

# I THE ARTISTS

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LYNETTE M. F. BOSCH

Defining Cuban-American art or what is “Cuban” or “Cuban-American” about art produced in the United States by artists of Cuban birth or of Cuban ancestry is a complex task, because the artistic production of artists who belong to these categories defies easy classification of style, subject, media, and message. Whereas the easy definition of these artistic categories can be resolved by forwarding identity as a determinant element, the implicit questions “What is ‘Cuban’ about Cuban Art?” and “What is ‘Cuban American’ about Cuban-American art?” cannot be so easily answered because issues of identity are simultaneously subjective and objective. A comprehensive or definitive definition of “Cuban” and “Cuban-American” identity(ies) has not been achieved. The attempt to determine a fixed definition of what constitutes Cuban art, Cuban-American art, or both is additionally complicated by the complexity of defining artistic identity, especially that of exiled artists belonging to different generations. This introduction to the interviews of Baruj Salinas, Humberto Calzada, Emilio Falero, María Brito, Mario Bencomo, Arturo Rodríguez, Demi, Juan Carlos Llera, and Alberto Rey is meant to guide the reader toward an understanding of how issues of identity are made manifest by visual artists, who are also Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans.

Artists are artists first and their concerns are primarily technical and visual. Visual artists, be they painters, sculptors, printmakers or architects, respond to a need to express their experience through objects. Once made, these works exist on their own terms, endowed with histories and meanings that cannot be fixed or limited by their originating circumstances. Interpretation, which is part of any “text,” or object as “text,” when considered within the purview of the artistic process, develops its own rules of logic while achieving context and connected meanings. Works of art produced by exiled artists of multiple identities are not easy parallels of literary, musical, or theatrical productions, because the process of making a work of art is not the same as these other creative endeavors.

It is, therefore, important to understand that the interviews conducted with the Cuban-American artists featured here are primarily artist interviews and secondarily interviews with a group interested in the expression of identity and the experience of exile.

The artists interviewed discuss their creative process within their personal, formal, stylistic and conceptual exploration involved in making objects. Each of them attempts to solve problems created by the material demands of their chosen media and in working with and around the possibilities inherent in those materials and in their manipulation. It is important to understand that visual artists are not philosophers, neither are they wordsmiths, and, while the myth of the inarticulate artist is just that, the artistic personality sees the world *on its own terms*. The artist is not interested in objectivity or in sociological, philosophical, or scholarly definitions of the subjects and experiences they represent. The perspective of artists is uncompromisingly personal and reflected in their work. The artists interviewed here have very strong individual opinions about their artistic creativity, their personal expression of this creativity, and the manner in which they view their situation as artists in relation to their being Cuban American and exiles. As artists, they do not seek “objectivity,” but rather the expression of their personal vision of human experience.

Each of the artists included here represents slightly different experiences of being Cuban, Cuban American, and an exile. All were born in Cuba and have spent most of their lives in the United States, yet they are in many ways very diverse, and they came at different ages: Baruj Salinas as an adult and mature artist, Alberto Rey as an infant without memories of Cuba, Demi as a child, Humberto Calzada as a young adult, and the rest as teenagers of various ages. (The interviews are arranged in an order that reflects the different stages at which these artists came to the United States.) Except for Salinas, who came as an adult and Rey, who lacks childhood memories of Cuba, every one of the featured artists represents a range of ages conforming to what Ruben Rumbaut identified as the one-and-a-half generation: being Cuban American born in Cuba and brought to the United States as children and adolescents. The concept of the one-and-a-halfers as a social identity was popularized by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in *Life on the Hyphen* and has become a given for identifying those Cuban Americans who came to this country at a certain age. As these artists have created a body of work that reflects their personal experience, they have, at different times and in different ways, addressed their multiple identities.

Because one-and-a-halfers were partially formed in Cuba, but forced to acculturate to American culture before their Cuban identities were fully formed, their lives are truncated, cut in “half.” But the halves are not neatly divided, as exile did not break their lives in even parts. Instead, the

hyphen becomes a figure of fracture that creates a movable territory of negotiation that is ongoing and fluid. One-and-a-halfers are also exiles, whose sense of identity, both Cuban and Cuban-American is defined by a landscape of slippage. The hyphen is a geography of change, where one-and-a-halfers navigate back and forth between their Cuban and American cultural references on a daily and hourly basis, as events and incidents call forth reactions from their Cuban and their American parts. For those who remember their Cuban lives, the removal from Cuba represents a central memory and a break with the continuity they knew as children. The older they were when they left Cuba, the more "Cuban" they had become. For the younger members of the one-and-a-half generation, their American part represents the greater part of their lives, as the years in the United States have lengthened into lives lived outside Cuba.

