



WORK IN MOVEMENT

More than 30 years of an uninterrupted, successful artistic career warrant a look at the work of Gilberto Frómeta (1946. Havana, Cuba), even if that glance may be shocked by the mobility of his work and the artist's own vocation to exist, to ponder and to give within the extremely rich, polemic and complex stream of the last five decades of Cuban visual arts.

The history of the largest island in the Caribbean is undoubtedly marked by one date, 1959. The popular rebellion led by Fidel Castro came to power that year, only to evolve into something much more profound, radical and shattering: a revolution that shakes each and every layer of national life, from the economic foundations to the universe of interpersonal relations. The revolutionary tide would naturally reach the world of arts, which strove to express, in its own language, this mammoth event while, at the same time, it underwent a resounding renaissance.

The foundation for this creative boom had begun to be laid before the Revolution; as a cursory look at past events confirms.



THE REPUBLICAN PERIOD

The first years of the Republic¹ were not effectively portrayed in painting. The dominating themes were the corner bodegas, still life, and a host of representations subservient to prevailing academic viewpoints. The trend of epic painting was also present with leading figures such as Menocal, Valderrama, Hernández Giró and García Cabrera.

The epic painters set their sights on the great Mambí² independence fighters in the war that had just ended. Some, like Menocal (1863-1942), had been directly involved in the struggle against Spanish domination. His paintings, which leaned towards narration and were devoid of emotion, received harsh critical reviews. Valderrama, on the other hand, was a meticulous chronicler, but lacked poetic vision. Before setting down to paint, he would conduct painstaking research, visiting places, taking measurements, and talking to witnesses.

There were other minor painters during this period who either imitated European styles or painted

¹ The Republic was established in Cuba in 1902.

² "Mambí" was the term used to refer to the Cuban anti-Spain independence fighters.

portraits with no psychological depth. In 1920, critic Jorge Mañach protested by asking when would the arts begin to “express the most vivid desires of our collective conscience.”

Leopoldo Romañach (1862-1951) is undoubtedly the best painter of this period. At a tender age, he had traveled across Spain, Italy and the United States, taking notes at ports and small villages. He studied under Filippo Prospero, visited museums and broadened his vision. Born in Caibarién, a small Cuban fishing town, he was greatly drawn by the sea, which he portrayed in lucent maritime scenes with ample, graceful strokes. But Romañach is also credited with having been an extraordinary teacher. Students such as Fidelio Ponce de León, Víctor Manuel, Amelia Peláez, Jorge Arche and Mirta Cerra all learned under his masterly eye and not just about painting but also about life and passion for the arts.



THE MODERN PAINTERS

There is a date that signals the emergence of the new art in Cuba: 1927. That year, the *Revista de Avance* magazine, the avant-garde arts publication, organized a salon with 82 pieces exponent of the new paths that visual arts were following in the country.

The exhibition featured key figures in the process of change that Cuban arts were to undergo. Some of the painters, like Victor Manuel, were already known, but, most importantly, the *Revista de Avance* salon provided, not only the opportunity for the initial core of this new generation to become known, but also a confirmation that they were not alone in this multifaceted search for a national expression.

The modern painters, for the first time in the history of Cuban visual arts, looked beyond the highest exponents of universal art and sought to incorporate themselves in it with an exacting recognition of the national, with its changing and complex essence.

Essential names from this period are Víctor Manuel, Amelia Peláez, Fidelio Ponce de León, René Portocarrero, Eduardo Abela, Carlos Enríquez, and Wifredo Lam, the most well-known of Cuban painters. From different angles and guided by their own strong individualities, each of these painters contributed to the emergence of a national visual production — that ranged from a focus on country landscapes and its harsh reality (Carlos Enríquez), to the exploration of the African aspects in our culture (Wilfredo Lam), which up to then had only been approached from the shallow, external angle of the picturesque.

The 1940s added new names to this small group. Joining the already established masters were Mario Carreño, Felipe Orlando, Cundo Bermúdez, Mariano Rodríguez, Roberto Diago and Arístides Fernández. Roberto Diago was above all an excellent draftsman, who touched on themes that put him on par with Lam, at times surpassing him. However, his short life (he committed suicide) and a certain flirting with Fascist ideas have worked against the general

recognition of his art.



