

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Dr Margaret Hills de Zárate

Tropical Path (Part 1): The Life and Work of Antonia Eiríz

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Abstract

Drawing upon archival and interview material Part 1 of this extended paper describes the early life and work of the Cuban artist Antonia Eiríz Vásquez from 1951 to 1968. Eiríz's artistic background, her influences and the political climate following the Revolution as it impacted upon her work are described. This material provides a background to her later involvement in community art as the founder of *el arte popular* (popular arts) which is described and developed in Part 2. In Part 2 reference to the broader history of the development of art therapy in Cuba is made and Eiríz positioned as a 'forerunner' of a particular strand of community based practice (Ben-David and Collins, 1966, p. 450). However, in Part 1, the focus rests on Antonia Eiríz Vásquez, the artist, and the events that paved the way to what was to come. In this manner I hope to

demonstrate that her involvement with *el arte popular* (popular arts), as outlined in Part 2, was not a digression but rather an extension of her creative work which is what she herself always maintained.

Keywords

Cuba, Modernism, Revolution, Cultural Politics, Painting, Los Once, Arte Popular.

Guantanamera

Yo soy un hombre sincero
De donde crece la palma
Y antes de morirme quiero
Echar mis versos del alma

*I am a sincere man
from where the palm tree grows
and before dying I want
to share the verses of my soul*

Mi verso es de un verde claro
Y de un carmín encendido
Mi verso es de un ciervo herido
Que busca en el monte amparo

*My verse is light green
and it is flaming crimson
my verse is a wounded deer
who seeks refuge on the mountain*

Con los pobres de la tierra
Quiero yo mi suerte echar
El arroyo de la sierra
me complace más que el mar

*With the poor people of the earth
I want to share my fate
the brook of the mountains
gives me more pleasure than the
sea*

Guantanamera, guajira,
Guantanamera

Lyrics based on the first stanza of the first poem of the collection 'Versos Sencillos' (Simple Verses) of the Cuban Nationalist poet and martyr, José Martí as adapted by Julián Orbón.

Introduction

Cuba, the 'pearl of the Antilles', was a Spanish colony for nearly four hundred years. Independence was achieved from Spain in 1898 in the aftermath of the Second War of Independence (1895-98) and the ensuing Spanish American War (April 1898-December 1898) only to be immediately occupied by the U.S. The U.S occupation lasted until 1902 when Cuba became an independent republic. Its most enduring legacy was the Platt amendment of 1900 giving the U.S. the right to military intervention in Cuba's internal affairs. The Cubans were given the choice of accepting the Platt Amendment or remaining under US military occupation indefinitely. In the end, they accepted its humiliating terms as the lesser of two evils. This was evoked by the US in 1903 to obtain a naval base at the mouth of Guantánamo Bay, which continues to exist. With the Republic came a long line of mostly ineffectual and corrupt governments the last of which was the Batista regime which ruled from 1952-59. Then came what is known in Cuba as the Triumph of the Revolution in January 1959 and with it the Castro administration which to this day remains in power (Thomas, 1971). However, while the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 serves as a reference point in thinking about change it cannot be envisaged as simply pertaining to a particular moment in time (Pérez-Stable, 1993). In Marxist-Leninist philosophy a revolution is perceived as a process not as an event. As the populist slogan states "*Esta Revolución es Eterna*" (This Revolution is eternal).

My own relationship with Cuba is not difficult to account for. As a very small child I remember listening to a song '*Guantánamera*' (girl from Guantánamo). The lady who helped my mother, Mrs Moore, had put me on the kitchen bench next to the radio while she polished the floor; a complicated process which involved kneeling on a rubber pad shaped like a dog's bone. I wanted to know what the words meant and she told me it was about poor people. A 'mera' she thought was a coin. As the child of a Prison Governor, I knew that there were poor people because there was a big fence outside and some 'poor' men lived on the other side of it. Much later I discovered that this was a Cuban song the lyrics drawn from the first poem of *Versos Sencillos* - "Simple Verses" - written

by the Cuban poet José Martí and that Mrs Moore and I had not been entirely mistaken about the relationship between suffering and poverty.

