



Alexander Gray Associates

Ricardo Brey

Frieze Los Angeles 2020 | Booth A7



## Ricardo Brey *Every Life is a Fire* (2009 – Present)

Since the late 1970s, Ricardo Brey's (b.1955) practice has focused on his research into the origins of humanity and humankind's place in the world. Born 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. In 1992, at the invitation of the Belgian curator Jan Hoet, he participated in *Documenta IX*—the first Cuban artist to do so. Since 2000, Brey has experimented with vitrine installations, producing works like *Universe* (2002–2006), consisting of 1,004 drawings illustrating an “entire” universe—including birds, fish, insects, and plants—its supplement *Annex* (2003–2016), and the ongoing series *Every Life is a Fire*. These recent works reveal the artist's decades-long inquiry into how humans understand and categorize reality and themselves.

Ricardo Brey's ongoing project *Every Life is a Fire* (2009–Present) consists of a series of boxes that unfold to reveal miniature worlds of sculptural assemblages. Inviting performative engagement, the archival boxes unfurl as they are opened—host to a complex web of symbols. Juxtaposing enclosure with expansiveness, each work's unveiling inspires surprise and wonder while representing the vast unknowable intricacies of the human mind. In contrast to the transparency of *Universe*, which functions as a visual encyclopedia of species of flora and fauna, *Every Life is a Fire* celebrates interiority and welcomes multiple interpretations drawn from Brey's own cross-cultural references. For example, in *The Uncanny* (2015), a neoclassical bust anchors the box and is positioned to stare at its own reflection in a small mirror, evoking the myth of Narcissus. In contrast, *Seven Roses* (2012), which features rosebuds made of scrap metal as the box's central axis, is dedicated to the Afro-Cuban deity Yemayá, who is honored in Santería as the goddess of the sea and the mother of all children on Earth. Incorporating found fleetwood, *Driftwood and Pebbles* (2014) suggests the ephemerality of time itself, the transient nature of youth-like innocence, and the influence of the moon on oceanic tides.

As the art historian John C. Welchman notes, “Brey's boxes don't simply open, instead they unfurl like a flag. The box also houses its own field of reference activated by the very process of opening ... as if the box were the site of so many bodily organs and the acts of viewing or entering it a kind of surgical procedure.” When the works were shown in 2015 at the Museum of Contemporary Art (M HKA) in Antwerp, Belgium, volunteers unfolded and folded them twice a day for viewers; their ritualized actions imbuing the boxes with the charged sacredness of reliquaries. Engaging with concepts of internality, *Every Life is a Fire* poses metaphysical questions about the nature of being, constructing, in Brey's words, a “hermeneutics of the soul.”

Works from *Every Life is a Fire* have been presented at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), the Museum of Contemporary Art (M HKA), Antwerp, Belgium (2015), and at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba (2014). The most recent work from this series, *I love sailing on forbidden seas and landing on barbarian shores* (2019), is included in Brey's current solo exhibition, *Adrift*, at Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, Bremen, Germany.

Recent works, like Brey's earlier fantastical historical documents, reveal the artist's decades-long inquiry into how humans of diverse cultural backgrounds 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.”



**Ricardo Brey's** work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, 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.

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Cover and details: Ricardo Brey, *Driftwood and Pebbles*, 2014, paper, silver paper, linoleum, cardboard, lead, silk paper, fleetwood, wire, ceramic, three folded books, dimensions variable. © Ricardo Brey/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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