Those one-and-a-halfers, who were teenagers and older children, were old enough to understand that exile meant leaving home, forever maybe. As they matured, their cognitive understanding of exile became an aspect of their experience that separated them from their American peers and defined them as being different. Those who were very young children or infants when they left Cuba, grew up in a culture of family exile, which they shared through circumstance. As they matured, association formed their identity as exiles. Thus, the exiled children and adolescents of different ages became exiles of multiple identities bound to their culture of origin through birth and ancestry, yet becoming adults in a culture that became progressively familiar as they progressively absorbed it. The response of this group of Cuban Americans to the divided self varies always, moving from exhilaration to conflict, as the tension created by the life on the hyphen fluctuates with changing circumstances. As exiles, Cuban-American artists are possessed of multiple identities as insiders and outsiders on either side of the hyphen.

For artists, yet another identity is added to these, because artists are by nature outsiders who participate in a culture and observe society in order to transform their observations into art. For the exiled artist, being an outsider takes on charged significance. For some, the moment of exile and the experience of exile may remain a fixed topos in their work. For others, it may be a passing consideration that emerges here and there in their work. Generational placement can also alter the artists' relationships with their exile identity and can affect the content and subjects they choose to develop. Each of these approaches is reflected in the work of the different artists interviewed in this book and no consensus is reached as to which approach is more or less legitimate. Yet, each artist interviewed has had to come to terms with his or her multiple identities, as Cuban, exile, and Cuban American.

The connection between identity and art in a Cuban context can be traced to the first generation of Cuban modernist artists, the painters of the Vanguardia, who were active in Cuba during the 1920s and 1930s. These artists, who include Carlos Enríquez, Wifredo Lam, Amelia Peláez, and Fidelio Ponce, sought to bring modernist movements and styles to Cuba in order to transform Cuban art from its nineteenth-century academic traditions into a more contemporary artistic expression. Simultaneously with the artistic agenda of the Vanguardia artists, Cuban cultural critics, such as Fernando Ortiz, became concerned with the definition of a Cuban identity, an identity that seemed to require articulation after the War of Independence from Spain. As Cuba began the process of postwar reconstruction, it became necessary to pull together a diverse population that included Spaniards, Africans, Chinese, and other European and Asian populations so as to create a national identity that united these groups. Ortiz's use of *ajiaco*, the Cuban equivalent of the American melting-pot, became popular on the island as a solution to the problem of the varied ethnic and racial identities that existed in Cuba. Ortiz's conceptual project became linked to the artistic efforts of the Vanguardia artists to transform Cuban art, and, by extension, Cuban society. The visual explorations and experimentation of these artists included a conscious desire to represent *lo cubano*, the essential nature of what constitutes Cuban identity.

This initial generation of Cuban artists was followed by a second, third, and fourth generations of modernist painters and sculptors, who identified themselves as the heirs to the traditions of the Vanguardia. Yet, the third and fourth generations largely disengaged from the project of linking Modernism to *lo cubano* as they began to explore a more universal visual vocabulary. These third and fourth generations, which included artists such as Baruj Salinas, Rafael Soriano, Eladio González, Gina Pellón, Zilia Sánchez, Enrique Gay García, and Hugo Consuegra, worked in styles reflecting the stylistic movements of Expressionism, Abstraction, and Abstract Expressionism, during the 1950s and 1960s. Having been born in Cuba and having become mature artists on their native island, these artists belong to a group of exiles from post-1959 Cuba, who came out of their country fully formed as Cubans and artists, with their artistic vocabularies clearly defined. When they arrived in the United States, they continued their careers in the new landscape of exile. In a manner of speaking, they can be seen as artists who continued to create "Cuban" art in the United States because their work did not immediately reflect overt changes in their identity as Cubans or as artists. For some of them, as the years passed, the need to express the realities of exile and the exploration of a hyphenated identity surfaced in their work, but for others, these events had a minimal impact on their creative production.