In January 2000, nearly forty years later, while undertaking research into the relationship between art and psychotherapy in post revolutionary Cuba, I was introduced to Jorge Nasser, an artist and art historian living in the Vedado district of Havana. During our interview he made several references to his teacher the artist Antonia Eiríz Vásquez who had inspired the therapeutic work he later become involved with. Eiríz's work struck me as important. This was partly because throughout the course of the interview with Nasser, I sat facing one of her drawings - one of a series where the human body has been pruned - which, I later discovered, she referred to as images of 'human bonsai'.

The conversation with Nasser suggested a potential link with Eiríz's community based art work in what has been termed '*el arte popular*' (popular art) and art therapy, in so far as it represented what has been referred to as the democratisation of art-making in the wake of modernism. This re-evaluation of child art, non European art and what was previously regarded as primitive art and the acknowledgement of its value in aesthetic as well as expressive terms was an important step without which the development of art therapy would be difficult to imagine (Waller, 1991 Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Antonia Eiríz the Artist

The information about Antonia Eiríz's early life was gathered from a brief biographical outline by Bruzon (1964) and from interviews with María del Carmen Cernuda Pérez, the curator of the Museum of San Miguel de Padron and by María Gutiérrez who had been Eiríz's neighbour from 1929 to 1993. Their help was indispensable given Cuba's Soviet style bureaucracy and allowed me access to materials, published and unpublished, which otherwise would have been impossible to access.

Antonia Eiríz Vásquez was the sixth and youngest child of Spanish immigrants of which only five survived infancy. She was born on the 1st of April 1929 in her parent's house in the Juanelo neighbourhood of Havana, a poor working class area in the municipality of San Miguel Del Padron which expanded in the first

decades of the 20th century. This simple wooden house, in Pasaje Segunda, between Soto and Piedra, which her parents moved to in 1920, was to remain her home and her studio until she left Cuba in 1993.



Figure1: Antonia Eiríz Vázquez in her studio, (Juanelo) La Havana, 1964.

I interviewed Eiríz's neighbour, María Gutiérrez, in her home in Juanelo in April 2000, when she was 93 years old and completely blind. In keeping with my research methodology, Naturalistic Inquiry, I adopted an open interview format which allowed her to tell me what she wanted to (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). She focused on her earlier memories recalling how she had assisted at Antonia's birth in 1929. Eiríz's parents were both '*Gallegos*', immigrants from Galicia in North West Spain, who had arrived as settlers in Cuba during the first decades of the 20th century. Her father, José Eiríz, owned a horse and cart and made his living transporting goods. Her mother, Esperanza Vázquez, was an expert seamstress and dress maker. She made all the family's clothes. Angelita, the eldest of her four daughters, had owned two dress shops in San Miguel Del Padron before the Revolution.

At some point before the Revolution, Angelita left Cuba to live in the US as did eventually all of her siblings. Only Antonia remained in the family home. María Gutiérrez recalled how much '*Nikita* loved drawing and painting' and how as a

young woman the family sent her to the famous Escuela de San Alejandro de La Havana. She entered the San Alejandro School of Art in 1951 graduating in drawing and painting in 1957 (Blanc, 1994, Martínez, 1995). Apparently, Eiríz never thought she would be a painter; a point she made towards the end of her life, in an interview with the art critic Giulio Blanc in Miami in February 1993. Her interest in art began with drawing dresses; possibly inspired by her mother and elder sister's activities (Anreus, 2004).

A snapshot of the literature pertaining to Eiríz's work which for the most part emanates from Cuba, represents a bibliographic trail from 1952, when she exhibited for the first time, to 1995 when her obituary appeared in Granma (Capote, 1995). Articles published after 1995 (Martínez, 1995; Álvarez, 2002; Serrano, 2002; Anreus, 2004) have for the most part been written by Cuban Americans (Martínez, Anreus) or Cubans living in exile in Spain (Serrano) or Brazil (Álvarez); each, in their own way, situating Eiríz in relation to the social and political climate which so powerfully permeates her life and work and which coloured to a greater or lesser extent their own view and experience of exile. Just as Cuban history can be viewed from either side of the "great divide", of the Cuban Revolution, as described by Perez-Stable (1993) so can the literature describing this history, particularly after 1959.

