

CRITIC'S PICK

Juan Francisco Elso's Indelible Art of América

The Cuban sculptor fused Latin America, Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean traditions. He inspired a maverick movement — and one of the year's best shows.



By **Holland Cotter**

Published Dec. 26, 2022 Updated Dec. 29, 2022

6 MIN READ

Over decades of seasons spent trawling through museums and galleries I've seen, up close or in passing, countless works of contemporary art. A few have entered my bloodstream instantly and indelibly. One was a sculpture called “Por América (José Martí)” by the short-lived Cuban artist Juan Francisco Elso.

That was in 1993 when, in the wake of the Columbus Quincentenary year, a group exhibition of new Latin American art called “Ante America” (translated in its catalog as “Regarding America”) traveled from Bogotá, Colombia, to the Queens Museum in New York. With new work emphasizing African, Indigenous and diasporic sources, the show was designed as a definition-stretching, stereotype-shattering response to the Museum of Modern Art's big, Modernist-minded “Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century,” also on view that year.

The 1986 Elso sculpture was a centerpiece of the Queens show. A tribute to Martí, the 19th-century anti-colonialist Cuban hero and writer, who conceived of “America” as a yet-to-be-realized social utopia, transcultural and transhemispheric, the sculpture was composed of a single wood-carved, glass-eyed male figure. Standing around five feet tall, he appeared to be caught, as if exhausted or stunned, in mid-stride.



Juan Francisco Elso, “Por América (José Martí)”, 1986. “Combining attributes of a Christian saint, African spirit-figure, political monument, and artist’s self-portrait, Elso’s image of Martí was of a ghost on the march,” writes our critic. Cuban officials viewed his portrayal as ideologically off-script and outrageously disrespectful. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

His pale skin was smeared with brown mud. His torso and limbs were punctured by flower-shaped darts, which also pierced the ground at his feet. He carried, in his right hand, an upright machete, a potential weapon that, here, also suggested a torch and a martyr’s palm. (He died in 1895 in a battle for Cuban independence from Spain.)

Combining attributes of a Christian saint, African spirit-figure, political monument, and artist’s self-portrait, Elso’s image of Martí was of a ghost on the march, an embodiment of vulnerability as power. I’ve never forgotten my first sight of him almost 30 years ago, and now he’s back, power

undiminished, this time at El Museo del Barrio in the survey “Juan Francisco Elso: Por América,” which, just under the wire, shoots straight to the top of my list of best exhibitions of 2022.

The show is a traditional career retrospective, in the sense that it gathers together what’s gatherable by the artist. But that isn’t much, only about 30 items, some in desperately fragile condition. Elso didn’t have time to produce a lot: He was only 32 when he died of cancer in 1988. Because he worked largely with ephemeral materials, much of what he did make hasn’t survived. And some late major pieces were unavailable. (Because of complex political relations, Cuba does not loan art in its national collections to the United States, and Elso pieces still in Cuba did not travel to New York for the show.)



Juan Francisco Elso, “Pájaro que vuela sobre América [Bird that Flies Over America],” 1985. Manu Sassoonian

To deal with these hurdles, the exhibition’s organizers — Olga Viso, a guest curator, collaborating with Susanna V. Temkin of El Museo — have framed their project as a “contextual survey,” one that sets an influential artist in his time and beyond it by placing him in the company of artists he knew and others, inside and outside of Cuba, who were, at that time or later, directly or indirectly inspired by his example.

Born in Havana in 1956, three years before the Castro-led Revolution, Elso grew up in a Roman Catholic home. And this early soak in popular devotional imagery and ritual seems to have predisposed him to what became a deep and lasting attraction to the visual expression of varied

spiritualities, from ancient Mayan religious sculpture to the ritual paraphernalia of Afro-Caribbean practices like Santería, of which he became an initiate. Many of his closest artist friends, among them José Bedia Valdés, Ricardo Brey, and Leandro Soto (1956-2022) — all represented in the show — shared his interest.



Poster for “Volumen Uno,” 1981, an exhibition that gave its name to a vanguard movement in new Cuban art to which Elso belonged. Thelvía López-Marín; via Rogelio López Marín (GORY), Miami

All were art students at a time when Soviet-style art education, based on 19th-century European academic traditions, was the only kind officially sanctioned. Focused on creating a new Cuban art, which incorporated Indigenous sources, references to Afro-Atlantic cultures, and influences from contemporary art happening elsewhere, Elso and his colleagues embraced maverick status and began to organize off-the-grid shows of their own.

