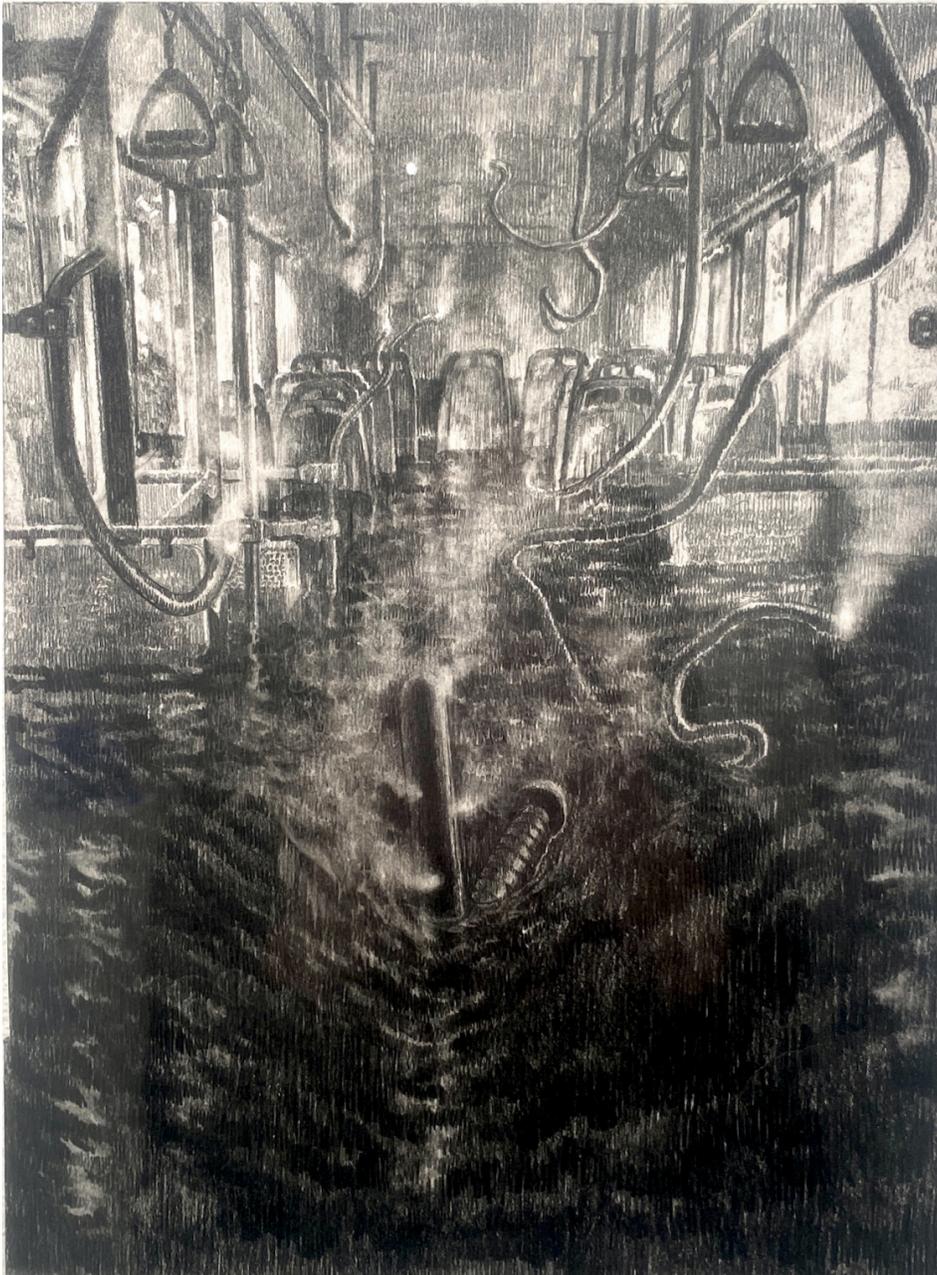


Cuban Artists Test the Frontiers of Political Dissent

The artists in *Umbral*, or “threshold,” address the dystopia of voicing dissent on the island and the tension of existing as a Cuban citizen anywhere in the world.



By Valentina Di Liscia | March 16, 2022



Raychel Carrión, “Romper” (2020), graphite on paper (Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic)

Against the backdrop of Cuba’s ongoing assault on human rights, an otherwise prosaic image of a bus without passengers becomes unnaturally haunting. In Raychel Carrión’s monochrome graphite drawing “Romper” (2020) — “to break” — rows of empty bus seats emerge from a thick, textured darkness akin to smog. In the foreground, the distinct shape of a police baton can be discerned amid the sinuous curves of metal railings, chain-like patterns, and strap handles that resemble hooks — mundane elements made sinister.