THE 1950s

The 1950s were marked by the infamous dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. His government desperately tried to garner the sympathies of the intellectuals but was met with open rejection by virtually all the prominent figures. Official initiatives, like the salon opened to mark the centennial of José Martí's birthday and the Second Spanish-American Art Biennial, ended up in failure.

The artists of this period can be easily split into two groups: abstract and figurative. Among the former is the Group of Eleven that included Fayad Jamís, Raúl Martínez, Agustín Cárdenas, Díaz Peláez (these last two are sculptors), Antonio Vidal, René Ávila, Hugo Consuegra and Antonia Eriz.

Other outstanding artists of this generation were the kinetic Sandú Darié; Luis Martínez Pedro, the creator of the stylish series territorial waters; sculptors Mateo Torriente, Florencio Gelabert and Rita Longa; painters Pedro de Oráa, Antonio Vidal, José M. Mijares, Servando Cabrera and Raúl Milián, among so many others who can not all be mentioned here.



THE REVOLUTION

The Revolution is victorious. Some artists leave the country, finding commercial acceptance and the attention of critics; others stay to continue the forward movement of their work, contributing with their well-earned prestige and solid training to the education of the younger generation of artists.

As previously mentioned, the coming-to-power of the revolutionaries set off an explosion of creativity. The new government established the Escuela Nacional de Arte (National School of Art) (ENA³) on the grounds of what used to be the most exclusive club of the Cuban elite.

Youngsters from all over the island came to study here. A movement of art instructors was created by the Revolutionary Government, museums and noncommercial art galleries were opened, and art became more prominent in existing and new publications.

³ Established in 1962, ENA provided classes in the performance arts, ballet, music and visual arts.

Gilberto Frómeta was among the first graduates of ENA, together with Éver Fonseca, Waldo Luis⁴, who had an untimely death, poet Albis Torres, Ecuadoran Pilar Bustos and Jorge Pérez Duporté whose works became well known. The teaching staff included Lesbia Vent Dumois, Jorge Rigol, Antonia Eriz, Adigio Benítez, Fayad Jamís, Servando Cabrera and Carmelo González; all of these prestigious artists, were guided not only by their sound mastery but also by their spontaneity, continual drive to explore new horizons and rejection of dogmas typical of the youth of those times.

Frómeta had begun commercial arts classes at the age of twelve, at a school in California, USA. When he joined ENA he was one of the few students who had already received some academic training. This period of frenzied learning provided him with significant technical skills and acquainted him with the political and aesthetical ideas of the time. It is a moment when politics were severely conditioned by the clash between Cuba and the power of the North, which refused, as it does today, to accept losing Cuba as its neo-colony.

Therefore, it was no surprise that his professional debut in the national arena in 1970, barely three years after his graduation, was an exhibition of drawings whose title announced his militant affiliation: *La Estafa de la Libertad*⁵



EACH TIME THE PENDULUM MOVES DIE

Ink and pencil on paper 640 x 480 mm 1969

(The hoax of liberty, a pun on the Statue of Liberty which is ‘Estatua de la Libertad’ in Spanish). The set of drawings parodies, satirizes and lashes out at the US style of representative democracy. One of the pieces “*Cada vez que el péndulo bate, algo muere*” (Every time the pendulum swings, something dies), graphite and India ink on paper, which blends Manhattan’s emblematic Empire State Building — tall and unyielding — with a Statue of Liberty that swings according to how the winds of politics blow.

PHOTOPRINTS

⁴ He died in January, 1971, when his professional career was barely beginning.

⁵ This painting was exhibited in La Rampa Gallery at Habana Libre Hotel.



Magazine Cover Design

Dedicated edition to the 24th of February 1895, The Bairwe's Outcry
 2nd stage of Cuba's independence war.
 CUBA International Magazine N° 2 1977
 Printed Russian edition in Moscow

His work as a graphic designer at *CUBA INTERNATIONAL*⁶ magazine set the course for his next artistic stage. His closeness to the world of photography led him to dive into this art form of light and immediacy, as a way of expressing urgent themes.



MACHETE AGAINST RIFLE

Manipulated-photo, wax pencil and ink over raw canvas 45 x 55 cm 1975.

He started with printed photos, but then went on to create his own negatives, on which he experimented with diverse techniques, from drawing to photomontage, to submitting the images to chemical procedures and obtaining prints through contact with sun light. These experiments, blurring the boundaries between photography and painting, received positive reviews that branded Frómeta as “a renovator of old procedures⁷.” The prints could later be “illuminated,” “retouched” in a favorable endeavor that brought great results. Frometa came to master the technique to the extent that he could obtain an impressive range of colors in his prints, without the use of pigments.

