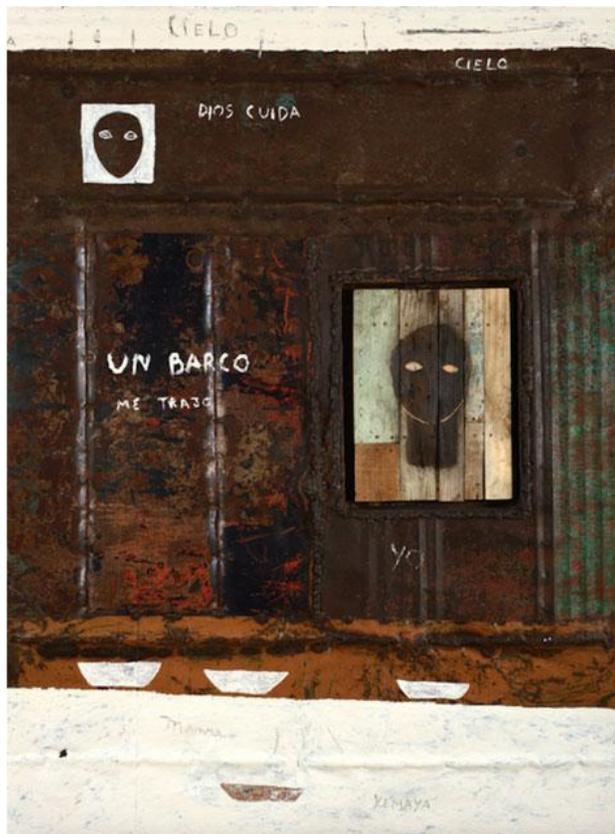


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## Cooper Gallery hosts first major retrospective of one of Cuba's most prominent artists



Un Pedrazo de Mi Historia [A Piece of My History] (2003), mixed media on metal. Photo: Courtesy of The Cooper Gallery.

**CAMBRIDGE, MASS.-** The Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art presents “Diago: The Past of This Afro-Cuban Present,” the first serious and systematic look at Cuba’s prominent contemporary artist Juan Roberto Diago and his prolific body of work, remarkable for its number of aesthetic turns in a relatively short period. The exhibition runs February 2 through May 5, 2017.

Diago has been a principal component of Afro-Cuban culture since the 1990s and is a leader in the new

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Afro-Cuban cultural movement that has denounced the persistence of racism and discrimination in Cuban society. The 45-year-old's two-plus decades of art-making has found him working in varied media -- from painting and photography to etching and sculpture -- and focusing on social issues from slavery to politics to poverty. While he draws significant attention in his home country and across Europe, where he has had numerous solo shows, Diago's work is gaining greater awareness in the U.S. as relations between the two countries have warmed and travel there by Americans has increased.

This exhibition includes 25 mixed-media and installation works that trace Diago's career from the mid-1990s, when he began to construct a revisionist history of the Cuban nation from the experience of a person of African descent.

Curator Alejandro de la Fuente, Director of the Afro-Latin American Research Institute at the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, says Diago is "one of the best, if not the best young artist in Cuba today." De la Fuente first encountered him when curating the group show *Queloides* at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh. The exhibition also was shown at the Rudenstine Gallery at the Hutchins Center (formerly the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute) in 2010. "What I love about Diago is that he is interested in history. He's using the past to understand current politics. Artists like Diago serve as historians who paint. He provides an alternate narrative of Cuban-ness and tells a history that previously wasn't allowed to be told."

"The Cooper Gallery was designed by architect David Adjaye to bring viewers through a series of 'unfolding moments,'" says Gallery Director Vera Ingrid Grant. "This exhibition focuses on several such moments in an early-career artist's evolution. It's an exhilarating coup for us to introduce the first thoughtful retrospective look at an artist who speaks to the black Cuban experience. His work resonates quite strongly with critical conceptual projects within the broader African diaspora such as enslavement, cultural loss, resilience and recovery. Diago's is a major voice and I know people will be excited by this show."

"Diago may be in his mid-career, but his discourse has developed so much over a short time; it's remarkable to note the many visual turns he has made," de la Fuente says. "The work captures the tensions inside modern Cuba -- a country looking to its past to understand its complex present. Diago has developed a body of work where language, materials and themes come together in a powerful, unique way."

## THE WORK

One particularly striking piece in the Cooper show, "*Ciudad en Ascenso [Ascending City]*" (2010, from the *Queloides* exhibition) is an installation that has seen several revisions before its current evolution. The work, which references the overcrowded living conditions of many black Cubans, represented a significant turn in Diago's aesthetic: not only did it reflect a new medium in a site-specific installation, but also it engaged with broader universal problems of poverty and urban marginality. "With '*Ascending City*,' Diago found a personal visual language that captures the transcendence from marginal group experience to global human condition. It's one of the most important pieces in the show and in his

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career,” de la Fuente says.

Additional works of note in “The Pasts of This Afro-Cuban Present” exhibition:

- an installation from the series “El Rostro de la Verdad [The Face of Truth]” (2013) that uses found and donated planks of wood pulled from shanty structures to surround viewers;
- “Mi Historia es Tu Historia [My History is Your History]” (2000) and “Un Pedrazo de Mi Historia [A Piece of My History]” (2003) – two mixed media works (on canvas and metal, respectively) that acknowledge the legacies of slavery;
- “Aché Pa’ Los Míos [(loosely) Good Vibes for My People]” (1999), a three-dimensional mixed media work on burlap that describes cultural loss in deeply religious terms;
- “Sin Título [Untitled],” (2011) a mixed media on canvas that speaks to the questions of silencing stories and depicts a simple human face without a mouth. The signature image of the exhibition; and
- a series of light-box photographs of friends and family members, framed in reclaimed wood.

In addition to his regional introduction at the Hutchins Center’s Rudenstine Gallery, Diago’s work also has been seen at the Cooper Gallery’s 2014 group exhibition “Drapetomanía.” His exposure in that show prompted a (Harvard faculty-purchased) gift to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston for its collection.

Artistic success has long been part of Diago's family. Family members on his paternal grandmother's side (née Urfé) were pioneering Cuban musicians. His father's father – and his namesake – was painter Juan Roberto Diago Querol. The elder Diago died young, but Juan Roberto has said his grandfather “made a profound impact on the visual arts. He went into uncharted visual territory and left his mark. In one way or another, that had an impact on me.”

Diago makes paintings and conceptual installations with things he finds around his neighborhood – bits of wood, plastic bottles, rusty metal. His juxtapositions of text and image have drawn comparisons to American painters Jean-Michel Basquiat and Ed Ruscha, both of whom Diago cites as influences along with Cuban painters Antonio Gattorno and Wilfredo Lam. Cultural observers have drawn parallels between his “acts of cultural resistance” and the 18th- and 19th-century slave rebellions in the Americas. He is represented by Magnan-Metz.

“Artists like Diago are children of the Cuban Revolution,” de la Fuente says. “They received training in Cuba’s arts schools, they participate in the Cuban art scene. Their work is underscored by the social and political justice that Castro’s socialist agenda was supposed to ensure, yet he and others have broken the understanding that discussion of these ideas should not be public. They are going their own direction; they’ve discovered race is not just a Cuban idea but a global issue.”