Of these publications the most balanced and thoughtful is that by the art historian Alejandro Anreus (2004) who draws attention to the irony that although both sides mention the harshness and tragedy of her paintings, drawings and prints, they avoid dealing directly with the critical essence of her work (Anreus, 2004). This 'critical essence' is described as 'an uncompromising neo-figurative visual vocabulary, one in which all subjects - particularly 'sacred' ones referring to motherhood, leadership, and patriotism, among others - are up for an autopsy-like inspection' (Anreus, 2004, p.1).

Early on, even before graduating, Eiríz became involved with the emerging avant-garde; participating in group exhibitions with *Los Once* (The Eleven). In 1952, she took part in *28 Dibujos y Gouaches* (28 Drawings and Gouaches) held in the *Salon Permanente de Pintura y Escultura* at the CTC Gallery in Havana (Auditorium of the Confederation of Cuban Workers) where she

exhibited work alongside Guido Llinás, her future husband Manuel Vidal, his brother Antonio Vidal and Fayad Jamís, all members of *Los Once*. Of the members of this group, Eiríz was particularly influenced by Llinás who she referred to as her 'teacher and mentor' in so far as he had introduced her to the most contemporary ideas in painting in the 1950's (Gómez in Anreus, 2004, p.2).



Figure 2: Eiríz with Llinás, La Havana, 1962.

The activities of this group were central to the period of transition between pre and post revolutionary Cuban art. A significant group of left-wing Abstract Expressionist painters they disbanded as a group in 1955, although they continued to exhibit together until their final exhibition in 1963. Loomis (1999) points out that 'their avant-gardist rebellion was connected to their political opposition of the Batista dictatorship' and that their refusal to participate in officially sponsored exhibitions and organisation of counter-exhibitions constituted acts of political defiance (Loomis, 1999, p.7). Similarly, Craven (2002) argues that through its *Anti-Bienal* in 1954 and *Anti-Salon* in 1957, organised by former members, *Los Once* was instrumental both in opposing Batista and in helping to guide the artistic transition triggered by the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Late Modernism, as exemplified in the work of *Los Once*, was not identified with capitalism but rather with social critique and more specifically with the revolutionary movement itself to which they allied themselves. This goes some way towards explaining why social realism never took hold in Cuba as it did in Eastern European Soviet Block countries. Raúl

Martínez, one of its most influential members, makes this point quite emphatically.

‘Abstract artists were strong as a movement when the Revolution took place, and they were supporting the Revolution; therefore, there was no negative identification with abstraction’ (Martínez in Goldman, 1984).

After a gap of five years Eiríz participated in 1957 in an exhibition of paintings at *La Iglesia de Paula* (the Old Paula Church) in Havana Vieja sponsored by the *Patronato de las Artes Plásticas*, a pre-Revolutionary organisation set up to promote the arts. The artist and critic Antonio Eligio (Tonel) (1987) in his article for *Revolución y Cultura* suggests that it was the canvases exhibited in this exhibition which first called Eiríz’s work to the attention of both the public and the experts (Eligio, 1987, p.38). In April 1959, her participation in the exhibition ‘Thirteen Cuban Artists’, at the Lyceum in Havana, brought her to the attention of the well-connected art critic Graziela Pogolotti whose shrewd appraisal of Eiríz’s early work, has been borne out by the test of time.

‘There is a new name that we must learn and I have left it on purpose until last: Antonia Eiríz Vásquez. I do not know her. But her (painting)... multi-coloured, made with weariness and without concessions, makes you think of a rich, disturbing, interior world. Painting for her, is far from being an exercise: it is the violent necessity of expression’ (Pogolotti, 1959, p.155-56).

Cuban Revolution

January 1, 1959 marked the advent of the Cuban Revolution and the beginning of a new phase in Cuba’s history. During the first years of the Revolution Eiríz and her work received a great deal of attention and support. She was associated with the most radical and independent group of intellectuals in *Los Once*, and with those who were part of the cultural supplement *Lunes*. Edited by the novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante, this magazine was the Monday supplement of the newspaper *Revolución*, which had been founded and edited by the journalist and independent socialist Carlos Franqui. As Anreus (2004) points out ‘both publications supported total experimentation and freedom in the arts, had a supportive and critical stance vis-à-vis the revolution’ and ‘rejected

any form of social realism in aesthetics and Soviet style communism in politics' while 'the majority of Cuban artists supported the revolution led by Fidel Castro believing that culture would be integrated and supported in the new agenda of radical change' (Anreus, 2004, p.2-3).