These works were released in a 1977's exhibition called *Fotoimpresos de Frómeta* at the National

⁶ Period between 1971 and 1978.

⁷ The phrase comes from Gerardo Mosquera's critic.

Fine Arts Museum. Although pieces like “*José Martí Pérez*” and “*Olas*” (Waves) on cardboard, dated back to 1974 and 1975 respectively, they demonstrate Frometa’s slow absorption of the technique before he decided to face the public and critics. The photoprints “*El can de mis vecinos*” (My Neighbors’ Dog) and “*Pescadores*” (Fishermen), both on paper and dating back to the 1980s, are representative of Frometa’s full blossoming in this art form.



JOSÉ MARTÍ

Photo-manipulation Bristol board 730 x 470 mm 1974



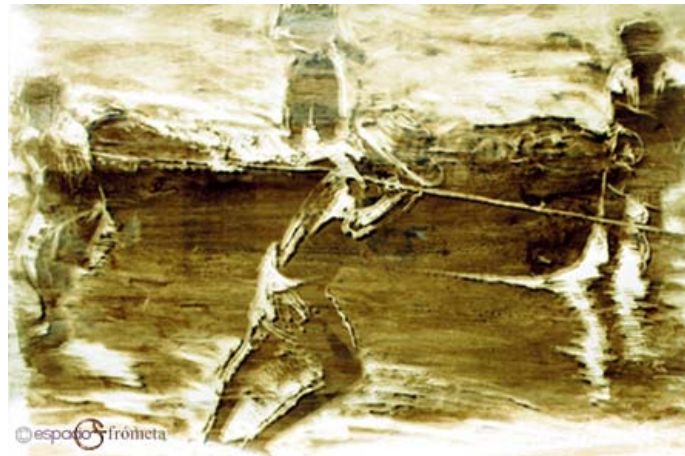
WAVES

Photo-manipulation Bristol board 58 x 79 cm 1975



MY NEIGHBOR'S DOG

Photo-manipulation Bristol board 55 x 99 cm 1983



FISHERMAEN

Photo-manipulation on Bristol board 70 x 99 cm 1983

An apparently fortuitous circumstance — a shortage of materials to continue producing photoprints — led Frómeta to change the course of his work in 1976. He went back to using pen and ink, which he had not tried since his student days. Inexplicably for some, the restless experimenter was now back in the arms of the Academy. Resulting from this period is a series of exquisite drawings of nudes and horses, in a fusion of great lyricism. The representational confrontation of both elements acts as an effective metaphor: how much human desire is in the horse that is watching the naked woman and how much animal instinct is there in the plainly offered sexuality! Perhaps the archetypical piece from that period is “*Pinto con desnudo*” (Paint with Nude, 1979), in which, as in the rest of the pieces in this collection, the figure’s contours are defined only by endless lines, which gives, as a result, an excellent drawing of sinuous and very expressive forms.



PAINT WITH NUDE

Ink and nib pen on Bristol board 735 x 1025 mm 1979

Collection of the National Museum of Fine arts of the Havana. Cuba

As always, in the case of Frometa, he did not reinsert himself in the Academy but rather used its resources to achieve visibly personal results while establishing him as one of the country’s great draftspersons, a real accomplishment given the long tradition of this discipline in Cuba.

Horses gallop a long stretch in Frometa’s works, all the way to the present, mutating, expanding the conceptual scope, enriching the end result. Those pen and ink drawings, which critics have

described as possessing the virtue of silence and light as the protagonist⁸,



HASTY ESCAPE

Ink and nib pen on Bristol board 732 x 1707 mm 1979

Collection of the National Museum of Fine arts of the Havana. Cuba

were followed by chalcography pieces of great impact as a result of the dramatic atmosphere which they achieve, in spite of or perhaps because of their small format⁹. It was in these pieces that color slowly began to emerge.



JEALOUSY

Messotinta on copper 340 x 465 mm 1987

In horses, Frómeta found a theme, a motif and a distinctive mark. Before him, Carlos Enríquez and Servando Cabrera had explored with horses, but never with so much realism or dedication. Frómeta has said that what most attracted his attention was the expressiveness of horses' eyes, that certain reflection of intelligence. Standing before a painting by Frómeta, maestro René Portocarrero once said that the horses appeared humanized, alive and virile.

