

Ricardo Brey: Doble Existencia / Double Existence

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*Doble Existencia /
Double Existence*

Alexander Gray Associates

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February 28 – April 6, 2019

Alexander Gray Associates

EN CUENTRAN SUSTENTO LAS OTRAS
ROCAS ES NECESARIO QUE LOS MUROS
QUE LAS DEBEN SUSTENTAR NO ESTEN
FUERA

DE LA FLOTLADA QUE
TIENDE AL CENTRO ESTE IRCONVENIENTE
NOO TAM B V NA RO R U AS

QU... ES LA... MANETT
DEL MISMO... QUE... TABLECE TODOS LOS BORDES Y LOS

MUROS... TENDIENDO RECTAMENTE HACIA EL
ESCRIBIO ESTANJO EN EL FONDO DEL ABISMO.

EN EL POZO de LOS SIGANTES
SI TUVIESE LA... Y...
CUAL CONVENDRIA a ESTE TRISTE FOGO
SOBRE EL que FORMAN FUENTE TANTAS ROCAS
SOBRE ESTE FOGO se ORVAN Y ENCUENTRAN LAS
OTRAS ROCAS ES NECESARIO que LOS MUROS que
SUSTENTEN NO ESTEN FUERA DE LA...

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Ricardo Brey in Conversation with Alex Santana

New York, NY, 2019

Alex Santana: You are currently based in Ghent, Belgium, but you were born and raised in Havana, Cuba and participated in an important moment for arts and culture on the island during the 1980s. How did Western art critics engage with Cuban art at the time?

Ricardo Brey: There were many critics who came to visit and took a superficial approach to Cuban art at the time. I even think some of them may have been disappointed in us. They found that we didn't follow what they were expecting from us. The Cuba of that moment was Cuba of the Revolution, which was committed to building a narrative of an official history. We were searching for belonging. We wanted to establish a root to our country. Many of the Western critics and scholars who visited were Marxists and they pretended to be sympathetic to the Revolution, even though at the time they were acting very imperialistic towards the real communists in Cuba. They were paternalistic in that they wanted to teach us what to say and how to behave, to bestow the lessons of life upon us, to try and teach us how to be proper socialists. In my work at the time, it was



Ricardo Brey in Cuba, 1981

more important for me to utilize the freedom I had with other authors—a freedom I recognized I didn't have with Karl Marx. I found that Magical Realism was more connected to my reality than the 19th century German philosophy of Marx and Engels. In that moment, I was already so full of the Marxist-Leninist philosophy I had read in school, and that didn't serve as the right tool for me to explore my own reality. I needed the freedom of Borges, García Marquez, Fuentes, and Guimarães Rosa. I needed the freedom of something else—the freedom of art, not *Das Kapital*.



Ricardo Brey: *Fuel to the Fire*, reactivation installation from *Documenta IX*, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA) (2015)

AS: Following this period of time in Cuba, in 1990, at the invitation of curator Jan Hoet, you moved to Belgium in preparation for your participation in two exhibitions: *Ponton Temse* (1990) and *Documenta IX* (1992). How would you characterize that transitional period of your life in the early 1990s and the changes you observed in your work?

RB: Some changes I adapted to my practice were the desire to leave all familiar systems, to work with



Tea ceremony in Kassel, 1992

adrenaline when responding to certain situations, and to totally rethink all of my previous methods from Cuba. I asked myself, “Why was this guy (Jan Hoet) so interested in me and impressed by my work?” I felt that the drawings I was making in Cuba were too literary and based in narrative—something that I always find so heavy in Latin American art—they were like fairy tales, and they needed to say something. It wasn’t working for me. I had that realization the first moment I moved to Belgium. Again, I thought: “Why was I invited here? What was the point of me being here?” It couldn’t possibly be exoticism. I carried something else inside my heart: a desire to move things forward.

I wanted things to transform in one second from ordinary to magic. I was transporting imaginary luggage. I told myself that I needed to get rid of everything I didn’t need for that trip and to leave some things behind in Cuba. For me, that was a very clear image and I’ve been using that metaphor my whole life. This is how disparate associations have developed in my work: drawing from my experiences in Cuba, my experiences with Native American communities in South Dakota, my appropriation of myths, and my use of bricolage. Utilizing all of these references and experiences is a key part of my practice—it’s survival. To be able to survive as a human being, as an artist, you need to use all the tools you have available.

AS: Part of that flexibility appears in your practice in that you mine various cultural sources that traverse time periods as well as geographies. In 2013 you acknowledged that “no religion, philosophy, culture, or civilization is truly pure.” Often your work incorporates seemingly unrelated objects that are placed together within a single composition, illuminating connections for viewers that previously might have never emerged. How do you understand cultural “impurity” and how do you create new mythologies in your work?

RB: Everybody copies everybody. All artists are always copying somebody. People were surprised when a Western artist like Picasso copied from African culture. In my work, I try to make sure that the cultural references I use don’t stay traditional or stagnant. Like you’ve said, I try to traverse time periods and cultures, in my use of titles and in my appropriations. At the core of my being is a confusing guy who has a huge curiosity about the world, with a mixed background that includes Spanish ancestry, Yoruba ancestry, and some Chinese-Caribbean ancestry. Because I was

born on an island, I didn’t have neighboring cultures around me. Cuba is surrounded by water, and that made me curious. I remember one time I was coming back from Australia on a trip, and during a layover in an airport in Hawaii, some guy came up to me and asked, “where are you from?” And I said “I come from another island, like you.” In that moment because I was surrounded by Oceanic people, I looked like I could be from Fiji, or Samoa, or New Guinea, and so there, in that random airport in Hawaii, I felt like I was home.

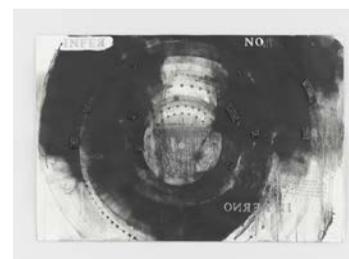
AS: So, being from an island provides you with enough flexibility and freedom to have strong affinities with other cultures beyond the geographical limits of Cuba, or Belgium, or any place for that matter?

RB: Exactly. I feel it now more so than ever before now that I live somewhere with surrounding neighborhoods. Look at Belgium: the north is bordered by Holland, the south by France, the southeast by Luxembourg, and the east by Germany—these are cultures that have been in proximity for thousands of years, but they don’t want to know each other. However, I am not of that experience. I am curious. I don’t think people are curious anymore, and that is very dangerous. You can’t ignore your neighbors. You need to know what’s going on in your neighborhood as well as those around you, and I think that art can help facilitate those connections. I put a lot of weight and hope in art.

AS: Your recent works from the *Inferno* series speak to hope, but also to chaos and trauma. Do you conceptualize *Inferno* as a state of being, rather than a specific site? How do you visually convey your understanding of *Inferno* in your recent large-format drawings?

RB: When I was finishing the boxes that make up the series *Every Life is a Fire*, I realized that I wanted to make landscapes that could serve as a setting for the boxes to be opened. First, I wanted to create a mental landscape for the boxes to be opened, and after that I said to myself, “I need to create a real landscape.” I didn’t want to create anything close to the Garden of

Eden as a context for these works to open, but rather, the opposite: the boxes needed to be opened in the *Inferno*. I found that Dante’s *Inferno* was so closely related to how I engage drawing-making, and I said to myself, “I



Inferno, 2017



The Black Cube, 2012



The Black Cube, 2012

can hang out here for a while.”

AS: When did you realize that the mental and physical landscape could be *Inferno*?

RB: I think when I came back from Cuba. At the time, Barack Obama was still the president of the United States and I had a lot of hope that the situation would get better in Cuba. I tested the power of the boxes in Cuba, by including them in my 2014 solo exhibition at El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana, and to my surprise, everything changed so dramatically. I had been optimistic and my viewpoint became negative again. My whole view of Cuba’s political and social landscape shifted—I was expecting to see improvement, not another battle. I realized that evil doesn’t go away.