“On the 27th of January, in front of Havana’s Ministry of Culture, agents of Cuban state police beat approximately 20 activists, artists, and reporters who were reading poetry,” reads a wall label for the work now on view at Montserrat Gallery in Manhattan, written in Spanish. “That day it was shown that in Cuba, what is called ‘culture’ is just another arm of power and repression.” An audio clip accompanying the piece amplifies the screams heard as officers apprehended participants of the pacific homage to Cuban author and journalist José Martí, shoving them onto the bus Carrión so uncannily captured.



Claudia Genlui and Anamely Ramos, curators of *Umbral*, stand next to a painting by Yasser Castellanos and a hat used in a performance by Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. (Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic)

Some of the artists included in *Umbral*, conceived by Havana-based curators Claudia Genlui and Anamely Ramos, were present that dark day in Havana, and are often on the frontlines of similar incidents so frequent in Cuba that they have become almost commonplace. In this exhibition of works by Cuban artists, activists, and members of the dissident San Isidro Movement, several names are familiar for their recurrence in headlines decrying state repression of free speech and creative freedom. One of Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara’s symbolic *Door* paintings hangs next to a blue hard hat worn by the artist as part of a performance piece during the month of February 2020, after three children died when a building collapsed in Old Havana the previous year. Alcántara was detained several times for wearing the helmet in public, a wall text says. And he remains in a maximum-security prison in Havana at the time of this writing, behind bars for the last eight months as one of hundreds arrested during historic anti-government protests on the island last year. When *Umbral* opened

on March 5, Genlui, his partner, had not heard from Alcántara in weeks and knew his health was rapidly declining after he declared a hunger strike in January; it was not his first.



Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara on hunger strike in 2020, when state police besieged members of the San Isidro Movement in their apartment (photo by and courtesy Katherine Bisquet)

Last year’s peaceful demonstrations in Cuba, which found echoes in solidarity protests around the world, were largely prompted by longstanding food and medicine shortages and poverty exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Two prints by Aryam Rodriguez feature bottles of rum the Cuban government handed out to households last December, a strategy to deflect attention from these scarcities, as a wall text explains. The rum was distilled using sugar from the 2020-2021 Zafra harvest, dubbed the “worst in the last 120 years in Cuba” due to lack of fuel, machinery parts, and low yields.



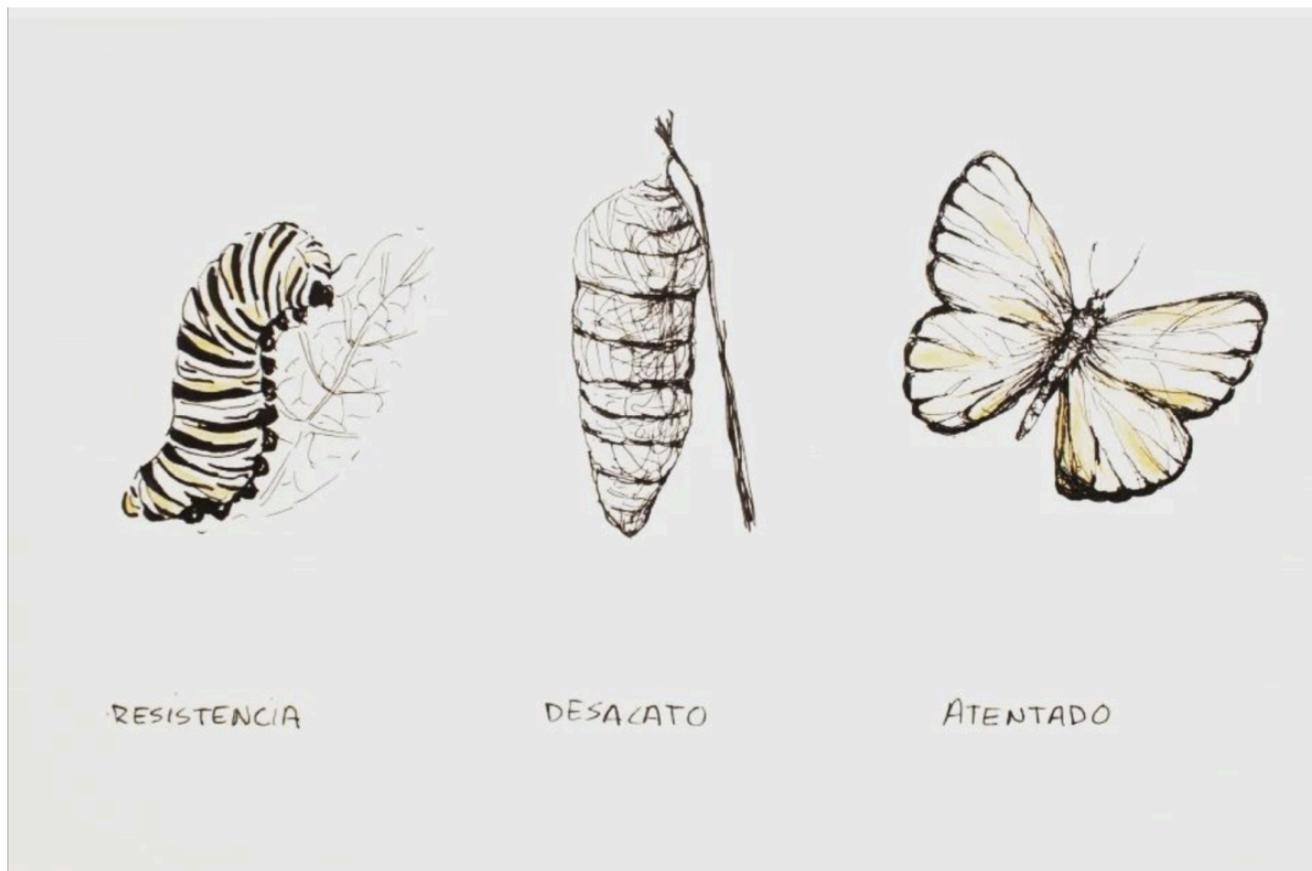
A visitor photographs Aryam Rodriguez’s series *El ron de Cuba*. (photo by and courtesy Jorge Domínguez)