However, in November 1961, during the first 'Dark Period' in Cuban cultural politics, and following the Bay of Pigs, an unsuccessful attempt by a U.S.-trained force of Cuban exiles to invade southern Cuba with support from U.S. government armed forces, *Lunes* was closed by order of the revolutionary government; ostensibly due to the controversy over the film 'PM' described as a 'decadent' look at night life in Havana (Craven, 2002, p.89; Kaptcia, 2005). The film, which was censored by the revolutionary government, was defended by the magazine in the name of artistic freedom.

According to Anreus (2004) tense meetings took place in the National Library in June 1961. It was during the second and final meeting between intellectuals, artists and the government's Cultural Council at the National Library that Castro pronounced the famous words: 'Within the revolution everything, outside the revolution nothing'. Soon after, in August, the First Congress of Cuban Writers and Artists assembled in Havana, and the Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC) was established. Leninist-style cultural management had arrived in the tropics; but still, socialist realism would not be officially imposed. As long as artists were not negative, pessimistic or critical in any way regarding the revolutionary process, they would be left alone. By keeping to these guidelines, they were 'within the revolution' and not outside it.

Eiríz's work was not a tool of either Castro's regime or reactionary Miami; rather it interrogated the ideological obfuscation on both sides (Anreus, 2004). The 'tortured and violent forms' in Eiríz's painting refer to the turmoil which followed in the aftermath of the revolution, to the public tribunals convened by Castro which condemned hundreds of people to death by firing squads. Her painting cannot be disconnected from that context. As she herself stated 'this is painting which expresses the moment in which I am living' (Eiríz, 1994).

In the ensuing decade Eiríz's output was prolific. Following her participation in the group exhibition *Expresionismo Abstracto* (Abstract Expressionism) at the

Galería de La Havana in 1963, she had her first one-person show *Oleos y Ensamblajes* (oils and assemblages) in the same venue in 1964 where several of what have become Eiríz's best known works were exhibited, amongst them *La anunciación* (1963-64) (The Annunciation), *El vaso de agua* (1963) (The glass of water) and *Ni muertos* (1964) (Not even dead).



Figure 3: "La anunciación," The Annunciation, 1963. Oil on canvas, 75" x 96".
Permanent Collection National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana Cuba.



Figure 4: The Glass of Water, Antonia Eiríz, 1963, Oil on canvas, 52"x41",
Estate of Antonia Eiríz.

El vaso de agua (1962) (A Glass of Water) is a Cuban expression which can be equated with the English expression 'A storm in a teacup. It was painted following the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962; the eight days when the world held its breath and which historians almost uniformly agree was the most dangerous moment in the Cold War (Dallek, 2003). This painting and three versions of a later work *Los de arriba y los de abajo* (1966) (Those Above and Those Below) are amongst those mentioned by Martínez (1995) as having 'crossed the line into the realm of political criticism'.



Figure 5: *Those Above and Those Below*, Antonia Eiríz, 1965, Oil on canvas, 65x80. Maxoly Gallery Collection, Miami, Florida.

However, these paintings appear to have travelled to Mexico in 1966 in a collection of eight oil paintings and three assemblages by Eiríz, accompanied by a collection of works by Raul Martínez. Under the auspices of the *la Dirección General de Difusión Cultural* (The General Office of Cultural Diffusion) they were exhibited at the Casa del Lago, at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 1966. The catalogue contains two short introductions to Eiríz's work by Adelaida de Juan and by Roberto Fernández Retamar. Craven (2002) refers to de Juan as 'perhaps the most important art historian within Cuba of the Cuban Revolution' while Retamar, an eminent author, had become Director of Casa de Las Americas in 1961 (Craven, 2002, p.199). This seems to suggest that if Eiríz's work was viewed as critical of the Cuban regime it was certainly not altogether seen in this light in 1966.

