on canvas, 250 x 195 cm, (98 x 77 inches)