Some of these were censored. One, called “Volumen Uno,” managed to open successfully in 1981 and gave its name to a vanguard movement in new Cuban art to which Elso belonged. Word of the show spread beyond the island. The Cuban-born Ana Mendieta flew in from the United States to see it, as did the New York sculptor Melvin Edwards, known for his abstract but trenchantly critical “Lynch Fragment Series.” Both artists had an impact on Elso, as he did on them, and their work appears in the introductory gallery of El Museo’s exhibition.

By this point, Elso was teaching — the activist artist Tania Bruguera was one of his students — and making art on an installation scale from an ever-widening group of media: paint, clay, thread, twigs, papier-mâché, dried leaves, sand, rainwater. Of these early-1980s installations, only fragments remain: light-touch pencil studies — jittery, like encephalograms — and fist-size clay hearts and ears of maize. Some fragments are on display in vitrines, as are, very movingly, a set of ritual vessels Elso used in his Santeria (now often called La Regla de Ocha) devotions.



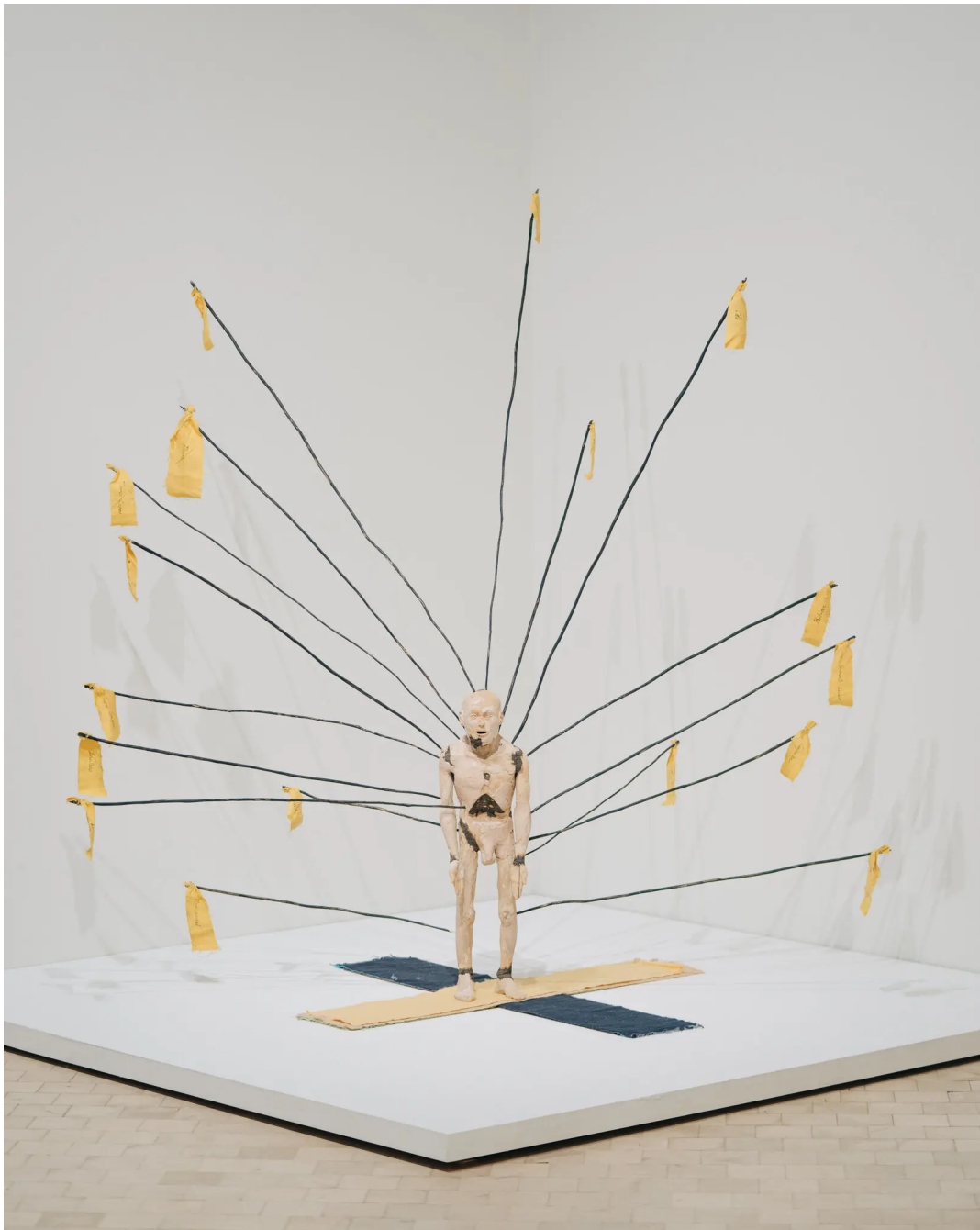
Ritual vessels Elso used in his Santeria devotions, in “Eshú - Elegguá” (left) and “Oggún,” right, circa 1983 -84. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