A retrospective review of her career as a painter clearly shows that she received considerable recognition despite the fact that she stopped painting in 1968. This was confirmed by Dr Graziela Pogolotti, director of the Artists and Writers Union, who underlines that from the very beginning of her career Eiríz's

talent had been noticed and that retrospectively she emerges as a figure in 'the front line of Cuban visual arts'. (Pogolotti, 2000)

Eiríz appears to have been inexhaustible. In addition to collaborating as an illustrator with the magazines *Lunes de la Revolution* and *Cuba* and realising various book covers, she had been employed since 1962 as a teacher at the School for Art Instructors in the section of *artesanía* or artisan work (Bruzon, 1964).

In her introduction to Eiríz's second one-person show at the National Museum of Art, where she was invited to exhibit her assemblages as 'Artist of the month', Bruzon (1964) writes:

'Meeting Antonia is the best introduction to an understanding of her paintings and assemblages; however, they themselves do not need a commentary to be understood, they are like an insult hurled in one's face' (Bruzon, 1964, p.1).

Bruzon's (1964) description of her interview is similarly intriguing. She describes visiting Eiríz in Juanelo, whose environment and inhabitants she drew upon as subject matter for her paintings (Cernuda Pérez, 2000)

'We found her building one of her assemblages, there was rotting wood, old tins, pieces of burnt cloth, rusty nails, climbing plants which mixed themselves with the assemblages and penetrated the intimacy of the house, children running armed with plastic bottles fulminating ants with jets of water. People enter and leave, they sit, speak of the heat, that for days there is no water in Jacomino (river running through Juanelo), the children continue running, Antonia shouts...' (Bruzon, 1964, p.1).

Bruzon reminds Eiríz that she has to write something for the catalogue about the forthcoming exhibition and quotes Eiríz's response.

'Look, it is very difficult for me to say why I make assemblages or why I paint, I need to dedicate myself to meditate about these things and really I don't do it. A while ago, when we made the exhibition of abstract expressionism, we thought about realising one later on, the group, an exhibition of assemblages. Later it was left in the air and we didn't do it. At that time I didn't think myself capable of

realising it. Later on, as I was running out of traditional painting materials, out of necessity I looked for elements of rubbish and worked with those. At the beginning I used those which I had in my own patio, later I went out to look for them in the rubbish, clearly overcoming certain scruples, not because of the rubbish but the people who looked at me in a strange way and who asked me what 'herb' are you looking for' (Eiríz in Bruzon, 1964, p.1).

Assemblage



Fig. 6: The Paper Boy, Antonia Eiríz, 1964, Assemblage. Permanent Collection National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana Cuba.

This is a particularly interesting extract because it clearly illustrates that making do or inventing materials was not new to Eiríz when in 1970 in a more difficult economic situation she adapted traditional papier mâché techniques which basically involved using rubbish or very cheap materials as alternatives. In the same interview she states:

'An assemblage is not a sculpture neither is it a painting rather it contains something of both techniques and of both disciplines. The construction of assemblages is nothing new and nowadays, all over the world, there are artists who make them from the most varied of objects. For me in particular making assemblages I have rediscovered the magical world of the everyday' (Eiríz in Bruzon, 1964, p.1).



Fig 7: Untitled, Antonia Eiríz, 1964, Assemblage, Private Collection

Bruzon reflects on Eiríz's use of the seemingly unusable.

' After seeing the 'Assemblages' of Antonia Eiríz and going out into the street we cannot remain insensitive before those mountains of debris and the destroyed things which sometimes appear in our way; in the hands of an artist they recover new forms, as only he can elevate them from the 'vulgar' (Bruzon,1964,p.1).

Arte Povera

It has since been drawn to my attention that there are striking parallels in Eiríz's work and approach to the Italian movement known as *Arte Povera* which emerged in the 1960's (Waller, 2006). Christov-Bakargiev (2001) notes that the term *arte povera* was first coined by the Italian art critic and curator Germano Celant in the summer of 1967, appropriating it from the Polish experimental theatre director Jerzy Grotowsky's notion of 'poor theatre', to define the work of a number of young Italian artists (Christov-Bakargiev, 2001, p. 21). Much of their work, according to Christov-Bakargiev (2001) could be described today as early examples of installation art. She also refers to the political nature of *Arte Povera's* resistance to the society of the spectacle it was born into, as well as the glorification of the consumer product implicit in much of the Pop Art that