Ramos explains the resonance of the title *Umbral*, or “threshold,” as “the idea of remaining at the entrance of something, but at a distance.”

“The fundamental thesis is that when you talk about Cuba, you have to enter a previous, introductory space, the *Umbral*, where certain notions that are difficult for the rest of the world to understand are explained through the voices of these artists who are in danger,” Ramos told Hyperallergic at the opening of the show.

The term encompasses the specific dystopia of voicing dissent while living on the island as well as the tension of existing as a Cuban citizen anywhere in the world, as the government maintains discretionary power to deny entry into or exit out of the country. Ramos currently finds herself currently inhabiting this “liminal space,” she adds: When she attempted to return to Havana from the United States last month, gate agents prevented her from boarding the flight.

“*Umbral* was created from a place of permeability,” Ramos said. “It is resistance, it’s an attempt to reflect on what a frontier is, where Cuba begins and where it ends, and what it means to be safe in Cuba today.”



Camila Lobón, “Resistencia, Desacato, Atentado” (2021), from the series *Epizootia*, ink and colored pencil on paper (photo by and courtesy Claudia Genlui)

Artist Camila Lobón, a Camagüey native whose works on view include illustrations designed for various civic actions on the island, recently completed a residency in Miami and plans on returning to Cuba. “The generation I identify with has a deep consciousness around this question of naturalizing the fact of returning, of entering and leaving and coming back, of regaining our ownership over the territory,” Lobón told Hyperallergic.

“In my case, I don’t think about the concept of country or nationalism — it’s my home, it’s where the people I love are, and for that reason, I have the right to be there,” she said.

In their subtle elegance, Lobón’s drawings are tacitly subversive. One of them depicts three stages in the metamorphosis of a butterfly labeled with the words “resistance, contempt, and disobedience,” the charges on which rapper Maykel Osorbo was arrested in May 2021. Another, a drawing of José Martí modeled after Cuban modernist Jorge Arche’s iconic portrait of the writer, was made for a “poetic pilgrimage” calling for the liberation of rapper Denis Solis in 2020. “I have two homelands: Cuba and the night,” it reads, citing Martí’s poem. “Or are they one?”

“Carolina [Barrero], a historian and activist, had the idea of making these as posters and giving them away. We never got to do that, because police intervened in her home, found the prints, and accused her of ‘clandestine printing,’” Lobón said. “Something as simple as the image of Martí, because of the gesture it implied about autonomy over an image, over an idea, is seen as an act of rebellion in Cuba.”