These days, and despite the rediscovery of historical figures like Hilma af Klint, the merging of art and active spirituality is out of fashion. But in the early years of multiculturalism it was widely explored and Elso made both a poetic and political thing of it. In a 1986 sculpture titled “La fuerza del Guerrero (The Strength of the Warrior)” — the title is a Santeria reference — a carved wood male figure bristles with protruding wooden rods each tagged with the written name of a cultural deity, from the Andean earth goddess Pachamama, to the Lakota leader Sitting Bull, to Che Guevara and Marti.

In “Pajaro que vuela sobre America (Bird That Flies Over America)” from the same year, he wove, from sapling branches and jute thread, a kind of winged space suit measured to his own height. It was as if he were positioning himself as an angel-Icarus, escaping terrestrial confinement and looking for a new place to land.

In fact, in 1986, he began spending much of his time in Mexico, where he immersed himself in the country's archaeological history and its religious traditions, past and continuing, and where he met and married the painter Magali Lara. Only after being diagnosed with cancer and in need of intensive medical treatment did he return to Havana, where he died.

By that time, his reputation was circulating internationally. His inclusion in the 1986 Venice Biennale had attracted notice. "Por América (José Martí)" was created for Gerardo Mosquera's second Havana Biennial — one of the first biennials anywhere to be truly global in scope — and was widely acknowledged to be a highlight of the show. However, it brought Elso unwelcome notoriety in Cuba, where government officials viewed his complex, culturally nuanced portrayal of Martí as ideologically off-script and outrageously disrespectful.



Juan Francisco Elso, "La Fuerza del Guerrero (The Strength of the Warrior),"

1986. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

How radically resistant would Elso's work feel in his homeland today? At present, censorship of art and artists is stricter than ever. In 2018, after a stretch of cultural relaxation popularly known as "Obamismo" — when then-President Obama's administration relaxed restrictions on travel to Cuba — the country's president, Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, signed a law, Decree 349, banning any art that hasn't been vetted by the government. Punishment of violators has so far been harsh. Protest, sometimes delivered through art, by a post-revolutionary generation of artists has been steady.

You'll find some of that new art in an exhibition called "Sin Autorización: Contemporary Cuban Art" at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery. The curators — Gwen A. Unger, a Ph.D. candidate in the school's art history department, and Abel González Fernándezan M.A. candidate at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College — have chosen work that is, with a few exceptions, conceptually oriented in form and politically tightly coded in content. Most of it looks and feels nothing like what Elso and his Volumen Uno cohorts were doing. It appears to share little, if any interest in their ethnological and spiritual concerns, and bears little trace, at least that I can detect, of Marti-inspired utopianism, with its vision of some reach-for-the-stars "America" waiting out there.

But if seen together, the Wallach and El Museo exhibitions suggest a generational change in what "political" can mean in art, at least in Cuba. The lineup of artists Viso and Temkin have marshaled as context for Elso — Belkis Ayón and María Magdalena Campos-Pons of Cuba and Luis Camnitzer, Senga Nengudi, Lorraine O'Grady and Tiona Nekkia McClodden of the United States — make as stimulating a lineup of intellectual and spiritual renegades as any I've encountered this year.



Installation view of Lorraine O'Grady's "The Fir-Palm," 1991, 2019, and Albert Chong's "Natural Mystic," 1982, at El Museo. Martin Seck

And leading the group here is "Por América (José Martí)." Its meaning may have changed over the post-multicultural, decolonizing, repression-fighting, history-revising decades since the sight of it first hit me, like a needle in a vein. But it remains, as it did at that first look, a hauntingly enigmatic emblem of — what? aspiration? defeat? resurrection? — and a luminous relic of a career cut short.

Juan Francisco Elso: Por América

Through March 26, El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, Upper Manhattan, (212) 831-7272; elmuseo.org.

Sin Autorización: Contemporary Cuban Art

Through Jan. 15, Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University; (212) 854-6800; wallach.columbia.edu.

A correction was made on Dec. 27, 2022: An earlier version of this article referred imprecisely as to why El Museo was unable to borrow artworks from a museum collection in Cuba. While, as the exhibition noted, the Cuban government has been reluctant to lend artworks to American museums, it is not the case that El Museo made a request for a loan and was rejected.

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic of The Times. He writes on a wide range of art, old and new, and he has made extended trips to Africa and China. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2009.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Indelible Works Of a Cuban Sculptor