AS: After more than twenty years in exile, what changes did you observe when you returned to Cuba? Are you attached to the idea of a rooted homeland or is your connection rhizomatic?

RB: I don’t ever feel nostalgic. After 20 years, I returned to Cuba and I had this overwhelming wave of realization: “I am back here and I don’t recognize anything.” Everything felt familiar, and at the same time, totally alien. I felt like Alexander von Humboldt on his first trip to the island. I was able to see how much of Havana still lived in my boxes. Havana is totally eclectic, non-linear, and random. I can’t even use the term “centrifugal”

because that relies on a circular frame of reference. You use the term “rhizomatic” and I like that, because it avoids chronology and organization. I have always been connected to Cuba, but I was surprised to find that the art I had been making in Europe had resonance and meaning back in Cuba. I showed one sculpture, *You Can’t Escape from What You Are* (2013), to a security night guard at the museum, and he gave me the most astonishing and beautiful interpretation. It was nighttime, and we were leisurely playing dominoes, and out of nowhere this guy surprises me with the most meaningful interpretive statement related to my use of materials. For me, that was a magical moment because it affirmed my decision of

committing to my use of bricolage. The risk you take when you leave Cuba is to encounter an abundance of luxury materials and say, “I can now use the most sophisticated materials and think bigger and better. These white folks are going to love me for that.”

RB, AS: *laughter*

RB: I wasn’t necessarily trying to be clever in that sense. I was trying to be honest and vulnerable by demonstrating the skill of my culture’s ability to survive the worst conditions—to survive hurricanes, political chaos, and yet to remain human.



You Can't Escape From What You Are, 2013

AS: You have previously stated that the incorporation of found objects in your work has the capacity to bring fragments like old writings and discarded materials “back to life.” You’ve previously said that this impulse was guided by your first moments in Europe, after experiencing the abundance and waste of the West, but is it also informed by Yoruba spirituality and anthropomorphism?

RB: I think my appropriation comes from a very Cuban way of thinking. For instance, Cubans will adapt these beautiful old cars from the 1950s. When you open the hood of the car you instantly notice that part of the motor is from the Soviet Union, while another part of the motor is Korean, but what remains most important is the amount of work that was put into it. For me, it starts there: how does the thing work? I hold a lot of empathy for things. I found this philosophical term in Japanese that I identify with: *mono no aware*, which is about empathy for things. I collect materials, and in the end, I feel empathy towards those materials. Empathy leads me to question the inherent meanings of materials and to develop new meanings. When I find things on the street, I speak to those objects and acknowledge them: “You are here. You are a discarded bottle cap and you are beautiful, like a



Western Canon, 2018

flower. I'm going to use you. Maybe not today, but maybe tomorrow you can be a part of art." Even if you don't understand why a found object is included in my work, the object will still try to claim its own identity, much like how I'm trying to claim my own identity and history. I was in the middle of the street, a car ran over me, maybe I flew around a bit and was flattened, but I am a bottle cap, and now I am a part of the art. I am very proud of that.

AS: Magic and surprise are key elements that inform your practice. In a 2013 interview with Sandra Sosa Fernández, you explain that "if (your work) doesn't surprise you, then there is no beauty." Is beauty important to you in your work? How does enchantment, mysticism and mystery influence you?

RB: I tend to make art that surprises me because I don't always remember what I was doing in previous years. For example, some of my work incorporates fish. In the 1990s when I first moved to Belgium, I was so engaged drawing fish, and I was happy. I would draw a lot of them in gold, because I remembered swimming in the ocean as a child in Cuba and seeing the fish in the water, and realizing that they were shiny! They didn't have color but they were pure light. Suddenly, I remembered that I had been making drawings of fish in the 1970s, and I had totally forgotten! I always think that I need to be in charge of my own reality. Even if you go back to old references from the past, you inevitably see things through new eyes, always. You need to find the beauty in what you're doing, even if a part of it is tragic. We, as artists, make copies of reality, using media like photography, painting, and sound... Copying reality can be very tragic.

AS: Much of your practice reflects on humankind's connection to nature, yet figurative representations of humans are remarkably absent in your work. Is this omission explicit? How does the recurring presence of inventions like games, music, and other ephemera contribute to the tension between humans and nature?

RB: This is absolutely explicit. I don't want to make human beings the center of my work. I think it's quite egocentric to continue to make us the center of everything, to make everything revolve around us. I don't want to participate in that. I'd rather make a portrait of a beetle or a butterfly than



Ricardo Brey, 2018
Photo by Isabel Brey



Axis Mundi, 2006

another portrait of a child or an old man. In another sense, objects that are man-made are also portraits of people. When I made *Axis Mundi* with discarded gloves I had collected, I was making a monument for human beings. It's not a portrait, per se, since I wanted to maintain the sense of anonymity of the people who had used those gloves. At the same time, gloves with five fingers are unequivocally us — it's really like the handprints in the cave of Altamira. Hands are a symbol for collective identity.

AS: Air and breath are elements that you've incorporated into past installations. Does your use of fans, ventilators, and other similar tools refer back to a life force that feeds us all?

RB: Yes. That and the idea of dreaming. When I first moved to Belgium and was working on the Documenta installation I asked myself, "What is something that all humans do? What is something that connects me to all these people around me?" I had an aha moment: sleep. Everybody sleeps. So I started to make work that had to do with sleeping, using pillows and a mattress.

Everyone lies horizontally and experiences the infinities of dreams, as well as that haunting moment when you're right about to fall asleep. The installation was a part of a system I was creating myself—a new mythology. It was assemblage, taking aspects from Cuban *Santería* with the incorporation of chicken legs and including a part of the Cuban climate with heat. I also needed to include something kinetic, so the ventilator became the perfect tool for that. In the same way, Coca Cola became the perfect pigment for painting. I sprayed the walls of the space because it was all too white, too clean—too "white cube." I had never seen anything like that before, and I said to myself, "No, no, this is not my space." I need to anthropomorphize my space in the way that I see it, between Earth and blood.

AS: Upon arriving in Europe, you began to think about these universal experiences that make humans relate to each other despite their differences. Today, how does your position and identity as an Afro-Caribbean man living in Ghent, Belgium inform your practice? Do you consider diaspora and hybridity as critical elements in your work?

RB: I am an alien and have always been an alien. I am an artist. No matter where I am located, I am always an alien. In Cuba I was a strange guy, and now I'm here (in Belgium) and nothing has changed. I was born in the 1950s and it was awful. There has always been discrimination against minorities. Cuba was awful in the 1950s and was awful during the Revolution. There are always good people and bad people. That's the reason I changed my practice from a broad, universal approach to the insular magic of the boxes. With the interiority of the box, I can communicate with one person directly. You can talk to someone for a while and charm them like a snake charmer, *como un encantador de serpientes*. You can make something that makes someone a believer, helping them escape the problems of the everyday. I love hybridity as a state of mind.

AS: You frequently draw from past projects and incorporate elements from the past into your current work. How do you conceptualize time in relation to your own identity?

RB: I know that the person at the center of this imaginative core is me. I always discover that I have another layer to me. Sometimes I am very depressed, because I think that this is the last drop—the last layer of me who has the capacity to be truly honest. But I always suddenly discover new parts of who I am. I am always moving around, like a ripple of water that moves but always comes back to the center ... what I want to say is that I don't know who I am. I discover who I am every day. I try to own my identity as a Cuban sometimes, but what I want to say is that my identity today is this one. Tomorrow, my reality might change, and I will need to accommodate myself to that. I want to be able to talk to the future.

AS: So, the unknown is productive? For you, the unknown feels like liberation?

RB: Yes, it gives me the potential for unfixed meaning. I think most of the answers I've given you today are unrelated to the things I was searching for in Cuba—they changed because I moved to another reality. The reality that I live now is not the same reality that I lived in the early 1990s. It's a new reality for me. I'm like Giacometti in that I struggle with space and time.