In 1986, the National Fine Arts Museum hosted the exhibition *Pintura (Paintings) 1984-1986*. In this collection, Frómeta goes back to the theme of horses from a new representational angle, with a treatment closer to pop, to the techniques used in cinema. He also took his first steps in abstract

⁸ "Violence," 1977; "Frontal Trot," 1979; "Paint with Three Eyes," 1979; "Stampede," 1979.

⁹ "Pinto," "Three," "Multiple Little Horse," etc.

expressionism — a true somersault in his career.



LEAP CONCEPT

Silkscreen 545 x 750 mm Two Prizes 1^a Biennial of Havana, Cuba. 1984

Perhaps because of the need of color, in works that up until then had been essentially monochromatic and highly contained composition-wise, the paintings from this period by Frómeta literally burst before the eyes of the observer. Patches still appear, here and there, that continue to suggest horses. These new paintings, a true exercise in creative freedom, and further evidence that Frómeta does not adhere to commitments other than those he establishes with the dialectics of his aesthetic ideas, ever restless, in a constant search for new paths through which to express his individual sensibility. In him, such rupture becomes an oblique expression of continuity.

An interesting parallel can be made between the paths followed by Frómeta and German expressionist Franz Marc¹⁰. Both set their eyes on horses as a motif, from which they both moved on to abstraction. But the similarities end there, as their attitudes and visual results are diametrically opposed.

In 1988, Frómeta presented the exhibition *Gestos descompasados*, a cardboard collection that features, in full bloom, the gestural language and the visual effects — a sort of virtual matterism. The pieces include verses, and reach depths that speak more to the senses than to the intellect. The works displayed here carry a strong reference to the world of children and the freely strokes of their pre-writing years. It is as if Frómeta, tired of so many rigors, allows “the spirit” to express itself freely, in a practice that might seem like automatism were it not preceded by so many years of professional work and his perfect mastering of the resources available to his art. Like a jazz musician, in this new expression, the painter improvises, unrestrained, over a melody he knows well. The animals appear shady now, only remotely suggested.

¹⁰ 1880-1916. One of the key members of the *Der Blaue Reiter* expressionist painters group.



WHIM VI

Acrylic and oil on canvas 100 x 80 cm 1988

DOODLEI MPROVISATION OF COLORS GESTURES AND FORMS XIV

Acrylic and oil on canvas 100 x 80 cm 1988

THE WHITE FLOWERS HORSE RIDER

Acrylic and oil on canvas 100 x 80 cm 1991 Signed in Maracaibo, Venezuela

It would be impossible to meticulously follow the dynamic sequence of Frómeta's exhibitions both abroad and in Cuba; not just because they are numerous, but because not all of them mark new directions. In many, Frómeta appears revisited, taking paths that seemed abandoned, only to reincorporate them, with a stroke of magic, and make them available to express any preoccupations surfacing at any specific moment.

Having successfully delved into abstraction, Frómeta allows the technique — for some, a genre in itself — to continue evolving, be it in works fiercely informalist¹¹ or as a backdrop for figurations that, once again, begin to renovate themselves. Interesting indeed is the recurrence to the world of merry-go-rounds. In these pieces, Frómeta, who had earlier drawn and painted “real” horses, now brings us wooden horses that, in a surreal prance, break free from the carousel around which they were to eternally spin. The realm of childhood gains new presence, beyond mere



BEFORE GALLOPING, TROT

Acrylic and oil on canvas 150 x 120 cm 110 x 195 cm 1994

“doodling.” In “*Antes de galopar, trotar*” (Before Galloping, Trotting, 1993), the foreground is filled with little wooden horses in a variety of toy forms (little rocking horses, horses on wheels, etc.). In the background, emerging from strokes that turn kinetic, are suggestions of spirited horses at full trot, in open contrast to the quiet stillness of the toys.

¹¹ Among them, for instance, “*Solemn Movement*” (1993), “*Song in the Tongue*” (1993) or “*Sleepy-Eyed*” (1994).

And since Frómeta is not an artist who is content with isolated discoveries, carousels and horses continue to be explored in a series that, although lacking a generic name, can be easily told apart. To this group belong pieces such as “*Ajíméz a la mar de la aventura*” (Window to the Sea of Fortune, 1994), “*Realidad del tiempo*” (Reality of Time, 1995), “*Tumulto del sueño*” (Tumultuous Dream, 1995), “*Espejo que atesora*” (Mirror that Treasures, 1995) and the beautiful “*Luz antigua*” (Ancient Light, 1996).