Artists who left Cuba as mature artists, during the 1960s and 1970s, formed the nucleus of what is now an accepted category: they became classified as Cuban Americans by virtue of their Cuban birth and their American naturalization. The artists belonging to this group who settled in Miami, began to create a market for Cuban art among exiled Cuban collectors. This nucleus eventually expanded into Miami's continuing market for Cuban and Cuban-American art. The original group exhibited in private homes, small galleries that came and went quickly, and at the Bacardí gallery. The most defined members of this wave of first arrivals belonged to the group Grupo de Artistas Latino Americanos (GALA): Baruj Salinas, Enrique Riverón, Rafael Soriano, José Mijares, Osvaldo Gutiérrez, and Roxana McAllister. GALA exhibited as a group and as individuals, and these artists became models for the younger generation of artists, who grew up in Miami, having come as children or adolescents. The GALA generation is now known as *La Vieja Guardia* (The Old Guard) and, while these artists dealt with the subject of exile and identity at different times in their work, their concerns are not the expression of a divided identity: they continue to be Cubans who have spent decades of their lives in the United States as exiles. Their acculturation has been a matter of language and choice, but their view of their Cuban selves is firmly fixed in a manner that it cannot be for the members of the one-and-a-half generation.

Identity is a significant issue for most Cuban-American artists who came to this country as children or adolescents. Thus, whereas for Baruj Salinas, for example, the expression of identity is part of a much larger *corpus* of artistic interests and concerns, for the other artists included here, the search for a Cuban-American identity, within the context of exile, can be a more pressing concern. As the members of the one-and-a-half generation have matured in the United States, their concern with their exile experience, ongoing acculturation, and hyphenated identities has been expressed in their work in diverse ways. In their interviews, these individual perspectives on exile and identity are expressed, often with divergent opinions and manifestations. As these artists address their identity, they repeatedly return to technical and artistic matters because they are artists first and foremost and their *métier* is always uppermost in their minds. As artists, their perspective is personal and individual and changing, because the identity of visual artists is highly changeable and fluid. Thus, the interviews with the artists reveal multiple levels of negotiating identities, as artists, social observers, transmitters of experience, translators of hyphenated identity, and reflectors of the experiences of specific generations of Cuban-born artists who have spent the greater part of their lives in the United States. Their contribution to this book must be taken on their own terms as artists and as exiled Cuban Americans.

## IDENTITIES

BARUJ SALINAS

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*Baruj Salinas was born in Havana, on July 6, 1935, immigrated in 1959 to San Antonio, TX, and holds a BA in Architecture from Kent State University. He eventually settled in Miami in 1961, where he stayed until 1974, when he left for Spain. He returned to Miami in 1993, where he still resides. Salinas began exhibiting in Miami immediately on his arrival in 1961 and cofounded the Grupo GALA, which included: Enrique Riverón, Rafael Soriano, José Mijares, Osvaldo Gutiérrez, and Roxana McAllister (b. Argentina, emigrated from Cuba to Miami with the first wave of exiles). His awards include: Best Transparent Watercolor, Texas Watercolor Society, San Antonio, Texas (1964); First prize, watercolor, 10th Horrt Memorial Exhibition, Fort Lauderdale, Florida (1968); Special Mention, VII Grand Prix International de Peinture, Cannes, France (1971); and First Prize, VI Latin American Print Biennial, Puerto Rican Culture Institute, San Juan, PR (1983).*

*Salinas's painterly style is abstract with topical references to his Jewish identity and interests in spirituality (Eastern and Western) and metaphysics. Topical references to his Cuban identity recur in his paintings of leaves, or pencas, of Cuba's characteristic royal palm trees. In addition to his paintings, Salinas has illustrated books and created prints.*

*Selected Collections: Villafames Museum, Spain; Carrillo Gil Museum, Mexico; Fine Arts Museum, Budapest, Hungary; Beit Uri Museum, Israel.*

## INTERVIEW

*Conducted by Lynette M. F. Bosch*

[Bosch] “Let me begin by asking Baruj about his origins in Cuba, his career as an artist, the general artistic scene in Cuba, and the reasons why he made the choices he made in terms of the style that became his. Baruj, can you tell us about how you began studying art?”

[Salinas] “I am going to start way before, when my family came from Turkey to Cuba. They emigrated from Turkey around 1918. They first went to Marseilles—stayed a short time there, a few months—and then landed in Cuba around 1920. My mother loved art. She painted, she

did blouses with oil paints. I watched her paint and I loved the smell of the paint, the colors, so little by little, beginning when I was around six, I started helping her to paint—she usually painted flowers. So I did that and then, because I loved drawing, I started doing the comic strips from the Saturday and Sunday newspapers: *El País*.”

[Bosch] “So you copied and then you elaborated?”

[Salinas] “Yes, I had a bunch of notebooks filled with Tarzan, Mandrake el Mago, Dick Tracy, and Superman, which unfortunately remained in Cuba—I don’t even know where. And when I was maybe eleven, I started painting Cuban landscapes with my mother’s oils—at that time there were no acrylics, although we did have watercolors. . . . And I started exhibiting at school. . . . Then, little by little, I started doing typical scenes of Cuban society. Most of them I put on paper or on canvas, but I mostly did black people. I had a friend that asked me ‘Hey, what’s the matter with you? Aren’t there any white people in Cuba?’ So I started doing them as well. . . .”