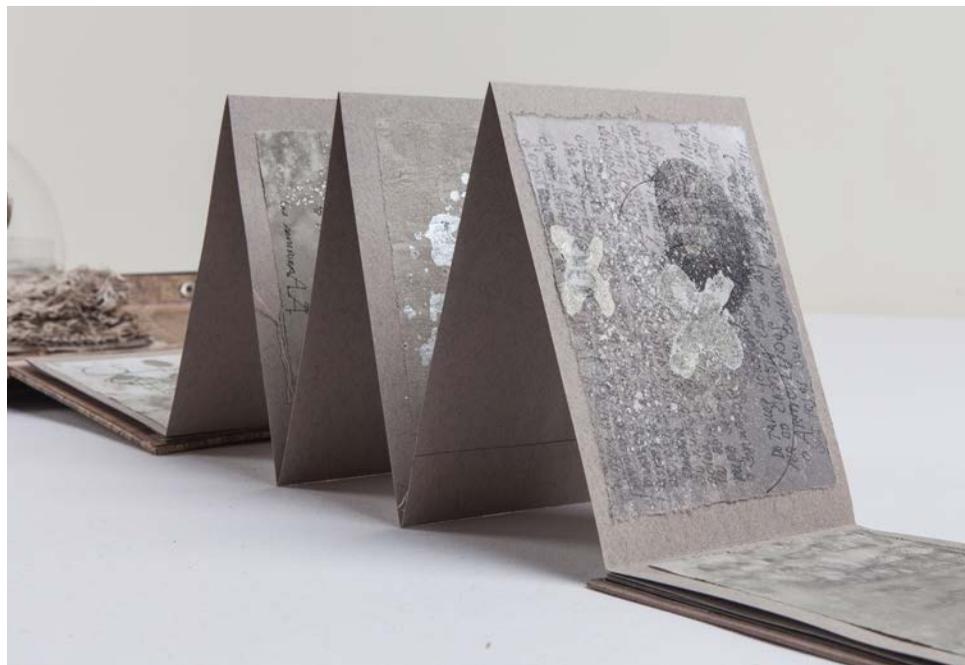
Ricardo Brey, 2018. Photo by I. Perera.