DREAM TUMULT

Oil on canvas 100 x 200 cm 1995

REALITY OF THE TIME

Oil on canvas 80 x 100 cm 1995



LATTICE TO THE SEA OF FORTUNE

Acrylic and oil on canvas 150 x 120 cm 1994

MIRROR THAT TREASURES UP

Oil on canvas 80 x 100 cm 1995

ANCIENT LIGHT

Acrylic and oil canvas 100 x 120 cm 1996

Existe una pieza, valiosísima, donde contraposición de corceles y caballitos de madera, de figuración y abstraccionismo (en una gama bastante fauvista, por cierto) llega al máximo de sus posibilidades: “*Festejo boreal*” (1995). Las figuras parecen descomponerse, estallar,



BOREAL FEASTE

Acrylic and oil canvas 120 x 200 cm 1995

One work, however, stands out for its true mastery in portraying the full range of contradistinction between real horses and toy wooden horses and figuration versus abstractionism (in a very fauvist range, by the way) — “*Festejo boreal*” (Boreal Feast, 1995). In this piece, the figures seem to fall apart, bursting into speed. We are witness to a world in eclosion that tests the sharpness of our perceptions, with figurative elements that are as attractive as the patches of color. In “*Festejo boreal*”, one language complements the other. Subordination, never.

At this point in his career, of greater “post modernity” now, appropriations begin to appear. Frómeta composes fantastic pieces in which he cites Renoir, Botticelli, Durer, and, above all, Toulouse-Lautrec, whose world evidently fascinates him.

Top hats now appear in abundance, perched atop of men’s heads, as do picture hats atop of women. Are they sending us to the past, to prove that any theme can be a good theme? Or are they a satire of times and social classes long gone, frivolous in essence, in which the life in the wooden horse and the lack of it in the real animal become blurry?



WOODEN PONY

Acrylic and oil canvas 100 x 120 cm 1996

One of the things Frómeta learned during his foray into abstraction, is that the theme, “the message,” can emerge a posteriori and that whenever painting attempts to transgress genre boundaries, to become narrative, and hence logical, it fails.

In “*Can Can de Lautrec*” (Lautrec’s Can Can, 1997), the dancer is no other than a horse. The public, enthralled, toss their hats in the air... Likewise, in “*El mejor amigo*” (Best Friend, 1997), Frometa’s horses are seen mingling with well known individuals, masters of the past: the essence of art is eternal, and recycling an iconography upon which time has bestowed positive recognition is an undeniable act of endearment with humanistic values and a loving sign of continuity.



THE MAGISIAN'S TOP HAT

Acrylic and oil canvas 130 x 150 cm 2003



DREAMS DON'T COST

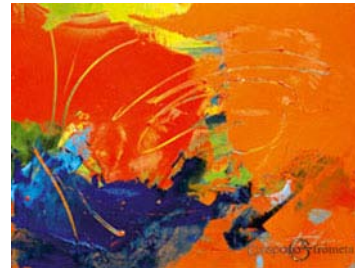
Acrylic and oil canvas 125 x 150 cm 2003



THE BEST FRIEND

Acrylic and oil canvas 120 x 160 m 1997

With time, the figuration-abstraction mixture, especially with regards to the world of horses, gradually disappears. Beginning in 2001, Frómeta focuses his attention in an area which, according to him, expresses it more faithfully: the nonfigurative. Vast studies in color, with pigment applied by aerograph, and the use of dripping, grattage, action painting, scraper and whatever available tool or instrument, all harmoniously blending into works of different formats that all share a common denominator — and this sounds weird when talking about informalism — the care for the end result and the delving into unknown areas of the unconscious, even when the artist, resorting to suggestive titles, seeks to anchor the reference in a discernible field.



NIGHT BIRD

Acrylic and oil canvas 100 x 70 cm 2001

TWILIGHT BIRD

Acrylic and oil canvas 80 x 100 cm 2001

BROAD LIGHT

Oil on canvas 66 x 81 cm 2001



EROS JUNGLE

Acrylic and oil canvas 50 x 100 cm 2004

In the last few years, the work of Gilberto Frómeta has followed a path that he has called “syncretic abstraction¹².” It feeds indirectly from the symbols present in the Afro-Cuban religions, blending them into the discourse as yet another compositional element: rough sisal cloth suggestive of Babalú Ayé¹³, cowries¹⁴ that pose as eyes, symbols connected with Santeria, Elegguá¹⁵ who emerges from the dense composition (the forest?). As I once said, “these are not exaltations or interpretations or even appropriations from the island’s magical universe. They are images of our subconscious identity, to which the artist resorts in his full right.