[Bosch] “What kinds of subjects did you do?”

[Salinas] “There was a black man that used to come around the neighborhood with a box—a tin box—full of ice and fish. He sold fish. And there was the ice cream man, kids in buses. Then I switched to market scenes; I did many typical markets. I used to go around in a *tranvía* (street car) or in a bus, and I would go to these markets, sketch them, and then paint them at home. I didn’t have a studio at that time; I painted in my bedroom.”

[Bosch] “How big were these works?”

[Salinas] “The biggest work that I did maybe was 30" × 40". I remember a market scene that I did that was about 30" × 40", and all in oils. I don’t know where the painting is now, unfortunately. I would love to be able to compare notes with what I did with what I’m doing now. There’s always a fine line that connects all these works. If you get down to it you find a trajectory. And you being a scholar would know how to connect the points. So I started going into the *Círculo de Bellas Artes* that was in Calle Industria, behind the *Capitolio Nacional*. I was maybe fourteen, fifteen; I was the youngest artist there, among all these older painters. . . .”

[Bosch] “. . . and you were self-taught?”

[Salinas] “. . . absolutely.”

[Bosch] “. . . and they were probably trained somewhere and there you were, obviously, with the in-crowd.”

[Salinas] “Yes. And then my mother told me that she wanted me to study. So she took me to Sara Martínez Maresma’s studio and she saw what I was doing and said: ‘No, let him develop by himself, don’t constrain him with academia or anything like that, let him develop by him-

self. And so I never formally studied. I kept on painting. Then I received a scholarship to study painting at Kent State University. Once I got there, and after maybe three months, I decided that perhaps, coming from a family with no means and poor, art was not for me. So I switched to architecture, but I kept on painting on the side, I never stopped.”

[Bosch] “What were you painting at that time? Because when you came to the United States as a student obviously all of a sudden there was a whole new world for you.”

[Salinas] “I was doing landscapes, American scenes and also, to help my income, I did portraits. I did portraits of my friends and their parents or whatever. But I never liked doing portraits. They were very realistic, because people love to see themselves, and in a much better light than they really are.”

[Bosch] “So they were flattering, idealized portraits.”

[Salinas] “I remember that Juan González, who lived one block away, used to do the same thing, and I remember him telling me once that there was this old lady that wanted to have a portrait done looking like Raquel Welch, so he did it.”

[Bosch] “There you are, pay me, I’ll do it. That’s fabulous.”

[Salinas] “That tells you about human nature.”

[Bosch] “But you were doing your own painting besides these portraits for hire.”

[Salinas] “Yes. Now, having studied architecture, my natural inclination was to go through the influence of what I had studied—facades, buildings. But little by little I transformed the facades from something realistic to something more abstract. They were invented, although at the beginning they were from American buildings, and mixed in style—Classical, Renaissance, or contemporary.

[Bosch] “I can see why architecture would take you to abstraction because of the 3-D conceptual part of it.”

[Salinas] “Exactly. But, at the same time, while living in San Antonio and working as an architect, I started showing at the Witte Museum. I won a few prizes and began to steer away from architecture. I felt constrained by the straight line, the rigidity of architecture. So I started developing a different line of work, and my evolution has always been slow. Sometimes it came spontaneously and sometimes I nudged it a little bit; I forced the evolution. This happens to all artists because we get tired, bored. I started doing works related to space conquest. I followed Apollo XIII, the moon walk, and all that. I got interested in astronomy and read a few books by Fred Hoyle, the great British astronomer and then I started painting totally abstract space . . . constellations, nebula, anything that dealt with outer space.”



[Bosch] “Suggestive of form but not graphically descriptive in terms of the actual visual presentation of the thematic content.”

[Salinas] “Exactly, the color and maybe a little bit of the structure, but the structure was loose, it was not architectural. That was my main subject matter throughout the ’70s until I went to live in Barcelona. In Barcelona, the quality of light, the architecture, the influence of other artists such as Antoni Tàpies and even Joan Miró—although Miró’s work has not much to do with my own . . .”

[Bosch] “. . . but indirectly just absorbing the idea that you could branch out in all of these different ways. That there was no set pattern . . .”

[Salinas] “. . . not, not at all. Then, my paintings started changing. The palette got grayer, the colors got lesser. Because of my connection and collaboration with poets and writers such as María Zambrano, José Angel Valente, Pere Gimferrer, and Michel Butor, I developed a concept of the language of the clouds. This consisted basically of a gray background with white as the main color of my palette—the white symbolizing clouds. I also used pictograms, ideograms, and strange alphabets like the Greek alphabet, the Hebrew alphabet, and the Iberian alphabet.”