Ricardo Brey
Doble Existencia / Double Existence



Rose of Jericho, 2013–2014





Rose of Jericho, 2013–2014, alternative views



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019



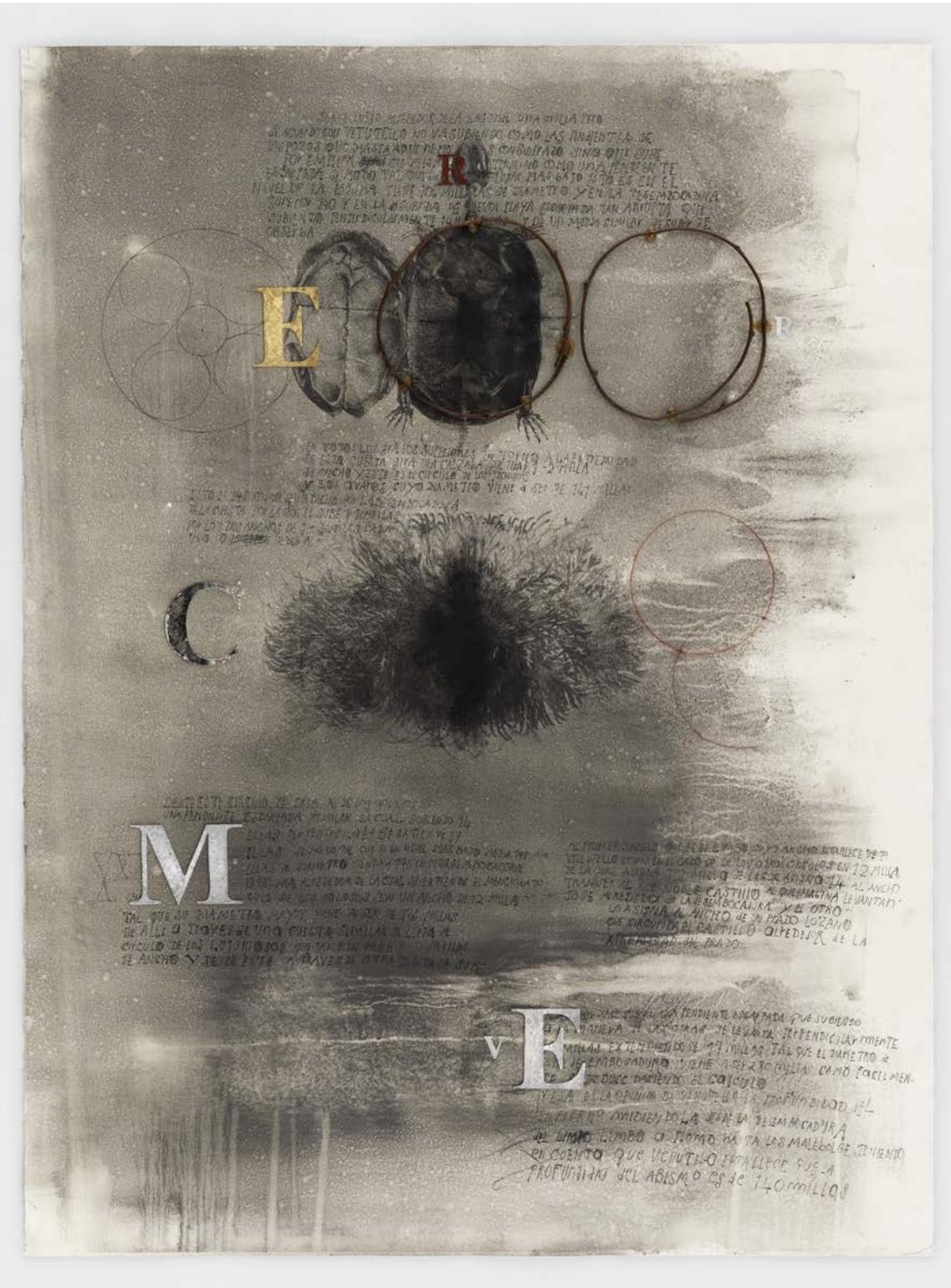
A dream, 2018



You Can't Escape From What You Are, 2013



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019



Breathing ground, 2017



EN CUERPO SIENTE LAS OTRAS
NUNCA ES NECESARIO TENER LOS MUROS
QUE LAS DEBEN SOSTENER NO ESTAN
FUERA

DE LA PROMESA QUE
TRONCA AL CERRAR ESTE INCOMPLETO
ESTO TAMBIEN NO ES UN

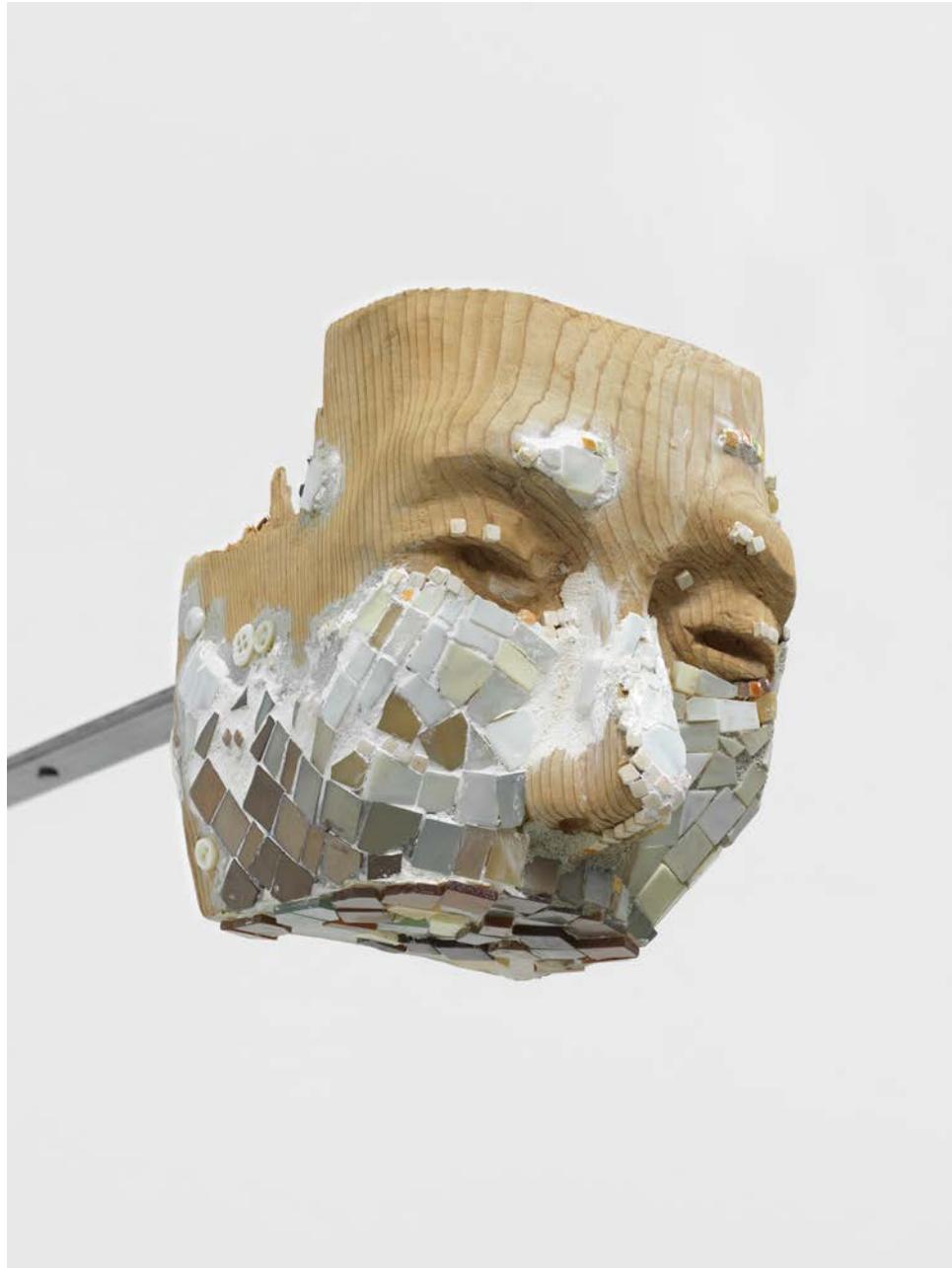
QU... ES LA... CUERPO O MANEJO
QUE... QUE... QUE... QUE... QUE...
MUROS... MUROS... MUROS... MUROS... MUROS...
ESCILIO ESTANIO EN EL FONDO DEL ABISMO

EN EL POZO DE LOS MUROS
SI TU VIÉSE LAS...
CUAL CONVENIRIA A ESTE TIPO DE...
SOBRE EL QUE... TANTAS ROCAS
SOBRE ESTE... ENCUENTRAN LAS
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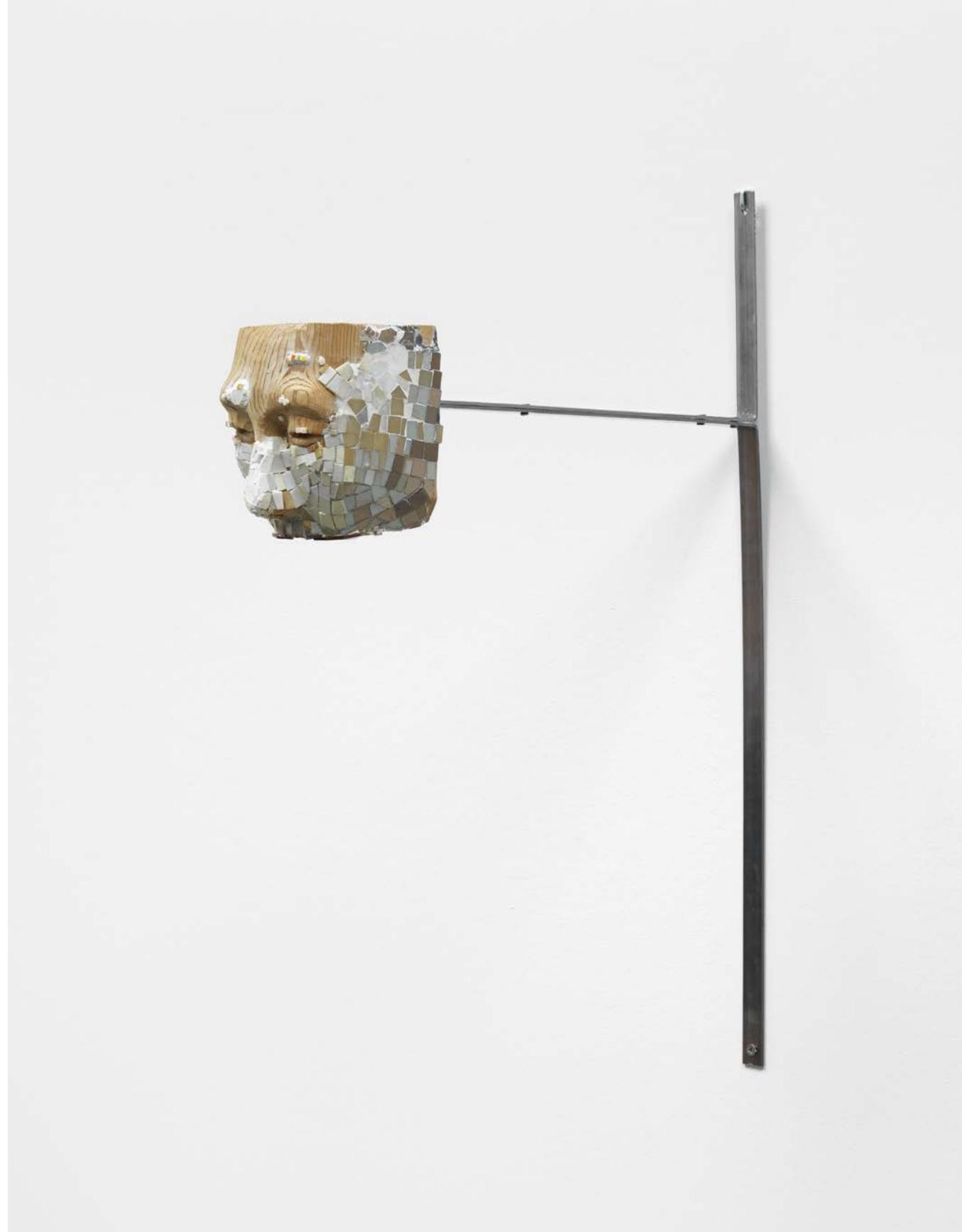
Stormclouds, 2017



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019



Meditatie, 2018, detail
Right: installation view





Scrub, 2018



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019



A patient man keeps cooking a stone and drinks from its broth, 2018
Right: detail