preceded it. This latter observation is particularly interesting given Cardenal's (1972) research into the stance on the arts taken by the Revolutionary government in relation to Soviet style realism 'Cuba, they said, had found its true socialist realism in Pop Art' (Cardenal, 1972, p.189). While there is no reference made in any of the interviews with Eiríz to *Arte Povera* her awareness of their activities is probable. She does however refer to the COBRA group in an interview with Blanc (1974) with whom Lucio Fontana, an artist of the older generation associated with the *arte povera* artists and still highly influential in the 1960's, had links. Closer to Eiríz's work and aesthetic is the work of Alberto Burri cited by Christov-Bakargiev (2001) along with Fontana as being one of the precursors of *Arte Povera*.

But the parallels between Eiríz's work and *Arte Povera* go further than the use of materials. Christov-Bakargiev (2001) refers to Burri's oeuvre as expressing the moral weight and burden of living in a post atomic and post-Holocaust world and Desnoes (1962) makes a similar point in relation to Eiríz's early work when he states that her pictures have a direct relation with the grotesque elements of our time. Like the *Arte Povera* artists, Eiríz's work is dense with social critique and always maintains a political edge (Martínez, 1995).

However, where this edge lies is debateable. In 2000 I interviewed the Cuban painter Roberto Fabelo. His account of Eiríz's later work in Juanelo where, on laying down her own paintbrushes, she initiated community based work involving papier mâché suggests that her position was more complex than Martínez (1995) seems to suggest and that her dedication to promoting the technique of papier mâché was much more than 'a form of social expiation for her previous work' (Álvarez, 2002, p.4). On the contrary Eiríz's use of humble materials was for Fabelo 'an act of creation with something that has always been of great interest in this (Cuban post revolutionary) society and that is the extension of culture, to draw the people closer to art, the extension of cultural areas...for me it was one of the most revolutionary things that was done in that in moment...to activate a group in the direction of creation' (Fabelo, 2000).

In the decade 1959-69 Eiríz exhibited widely both at home and further afield in both the Americas and in Europe. She was selected to represent Cuba in

several international Biennial exhibitions (1961, 1961, 1963, and 1966). She began a career as an art teacher at the School for Craft Instructors in Havana (1962-64) and later at the National School of Art of Cubanacán where she taught painting and colour theory from 1965 to 1969. In 1967 she was awarded a six-month travelling scholarship to Italy, Spain and France by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. Anreus (2004) notes, that she participated in forty group shows in those ten years both in Cuba and abroad. In short, her curriculum vitae from 1959-69 suggests an extremely successful career as an artist and teacher in post-Revolutionary Cuba.

On the other hand Martínez's (1995) text, published after her death, emphasises Eiríz's preoccupation with what he refers to as the darker side of Cuban life in the 1960's and attributes her abandonment of painting as much to the 'negative official reaction to her tribune paintings' as to what he describes as her 'daily struggles of a more personal nature'. However, the evidence cited in the résumé of Eiríz's professional life in the catalogue of her retrospective exhibition in 1995 points to a woman participating fully in the life of the artistic community of her time.

Shortly before her death, Eiríz in an interview with Blanc (1994) reflected on what had influenced her painting. She cites the Cuban painters Amelia Peláez, Raúl Milián, René Portocarrero and Acosta León who she describes as an 'extraordinary painter of universal importance'(Eiríz in Blanc, 1994, p.2).



Fig 8: Velocípedo, Angel Acosta León, 1961, Ink on cardboard, 10 x 12 inches.
Reproduced with the permission of Cernuda Arte.

Other Influences on Eiríz's' work

Of influences further afield, in Europe and North America, Eiríz's interest was in modernist painting.

'People have talked about the influence of Goya. I did not know Goya well. Perhaps his influence was transmitted to me through my Spanish roots. They have classified me as an expressionist, but I always wanted to be an abstract painter. I love De Kooning, Kline, Tapes, Miró and Dubuffet. Cezanne saved me from the landscapes in the academy. He eliminated everything that was superficial in painting. Orson Welles once said talking about cinema that what was important for a director was not what he had to put in his film but what he had to cut out. This is also true for the painter. I admired abstract painters very much but in my case, the little heads and figures appeared almost in spite of myself. I was also interested in the COBRA group and would have liked to paint with their brilliant colours' (Eiríz in Blanc, 1994, p.3).