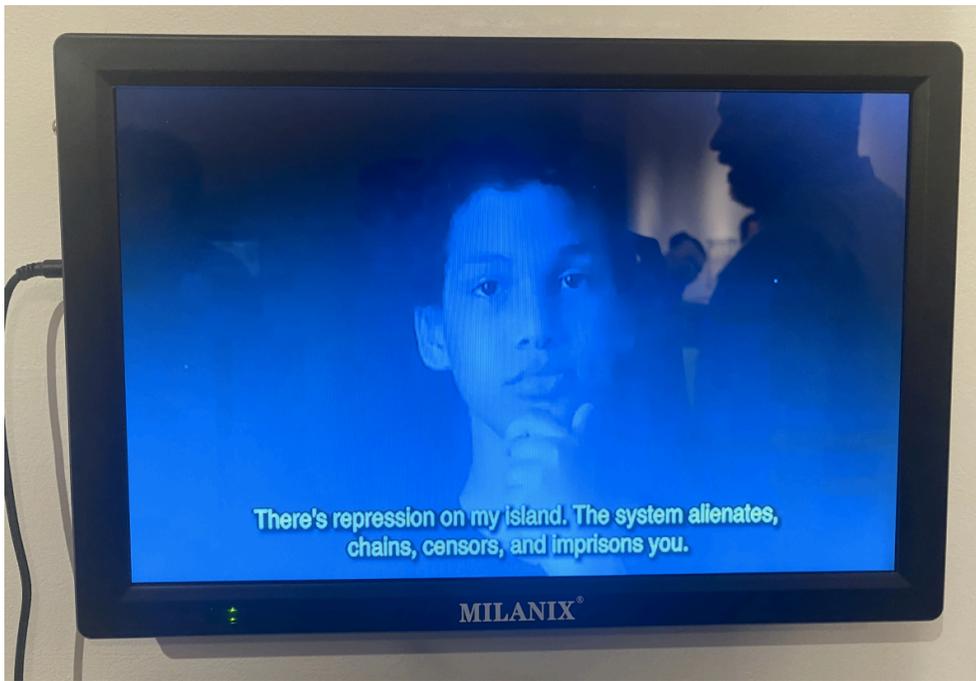


Camila Lobón with her works on view at the opening of *Umbral* (Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic)

Alexis Romay, a Cuban writer and teacher who attended the opening of *Umbral*, left the island in 1999. When asked if he plans on returning, he quotes Heraclitus: “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.”

“I resist the hyphen: I don’t call myself ‘Cuban-American.’ I am profoundly Cuban,” Romay told Hyperallergic. “But like many other Cubans, I told myself that I cannot return to that Cuba. I can’t return to a place from which I escaped.”

“What they are doing — Anamely, Camila, Claudia — is asserting the idea that this country is ours,” he continued. “I don’t think I’ll ever step on Cuban soil again, but if I do, it’s because of them. They are returning to me a country that I had lost.”



Still from the music video for “¿De qué me van a hablar?” (“What are they going to talk to me about?”) by Anyelo Troya, Maykel Osorbo, and Elexer Funk “El Funky” (Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic)

A screen plays the music video for “¿De qué me van a hablar?” (“What are they going to talk to me about?”) (2021) shot by Anyelo Troya and featuring Osorbo and Elexer Funk “El Funky,” which calls for freedom for Alcántara and members of the San Isidro Movement. Osorbo and El Funky are co-authors of “Patria y Vida,” which became a rallying cry for freedom during the peaceful protests of July 2021. When the video for that song began to “spread like wildfire” among Cubans, wrote curator Coco Fusco for Hyperallergic, the government launched a defamation campaign against it that included homophobic attacks. Osorbo is currently in prison and El Funky lives in exile in the US. Troya is in Havana with a yearlong order that restricts his mobility.



Tarot cards designed by several of the artists in the exhibition (Valentina Di Liscia/Hyperallergic)

In a small room in the back of the gallery, Indira Romero, a Cuban artist and performer, offers tarot readings with a deck of cards illustrated by many of the artists in the show. The High Priestess was designed by Lobón, a jovial portrait of Cuban salsa musician Celia Cruz mid-song against a background of papayas. Hamlet Lavastida, who was forced into exile last year after three months in prison in Cuba, drew number 15, the Devil: the unmistakable silhouette of Fidel Castro pointing a gun.

“Our cry should not be in vain,” Genlui wrote in a statement for the exhibition. “Luis Manuel always said that art gives us the possibility of helping everyone understand. Today, he and Maykel assume that cry in the form of extreme sacrifice; today, through curation and art, we are by their sides, we transit that threshold and we invite the world to understand us.”