Leo, 2018
Right: detail





Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019



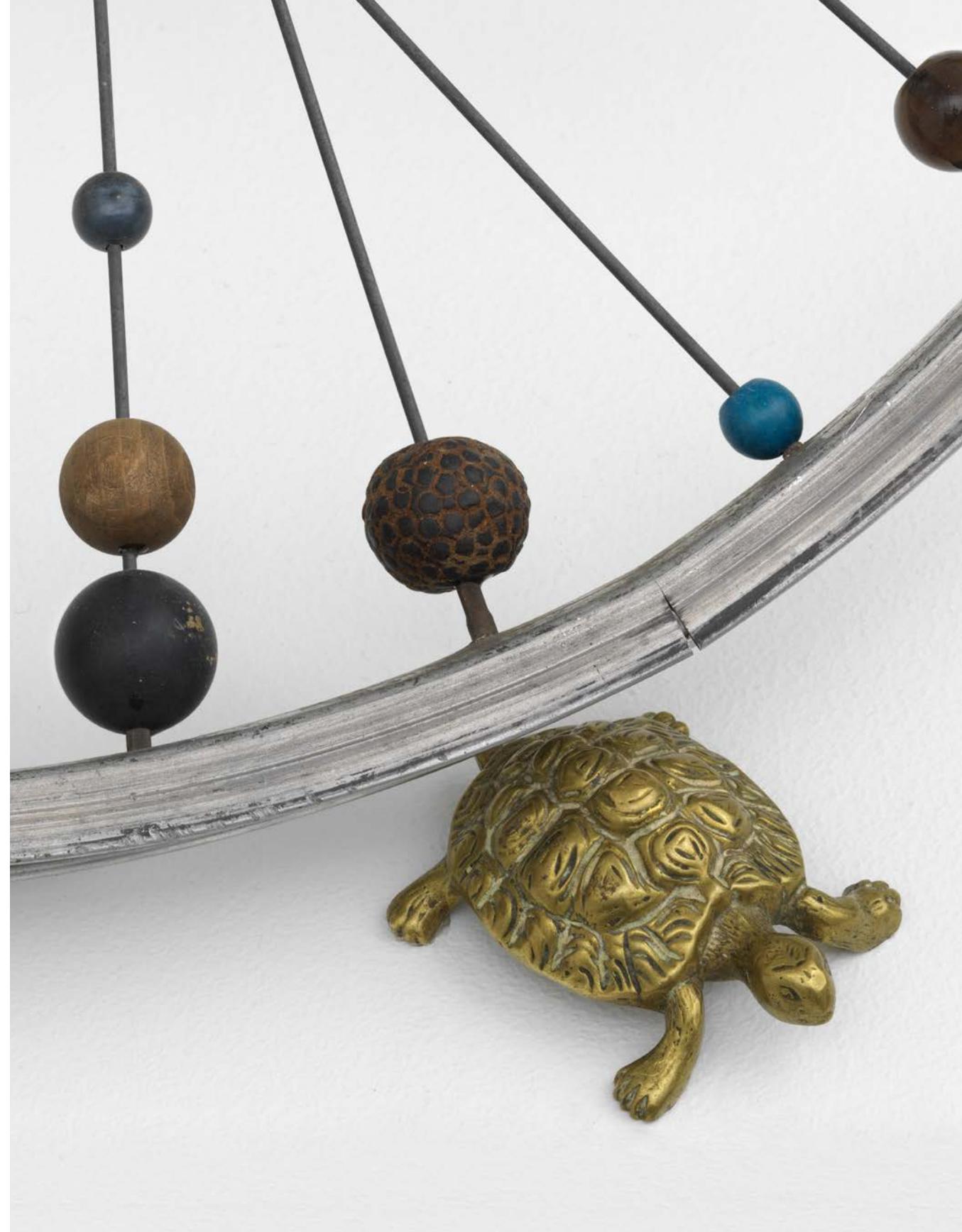
Seldom Blue, 2017

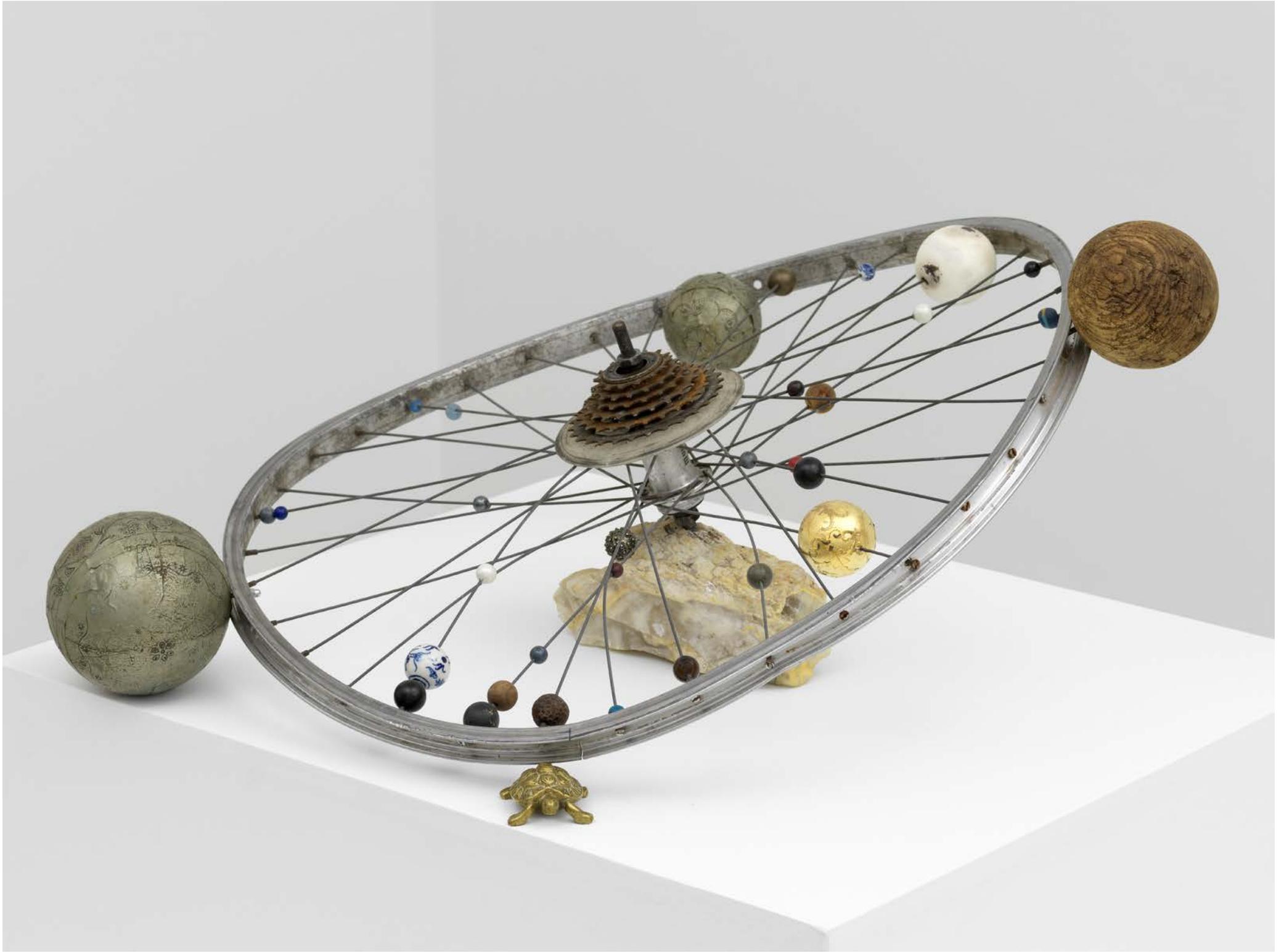
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019





You will never guess what comes next, 2018
Right: detail





You will never guess what comes next, 2018



Outer darkness, 2017

O N R E F I N I

... SU ESPINA
EL PLANETA
ALTURA O FALDA

... SE HAZO A SU
... A POSEER
... LA PIEL A LA PIEL

EL ESPÍRITU MIA UN FUGI TIVIO
... AMARAR SATORCA EL DUR
... NINGUNISMO VIV

... LO ASTRALIA
... LA ESMERALDA

EN
Y COMO QUE AFAVOSA ZIA
... TIERRA BESI
... SE VUELVE AL OBTM PE

Outer darkness, 2017, detail



Fern at the edge of the road, 2017



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019



Ricardo Brey in Tokyo, 1994

Ricardo Brey: Selected Chronology

1955 Born in Havana, Cuba, on November 9, 1955. Born to a family of fishermen.
 1970–74 Attends La Escuela de Artes Plásticas San Alejandro in Havana, Cuba.
 1974–78 Studies at La Escuela Nacional de Arte, a prestigious art school in Havana focused on craft and developing the technical skills of the profession.