Álvarez (2002) notes in his discussion of Cuban art in the 1960's, that a proliferation of figurative art, which he also deems as 'official art', began to appear, which can be denominated 'marvellous reality', in accordance with the concept created by Alejo Carpentier in literature. He also mentions that in this period, Art Brut and la Nueva Figuración (the New Figuration) awakened the

interest of young artists and counted amongst its principal exponents, Antonia Eiríz and Acosta León (Álvarez, 2002, p.3).

Martínez (1995) locates Eiríz's influences further afield and regards her 1960's images as being in the best modernist tradition of Francisco Goya, James Ensor, Kathe Kollwitz, Jean Dubuffet, Clemente Orozco and Frances Bacon. In Cuba, what he describes as her 'works of biting political criticism', have, in his view, the drawings of Rafael Blanco (1885-1955) as their predecessor. Her more personal sombre works, he argues, have their forerunner in some of the paintings of Fidelio Ponce (1895-1949) and Raul Milián (1908-1984). He also cites the literature of the Cuban playwright Virgilio Piñera (1912-1979) as being in her 'immediate artistic family' in its mordant black humour (Martínez, 1995, p.1). Anreus (2004) echoes this opinion noting that many years later critics would find stylistic commonalities between Eiríz's work and those of Francis Bacon and the Mexican José Luis Cuevas. He notes however, that she did not encounter their work until after her own visual vocabulary had developed, and unlike their work, hers would be devoid of narcissism and always have a political edge. He goes on to comment that Eiríz does not mention in any of her interviews the Cuban expressionist painters Fidelio Ponce (1895-1949) and Rafael Blanco (1885-1955) as influences but expresses his own opinion that 'in their distortions and satirical visions of the society of their time, they are part of the same family'. In this reference to 'family', one senses an oblique reference to Roberto Retamar's article originally published in 1964 in which he refers to Eiríz's family in terms of a tradition of painters concerned with tragedy (Anreus, 2004, p.2). Her black sense of humour was certainly remarked upon innumerable times during the many interviews I conducted with those who had known her.

The year 1968 was a contentious one in Cuban cultural politics and marked a pivotal point in Eiríz's career. It was the year that Herberto Padilla (1932-2000) received the poetry prize from the Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC) for his manuscript *Fuera del juego* (Out of the Game), a collection of poems, described by Anreus (2004), as critical of life in post revolutionary Cuba. Padilla's book was published, but it contained a declaration from the Writers and Artists Union

attacking the book as counterrevolutionary and defeatist. The book contained a poem written about Eiríz and her painting in which the following lines appear.

'Those demagogues she paints,

Who look like they are going to say so many things

And in the end do not dare to say anything at all.'

These demagogues or crowds of demagogues mentioned in Padilla's poem, who 'in the end do not dare to say anything at all', are the subject of Eiríz's most controversial painting, the 1968 work *Una tribuna para la paz democrática* (A Tribune for Democratic Peace).

In 1993 Blanc asked her why she had stopped presenting one-woman shows and in-group exhibits after 1968.

'When I began to hear remarks that my painting was 'conflictive', I began to believe them. 'The Tribune', for example, was criticised very harshly. It was about to be awarded a prize and then there was no prize due to the criticism. One day I saw all my pictures together for the first time in many years. I said to myself: this is painting which expresses the moment in which I am living. And if a painter can do that, then he or she is a real painter. Thus, I absolved myself' (Eiríz in Blanc, 1994, p.3).

Anreus (2004) offers a detailed description of this work which has been on permanent exhibition at the National Museum of Cuba since July 2001.