Those who familiar with this world will ‘see’ more, but others will also enjoy Frómeta’s succulent painting, for he is also a master of synesthesia, his paintings producing sensory reactions that go beyond the sense of sight¹⁶.”As these lines are written, the artist — at times Jekyll, at times Hyde — works indistinctively with pen and ink on canvas (horses again) and the most uninhibited of abstractions.



FOREST FRIEND

Acrylic and oil canvas 65 x 50 cm 2005

NIGHT KITE

Acrylic and oil canvas 200 x 150 cm 2005

IDOL

Acrylic and oil canvas 65 x 45 m. 2005

He switches from one to the other naturally with the conviction of someone who knows that

¹² Although an exhibition under this name took place at the Collage Habana Gallery in 2006, similar elements had already surfaced in *Haciendo Caminos* (Making headways), held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2005.

¹³ A deity that, in Cuba, synchronizes with the biblical Saint Lazarus and is the patron saint of lepers.

¹⁴ A marine mollusk found along the Eastern Cuba coast. Its shells are highly valued and have been used as currency in India and some African countries. In Cuba they are used in a divination rite.

¹⁵ A deity in Regla de Ocha or Cuban Santeria. It is the only saint in the Yoruba pantheon that has a physical representation, consisting of a small triangular stone with eyes. The rest of the deities are recognized by their attributes.

¹⁶ Taken from the catalog of the exhibition *Haciendo camino* (Making headways) (2005).

painting, like life itself, does not happen in a linear way, and that the two facets of his work are mirrors facing one another, mutually illuminating.



FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

Charcoal and Acrylic on canvas 85 X 104 cm 2009

Currently, Frómeta's abstract works are generating a great deal of interest. Following a long period of misunderstanding, abstractionism — judged by some dogmatic and sectarian individuals in Cuba to be a cursed, bourgeois and “dehumanized” art — has for a number of years now been a vigorous movement, greatly contributing to the national arts. It should also be noted that some painters have seen this genre as a quick path to commercialization, wrongly thinking that its main function is decorative.

Frómeta, however, has come to abstraction propelled by his unquenchable thirst for discovery and his drive for unrestrained creative freedom. In no way does he seek to “please” or to be in line with one or another current. If his work ends up being the beautiful pieces they are, it is because Frómeta is particularly gifted when it comes to detecting, producing and sharing beauty; or that which — as Pessoa would say — we call beauty for lack of another name and in appreciation of the pleasure it provokes.



YELLOW VERSE

Acrylic and oil canvas 212 x 360 cm 2010

Signed in Beijing



BLUE ILLUSION

Acrylic and oil canvas 80 x 0100 cm 2010 Signed in Beijing

PANDORA

Acrylic and oil canvas 100 x 80 cm 2010 Signed in Beijing



RELIEF SYMPHONY

Oil on canvas 212 x 350 cm 2011 Signed in Beijing

As far back as 1974, Gilberto Frómeta has been featured in the elite collection of Cuban painters at Havana's National Museum of Fine Arts. His works, diverse and unique, expressionist or of "a certain constructive classicism"¹⁷ have been exhibited with considerable success and positive reviews in over thirty countries, including Cuba, Austria, Spain, France, Holland, Britain, Malaysia, Poland, Portugal, Russia, United States, Brazil, Columbia, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Venezuela, Japan, Czechoslovakia, Algeria, Belgium, Syria, Qatar, China, Luxemburg, Germany and Canada.

Any short list of current Cuban artists would have to include Frómeta. Such a list would name internationally recognized artists such as Tomás Sanchez, Nelson Domínguez, Roberto Fabelo or Pedro Pablo Oliva — four of the most notable and closest in time to him. Frometa's work is sure to evoke disbelief in those who are only now becoming familiar with it, a range of pleasure for his loyal collectors, and sudden alarm among the standardizing, content-driven critics who seek to reduce the complex process of artistic creation to a ridiculous set of formulas.

Alex Fleites

Cuban Art Critic

¹⁷ The phrase comes from the critic and painter Manuel López Oliva.



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