1977 Begins to collaborate with other members of Volumen I, a group of young artists committed to artistic experimentation in Cuba, opposed to the socialist-realism formal mandates of the Cuban Revolution. The group organized itself as a discussion forum for community-building among young Cuban artists.

For me, Volumen I was getting together with my friends, and understanding what their art was about. I knew all about what (Juan Francisco) Elso was working on, and I drooled, and still do, at Gustavo Pérez Monzón's drawings. They weren't artists, they were my friends, my brothers.¹

1979–80 Produces works on paper referencing late-18th-century Spanish painting traditions, stylistically utilizing frottage and collage as methodologies in his drawings.

1979–84 Works as an educator at Casa de la Cultura, Jaruco, with fellow artist Gustavo Pérez Monzon leading outdoor drawing workshops for the institution's visitors, which primarily consisted of children and the elderly. At this time, begins to explore the writings of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose theories on the formations of culture influenced Brey for years to come.

When I got to Jaruco I had no interest in teaching children. Gustavo showed me how to respect that. I was very sorry when he left, and I had to finish what he had started. I didn't begin his work; I just continued it. The Casa de Cultura became nationally recognized, with the first Children's Art Museum in Cuba.²

1980 First solo exhibition, titled *Full Moon*, presented at Casa de la Cultura, Jaruco, Cuba.

Produces drawings related to the first European explorers and naturalists in Latin America, including facsimiles of historical documents, a commentary on colonialism and scientific exoticism. These figures included Alexander von Humboldt and Pehr Löfling.

I try to discover my own continent and its history, and my self and my biography, and the exact link of both, where they connect.³

1980–85 Organizes the landmark *Volumen I* exhibition at the Centro de Arte Internacional, Havana, along with fellow artists José Bedía, Juan Francisco Elso, José Manuel Fors, Flavio Garciandía, Israel León, Rogelio López Marín, Gustavo Pérez Monzón, Tomas Sánchez, Leandro Soto, and Rubén Torres Llorca. In two weeks, the

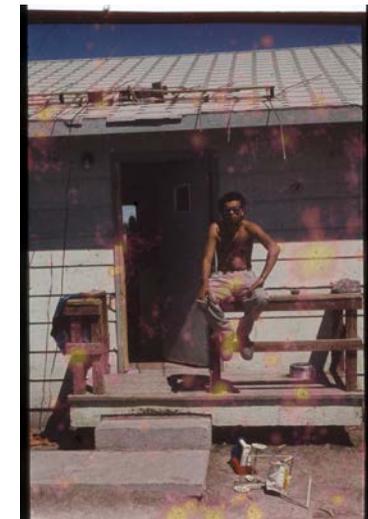


Fig 1 Brey in Cuba, 1980
 Fig 2 *Pesco*, 1978
 Fig 3 *Minas de Matahambre* Cuba, 1983

Fig 4 *Papeles de Verrazano*, 1985
 Fig 5 Brey in South Dakota, 1985

Fig 6 Brey at *Pintura Fresca* exhibition, Cienfuegos Art Gallery, Cuba, 1979
 Fig 7 Brey in Cuba, 1978



Fig 6 *Volumen I* artists with Ana Mendieta and Lucy Lippard, Cuba, 1981

Fig 8 *Luna Llana*, 1979–80
Fig 9 Brey in Boston, 1987

Fig 7 Brey and Mendieta, Cuba, c.1983–84

Fig 10 Brey and Jimmie Durham meet in New York City, 1985

Fig 11 Brey in his Havana studio, 1990

exhibition drew over 8,000 visitors and ushered in a new era of conceptual art in Cuba, referred to as the “Cuban Renaissance.”

Diría que Volumen I fue simplemente un accidente, una piedrecita en medio de la carretera pero que se convierte dentro del marco artístico de Cuba, en algo parecido a una montaña con cierto carácter ya mitológico difícil de superar... Nosotros hicimos algo por el estilo. No había una estructura sólida para consolidar una política cultural y una cultura revolucionaria. Ahí fue dónde ciertas circunstancias y condiciones nos señalaron que debíamos hacer la política y la hicimos.⁴

- 1981 Creates a series of drawings devoted to Charles Darwin and the *Origin of Species* that was exhibited in El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba.
- 1981 Begins to experiment with a stencil machine, a gift he received from Cuban artist Raúl Martínez. Utilizing this new tool, develops works based on the diary of Alexander von Humboldt.
- 1981 Meets and befriends Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, who would remain an influence for the artist for years to come.
- 1985 Travels to the US for the first time, following an invitation by Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer to be an artist-in-residence at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Westbury for four months.
- 1985 Exhibits *The structure of myths* in SUNY’s Amelie Wallace Gallery, one of his first three-dimensional installation works, consisting of Brey’s recreation of Giovanni da Verrazzano’s logbooks as well as traditional *Santería* offerings like salt, cowry shells, candles, and strings of pearls.
- 1985 Meets and befriends Jimmie Durham, and is invited by him to visit Indian reservations in South Dakota. Spends one month with primarily Lakota indigenous communities, who maintained the tradition of Sitting Bull, despite lack of resources and financial precarity.

When I lived with the Lakota peoples, the first thing they taught me was a prayer that is about all my relationships. ‘A holistic vision of the entire world!’ My relationships with the entire world, not only with my friends, but also with the birds, the earth, the wind, the sun, the moon, because I am part of all of that. I’m a mineral, a blob of matter that rusts with time.⁵
- 1986–87 Visits Mexico City and lives there for 11 months with colleagues José Bedia, Elso Padilla, and Carlos Capelán. Brey begins a series of illustrated and stenciled drawings featuring natural elements like stones, water, dirt, and fire, meant to respect and manifest the higher powers of Yoruba religious traditions.

1987 Participates in the 19th Bienal de São Paulo, curated by Sheila Leirner.

1989 Participates in the Havana Biennial with a sculptural work titled *Cada cosa sagrada debe estar en su lugar*.

*Havana was finally free to mix popular arts and 'spontaneous' art—the term used in Cuba in place of naive or outsider art—with 'high art,' without any artifice or smugness. In that sense, the Third Biennial of Havana was probably the most exciting version of them all.*⁶

1990 Invited by Belgian curator Jan Hoet to participate in the exhibition *Ponton Temse* in Belgium. Temporarily moves to Belgium to prepare for his inclusion in the exhibition. Drops "Rodriguez" from his surname to honor his mother's memory, now utilizing the name "Ricardo Brey."

*What Jan Hoet intuited in Cuba was the possibility of making art out of nothing, and of surviving as artists like Robinson Crusoe. Being capable of creating an art that in some way reveals the future in the nothing. They have everything and I have nothing. However, if I have a thing, I have its spirit. That is the matter that I cannot transfer, sell, do without...and it comes with me.*⁷

1991 Following a brief return to Cuba, permanently settles in Ghent, Belgium.

*Yo fui un pionero aquí, llegando al corazón de Europa como es Bélgica, preguntando y radicalizando ciertas posturas que venían del Tercer Mundo, de un país que era de los más radicales en esos momentos con esas formulaciones.*⁸

1992 Invited by Jan Hoet to participate in *Documenta IX* in Kassel, Germany, where he produces a large-scale installation. Incorporating materials like Coca-Cola, glass panes, tattered window blinds, soiled pillows, and strewn feathers, *Untitled* evoked a sensation of disaster and was conceptually in line with the principles of multiculturalism of the time. Hybrid ambiguity becomes a catalyzing force in Brey's practice.