'Initially conceived as a painting with an installation component, the work was meant to be shown with a wooden platform below it, on which would rest two rows of folding chairs facing the painting. The elements within the painting are simple enough; in the centre foreground is a podium, the inside facing us, five microphones on the top, several wires below. Painted in blacks, browns and greys, the podium is a massive and sinister object. The middle ground is the collage element: a red rope on either side of the podium, holding seven small paper leaflets that each contains the following printed message: P.C.V. *por la*

paz democrática ...for democratic peace. Had the printed message read P.C.C. instead of P.C.V., it would have meant Cuban Communist Party. As it is, the initials are ambiguous enough to be troublesome. Eiríz's second husband Manuel Gómez, recalled this painting and its title, 'Many times I have thought how officialdom was as annoyed by her paintings as by her titles. Antonia never tried to change anything, because reality could not be changed. She would simply put in the painting what she would see. She was essentially honest in this. I remember bringing to her attention the title she had thought about for a painting just completed. I thought it would bring her problems. She thought about it for days and decided to call it A Tribune for Democratic Peace. The painting was really an installation that included a wooden platform with folding chairs' (Anreus, 2004, p.6).



Fig 9: A Tribune for Democratic Peace, Antonia Eiríz, 1968.

The work was exhibited at the 1968 National Salon and publicly criticised at a meeting at the Writers and Artists Union by the literary critic, José Antonio Portuondo, also the union's vice-president. He considered the painting to be grotesque, defeatist and in essence counterrevolutionary.

Concluding remarks

By the end of 1968 Eiríz stopped painting and by 1969 she had resigned from her teaching post at the Cubanacán art school. In 1968 her mother had died and Eiríz, whose brief marriage to the artist Manuel Vidal had dissolved many years before, was alone with a fourteen year old son. As Anreus (2004) points out her painting was not only seen as conflictive and defeatist by the revolution's cultural establishment but also by fellow members of staff at the art school. She is reported to have stated 'If my painting is so problematic, I will stop painting, and it will be their loss' (Gómez in Anreus, 2004, p.7).

Eiríz was not alone in this purge of Cuban intellectual and artistic life and given what was to come, her 'self-imposed' retirement was timely and took place at an extremely difficult time in Cuban cultural politics. Following the Padilla case in 1971 in which the poet made a public confession to support the revolution, Castro established the new cultural politics which would substitute his last message to the intellectuals, 'Art is an arm of the Revolution': from this proclamation followed the affirmation of culture as an activity of the masses; the acknowledgement of Marxist-Leninism as the only instrument for interpreting reality and the call for the creation of a highly ideologised art. What was to become known as 'The grey five year period', as named by the critic Ambrosio Fornet, was to last for a decade (Serrano, 2002, p. 4).

Leading international intellectuals protested and 'the honeymoon between progressive intellectuals and the Cuban Revolution ended, even if an embrace of US opposition to the revolution did not follow' (Anreus, 2004, p. 7). Álvarez (2002) suggests that 'the neo figuration of Eiríz and Peña was criticised for not being in line with politically correct norms of their time' (Álvarez, 2002, p.3). He names Eiríz as being one of the artists who stopped painting under institutional pressure and suggests that her dedication to promoting the technique of papier mâché was a form of social atonement (Álvarez, 2002).

It was in this context that Antonia Eiríz ceased to paint and resigned from her post at the Escuela Nacional de Arte de Cubanacán in 1969. Although she participated in several collective exhibitions in Cuba, the US and Spain at that time it was not until 1985 that she exhibited again in Paris. In part 2 Eiríz's life

and work from 1969 to 1993 and her decision to dedicate herself to el arte popular are described. In this way she established thinking about practices involving art that were considered therapeutic or helpful which inspired the development of work of art therapy in Cuba (Hills de Zárata, 2006). Her path is traced from Cuba to Miami and the last few years of her life when she resumed painting with a passion until her untimely death in 1995.

Biography: Margaret Hills de Zárata PhD is currently Programme Leader of the MSc in Art Therapy at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. Her research interests are in Latin American cultural studies, art therapy practices in developing countries and political violence. She has taught and worked in Spain, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Cuba.

Interviews

1. Jorge Nasser - 5th January and 23rd March 2000 (papier mâché artist)
2. María del Carmen Pérez Cernuda - curator Museo de San Miguel del Padron, 15th January and 15th March 2000.
3. María Gutiérrez, 13th April 2000, Juanelo (neighbour of Antonia Eiríz)
4. Dra. Graziela Pogolotti - 12th April 2000, Vedado, (Vice President of UNEAC).

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Links:

Celia Cruz sings Guantanamera:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=IT&hl=it&v=Js0rKmv-0lw>