*Cuando se mira una pieza como la de Documenta, tú te desplazas dentro de un espacio físico que tienes que recorrer, pero en Cuba tú te parabas en un punto fijo y solo tenías ese punto para mirar; era como un cíclope que miraba en un ángulo de cámara estático... Me parece que la obra en el centro da a los espectadores oportunidad de desplazamiento, una opción de coordenadas de visión más amplias.*⁹

1994 Solo exhibition *Tocar la otra orilla*, V Havana Biennial, Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro, Havana, Cuba.

1995 Participates in an exhibition titled *Leonkart, città del desiderio*, at Centro Sociale Leoncavallo, Milan, Italy, along with fellow artists Arcangelo, Michelangelo Pistoletto,

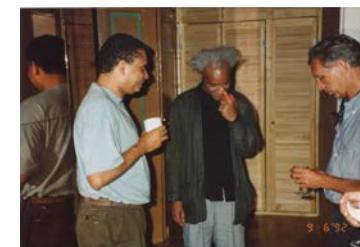


Fig 11 Ricardo and Isabel Brey in Ghent, 1992
Fig 12 Brey and Denys Zacharopoulos at
Domaine de Kerguéhennec, France, 1993
Fig 13 Brey working in Tokyo, 1994

Fig 14 Brey, Durham, and David Hammons, 1992
Fig 15 *Nobody was seriously wounded*, 1993
Fig 16 Tea ceremony in Kassel, Germany, 1992

Fig 17 Giacomo Picca, Luis Camnitzer, Ricardo
Brey, and Gonzalo Díaz building up
Universalis, São Paulo Biennial, 1996
Fig 18 Isabel and Ricardo in Pompeii, Italy, 1996



Fig 16 Brey creating *Axis Mundi*, 1997

Fig 17 Brey installing *Universe* at Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, 2006

Fig 18 Brey family with the technical team for the exhibition *Sources* at Centre d'Art Contemporain, Crestet, France, 2000

Fig 19 Ricardo and Isabel installing *Shelter*, 1996

Fig 20 *Sixth Mass Extinction*, 2001, installation view, *Belgian system*, Tour & Taxis, Brussels, Belgium

Fig 21 Brey creating wall drawings for *Ainsi de suite 3* at Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain, Sète, France, 1999

Fig 22 Brey family at GEM, Museum of Contemporary Art, The Hague, the Netherlands, 2004

Fig 23 Installation view, *Ainsi de suite 3*, 1999

Jaume Plensa, George Lappas, Pier Paolo Calzolari, and Michel Frère.

1996 First solo exhibition at a European museum, at Galleria Civica di Modena, Palazzina dei Giardini, Modena, Italy.

1996 Participates in the 23rd Bienal de São Paulo, curated by Nelson Aguilar.

1997 Receives a Guggenheim Fellowship for Sculpture and Installation.

1998 Awarded the Prize for Visual Arts from the Flemish Ministry of Culture, Belgium.

2000 Produces his first sculptural work that is confined within a vitrine, *Signs in the dust*, clearly delineating the borders of the artwork in stark contrast with his sprawling, immersive sculptures and installations of the 1990s.

2001 Develops a site-specific installation titled *Sixth Mass Extinction* at Tour & Taxis, a large former industrial site in Brussels, Belgium.

2002 Begins to experiment with small-scale drawings of natural flora and fauna. Produced over 1,000 drawings over a period of six months and titled the series *Universe*.

That is how Universe (2002–2006) came about. I wasn't creating the universe, just my universe, with all my anxieties, my dreams, my leitmotifs. All the techniques I've used, and even some I invented at the time, were in the drawings.¹⁰

2003 Develops the *Annex* series, originally an exploration of flight focusing on birds and flying insects, meant to supplement the overwhelming totality of *Universe*.

2004 Solo exhibition *Ricardo Brey, Hanging around*, held at GEM, the Museum of Contemporary Art, The Hague, Netherlands. The presentation included works from the *Annex* series. A monograph catalogue is published titled *Ricardo Brey: Under the leaves*.

2006 *Universe* is shown at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK) in Ghent, Belgium. A catalogue is published including reproductions of drawings from the *Universe* series.

2009 Begins his series *Every Life is a Fire*, consisting of archival boxes that unfold to reveal books, drawings, sculptures, and performative proposals.

The project with the boxes, Every life is a fire, is my most metaphysical work, and it came to me as an obligatory answer to the beauty and the consideration of the small space.¹¹

2014 After more than 20 years in exile, returns to Cuba on the occasion of his first career retrospective at El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba. A second monograph catalogue on Brey's work is published, titled *Qué le importa al tigre una raya más*.

2015 Receives his first European retrospective of his work at Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA), Antwerp, Belgium. The presentation also featured site-specific installations by the artist at two historic sites in Antwerp: The Athenaeum and St. Paul's Church.

2015 Included in *All the World's Futures*, the 56th Venice Biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor.

*What I am presenting here (at the Venice Biennale) is a work that I started to make in 2009, consisting of archival boxes that I normally keep closed. This is the first time that I've opened all of them and they've become intertwined in one way or another. They have objects, books, references to different backgrounds, histories, and philosophies. What they all have in common is they look like our boxes, those are two words I can use to explain without destroying the mystery. They are a hunting ground for people who want to find ideas.*¹²

2019 Solo exhibitions held at Museum de Domijnen, Sittard, Netherlands and Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, Bremen, Germany.

Notes

1 Sandra Sosa Fernández, *The Futility of Good Intentions* (Gent: MER. Paper Kunsthalle, 2014), 124.

2 Fernández, 128.

3 Benjamin Buchloh, *New Art from Cuba* (Old Westbury: Visual Arts Program, State University of New York, College at Old Westbury, 1985), 36.

4 Dennys Matos, "Dejar el ghetto, pero no con las manos vacías," *Cubaencuentro*, February 15, 2008, <https://www.cubaencuentro.com/entrevistas/articulos/dejar-el-ghetto-pero-no-con-las-manos-vacias-68534>, accessed February 14, 2019.

5 Fernández, 131.

6 Luis Camnitzer, *On Art, Artists, Latin America, and Other Utopias* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 217.

7 Fernández, 132.

8 Dennys Matos, "Dejar el ghetto, pero no con las manos vacías," *Cubaencuentro*, February 15, 2008, <https://www.cubaencuentro.com/entrevistas/articulos/dejar-el-ghetto-pero-no-con-las-manos-vacias-68534>, accessed February 14, 2019.

9 Dennys Matos, "Dejar el ghetto, pero no con las manos vacías," *Cubaencuentro*, February 15, 2008, <https://www.cubaencuentro.com/entrevistas/articulos/dejar-el-ghetto-pero-no-con-las-manos-vacias-68534>, accessed February 14, 2019.

10 Fernández, 148.

11 Fernández, 153.

12 Ricardo Brey, "Interview with Ricardo Brey (Cuba), one of the artists selected to participate in the exhibition, *All The World's Futures* – Biennale Arte 2015," *Biennale Channel*, May 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zsx7h16FMCU&t=5s>, accessed February 14, 2019.

Ricardo Brey, 1985



Ricardo Brey was born in Havana, Cuba in 1955 and has lived and worked in Ghent, Belgium since 1990. From the late 1970s onward, Brey's practice, which spans drawing, sculpture, and installation, has focused on his research into the origins of humanity and humankind's place in the world.

A child during the Cuban Revolution, Brey was educated at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas San Alejandro (1970–1974) and the Escuela Nacional de Arte in Havana (1974–1978), at the time the best art school in Cuba. After graduating, he joined a dynamic artistic scene in Havana that included Cuban and international artists who were committed to advancing artistic practice in Cuba. Brey worked briefly as an illustrator and graphic designer before exhibiting in the landmark 1981 group show *Volumen I* at the Centro de Arte Internacional in Havana.

Volumen I brought Brey widespread critical attention and ultimately provided him with the opportunity to travel and exhibit internationally. As the 1980s progressed, he continued to refine his interest in history and myth. Mining both the legacies of colonialism in Latin America and Afro-Cuban traditions, Brey produced a rich body of work that ranged from faux historical documents drafted by explorers and naturalists to Santería-influenced sculptures and installations. In 1992, at the invitation of the Belgian curator Jan Hoet, he participated in Documenta IX—the first Cuban artist to do so. Brey's installation for Documenta consisted of a series of objects, including old Venetian blinds, mattresses, panes of glass, and an electric fan, and represented a new stage in his artistic development. Moving away from the handmade Afro-Cuban objects that typified his late 1980s work, Brey began to create his own hybrid transcultural myths through the juxtaposition of disparate readymades.

During the 1990s, Ricardo Brey continued to refine this approach to sculpture and installation, harnessing the associative potential of objects to suggest a narrative. For example, Brey used tires to construct installations that serve as meditations on transience and exile—the tires' forms referencing the tire rafts built by Cuban refugees to cross the Florida Strait. Since 2000, Brey has experimented with vitrine installations, producing works like *Universe* (2002–2006), consisting of 1,004 drawings illustrating an "entire" universe—including every bird, fish, insect, and plant—its supplement *Annex* (2003–2016), and the ongoing series *Every life is a fire*, intricate boxes that unfold to reveal books, drawings, sculptures, and performative proposals. These recent works, like Brey's earlier fantastical historical documents, reveal the artist's decades-long inquiry into how humans understand and categorize reality and themselves. As Brey states, "What fascinates me is the origin of the human race, our culture and our society. It is from the relationship between different life forms and between the communities of earlier and today that we can deduce the state of the present world. We can learn from our evolutionary past and thus consider our current condition critically. From a global approach man can emphasize the underlying connection between everything around us."

Two solo exhibitions of Brey's work, at Museum De Domijnen, Sittard, Netherlands and Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, Bremen, Germany, will be on view in 2019. Ricardo Brey's work has been the subject of other numerous solo presentations, including *Fuel to the Fire* at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA), Antwerp, Belgium (2015); *BREY* at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana, Havana, Cuba (2014); *Universe* at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK), Ghent, Belgium (2006–2007); *Ricardo Brey, Hanging around* at GEM, Museum of Contemporary Art, The Hague, the Netherlands (2004); *Sources* at the Centre d'Art Contemporain, Crestet, France (2000); Kunstverein Salzburg, Austria (1997); Galleria Civica, Palazzina dei Giardini, Comune di Modena, Italy (1996); Vereniging voor het Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent, Belgium (1993); and *El Origin de las Especies* at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana, Havana, Cuba (1981).

He has also participated in innumerable group shows, including the 56th Venice Biennale, *All the World's Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwezor (2015); *Artesur, Collective Fictions* at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France (2013); *Trattenendosi* at the 48th Venice Biennale, Italy (1999); *Universalis* at the 23rd São Paulo Biennial, Brazil (1996); Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany (1992); and *Volumen I* at the Centro Internacional de Arte de La Habana, Havana, Cuba (1981). He is the recipient of many awards and grants, including the Prize for Visual Arts from the Flemish Ministry of Culture (1998) and a Guggenheim Fellowship for Sculpture and Installation (1997).

Brey's work is featured in countless private and public collections, including the Bouwfonds Art Collection, The Hague, the Netherlands; Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, Havana, Cuba; CERA Art Collection, Leuven, Belgium; Collection of Pieter and Marieke Sanders, Haarlem, the Netherlands; Collection de la Province de Hainaut, Belgium; de la Cruz Collection, Miami, FL; Fonds national d'art contemporain (FNAC), France; Ella Fontanals-Cisneros Collection, Miami, FL; Lenbachhaus, Munich, Germany; Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection, Mount Kisco, New York; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana, Havana, Cuba; Museum de Domijnen, Sittard, the Netherlands; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA), Antwerp, Belgium; Nova Southeastern University (NSU) Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, FL; Province of East Flanders Monuments and Cultural Heritage, Belgium; Sindika Dokolo Foundation, Luanda, Angola; Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK), Ghent, Belgium; Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen, Germany; Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan; and others.

Exhibition Checklist

Fern at the edge of the road, 2017

Red iron oxide, graphite powder, ink, red chalk (sanguine), gouache and wood cut-out letters on paper
28.74h x 43.31w in (73h x 110w cm)

Outer darkness, 2017

Graphite powder, pencil, oil, mirrored glass, ceramic, metal and bottle caps on paper
28.74h x 43.31w in (73h x 110w cm)

You will never guess what comes next, 2018

Bicycle wheel, brass turtle, quartz from Aldeia Nova, Portugal and spheres in wood, metal, ceramic, and glass
13.75h x 32w x 25.5d in (34.92h x 81.28w x 64.77d cm)

Seldom Blue, 2017

Prussian blue pigment (ferric ferrocyanide), pencil, charcoal, tempera, silver leaf, metallic paper, fabric with metal beads and cut-out letters on Arches paper
63h x 47.24w in (160h x 120w cm)

Roots, 2017

Graphite powder, pencil, acrylic, relief foil, tree bark and cut-out letters on Arches paper
47.24h x 63w in (120h x 160w cm)

Leo, 2018

Wood, concrete cast, bicycle tires, pearls
77h x 26w x 20.75d in (195.58h x 66.04w x 52.70d cm)

Rose of Jericho, 2013–2014

Fabric, paper, rope, wood, dried rose of jericho plant, glass, grey cardboard, white emulsion, one folded book
Dimensions variable

You Can't Escape From What You Are, 2013

Trumpet, metal duck, ties, glass beads, rope, fabric, wire
25.25h x 21.5w x 7.5d in
(64.14h x 54.61w x 19.05d cm)

Breathing ground, 2017

Graphite powder, pencil, red chalk (sanguine), twigs and cut-out letters on Arches paper
63h x 47.24w in
(160h x 120w cm)

Stormclouds, 2017

Graphite powder, pencil, mirrored glass, ceramic, wood and metal stars and cut-out letters on Arches paper
47.24h x 63w in
(120h x 160w cm)

Meditatie, 2018

Carved wood, glass mosaic tiles, black wax, buttons, iron
21.88h x 4.5w x 16.88d in
(55.56h x 11.43w x 42.86d cm)

Scrub, 2018

Red pigment, red chalk (sanguine), pencil and Mars black pigment on Arches paper
47.24h x 63w in
(120h x 160w cm)

A patient man keeps cooking a stone and drinks from its broth, 2018

Petrified wood and faucet
4h x 3.25w x 9.63d in
(10.16h x 8.26w x 24.45d cm)

A dream, 2018

Iron sulfate, graphite powder, pencil, pastel, Mars black pigment, cut-out letters, mirrored glass and straw on Arches paper
47.24h x 47.24w in
(120h x 120w cm)



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019

Other Illustrated Works

Inferno, 2017

Graphite powder, pencil, acrylic, ceramic, mirrored glass, metal stars and metal numbers on paper
28.74h x 43.31w in (73h x 110w cm)

The Black Cube, 2012

Metal, ceramic, glass, powdered pigment, lead, wood, rope, cardboard, paper, drawing, folded book
Dimensions variable

Western Canon, 2018

Cedar wood, carved wood, cast, tiles, stones, and light bulbs
19.69h x 6.69w x 29.13d in (50h x 17w x 74d cm)

Axis Mundi, 2006

Gloves and iron
92h x 17.50w x 17.5d in (233.68h x 44.45w x 44.45d cm)

Pesco, 1978

Ink, pastel, transfer, pencil and paper on cardboard
28.34h x 28.34w in (72h cm x 72w cm)

Papeles de Verrazano, 1985, detail

Stencil, spray, pastel and pencil on paper in 200 pages
Each page: 10.2h x 7.48w in (26h x 19w cm)
Overall: 20.4 x 472.44 in (52h x 1200w cm)
Installation view, *We document Art*, Antwerp

Luna Llana, 1979–80

Gouache, watercolor, pastel and transfer on paper
29.1h x 20.4w in (74h cm x 52w cm)

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Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

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