[Bosch] “Words and pictures began to come together but in an abstract way. Not at all narrative.”

[Salinas] “With white as the main color. This was brought about by a conversation with my good friend, María Zambrano. I would visit her, and I would listen to her talk—because she monologued, I never had a chance to dialogue with her. Then one day she tells me—and she wrote about it—‘I see you as white.’ So the white became my main color, and in most of the work I did in Barcelona white is the vital element.”

[Bosch] “How do you respond to it? When you use it, when you manipulate it, what is it that comes out?”

[Salinas] “I don’t know . . . the idea of purity, the idea of cleanliness, . . .”

[Bosch] “. . . and as a color, when you add the others, is the white the background, the accent, the highlight, for you?”

[Salinas] “That is a good question because lately I have been using it as background. But while I was living in Barcelona, I was using it as the subject. The Chinese and the Japanese use black for their pictograms and ideograms and I used white instead of black, in a negative way.”

[Bosch] “It really was your accent and your form and the subject.”

[Salinas] “I developed a white calligraphy in broad forms. I did that for maybe ten, twelve years and then I came back to Miami in 1992, and color started creeping up in my work again. It had to do with the light. The quality of the light here is different than what we have in Spain. The light in Barcelona is sort of rosy and because of the gray architecture, the contrast is strange. That, I’m sure, influences Spanish artists and it did

influence me very much. So I started doing paintings that related more to earth even though I still kept clouds as sort of a mainstay in my work. Lately I've been doing something I call 'Sun flares.' And the flares can be white, instead of red or orange or yellow. So white is again becoming the mainstay of my painting. One thing that I would like to insert about this trip that I have done with my work is the work that I've done with Masafumi Yamamoto—the Master printer with whom I worked some fifteen years in Barcelona. I did all my etchings and lithographs with him in his atelier. I would spend half of my day there and—it's funny because doing an etching like *Fuji-San* would take me three weeks and in that time I could have done five paintings. It is a very slow process, very involved . . .”

[Bosch] “It is a significant investment of time and energy, collaborative.”

[Salinas] “A lot, yes.”

[Bosch] “You don't always have the last word because you have to take the medium into consideration and the other person with whom you are working, and so it becomes much more involved.”

[Salinas] “Not only that, there was a time when I would be influenced by what I was doing in my etching work, so the painting took from the etching and that developed in a different direction. So much so that a friend of mine, a poet, told me that I was becoming 'yamamotized.' . . . There's no question that my work with him influenced me but at the same time I influenced him.”

[Bosch] “It's the back-and-forth.”

[Salinas] “It was a dialogue, a real dialogue. I was fortunate enough to be able to do a book, called *Trois enfants dans la fournaise*, with Michel Butor. He told me that I should do the etchings first and then he did the texts—which are very poetic—afterward. That book came out in 1988 and was shown in the Museum of Bayeux in France with a number of other artists that had been collaborating with him. We still correspond—he is an older man now, but a real swell guy. And my collaboration with José Angel Valente and María Zambrano I treasure. The work that I did with Valente, *Tres lecciones tinieblas*, had to do with the Kabala and fourteen Hebrew letters and his poetic interpretation of each letter. Like the letter 'aleph'—which is the beginning—he calls it the 'first blood.' And the letter 'beth'—which is the 'b' in our alphabet—means 'house,' *morada*, dwelling, a place to be. The book is very beautiful and won the National Prize of poetry in Spain in 1980. And with María Zambrano I've done two books, *Antes de la ocultación: los mares* with four lithographs. In these lithographs I incorporated texture, so it was a double process: first the lithograph and then the texture.”

[Bosch] “You're very unusual in all of these collaborations because the idea that one has of artists is that they work alone and then they bring

out what they've made. But clearly, you're fairly unique in that you keep jumping into these group projects where you're working cross-culturally in some ways but also in an interdisciplinary manner in other ways because you're collaborating with writers and with poets."

[Salinas] "It enriched me a lot and I miss it. After I moved to Miami, I haven't collaborated much because there are no etching ateliers in Miami. There's one that a young fellow by the name of Joaquin González has opened up, but it's very . . ."

[Bosch] ". . . modest in scale? And you need something larger . . ."

[Salinas] ". . . yeah, because it has a small tórculo, a small press . . . And also, I don't have the interaction with poets and writers. Barcelona is another story. It's a very cultural city, a city that is vital."

[Bosch] "It has a history with layers from the very beginning through the medieval age, the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Art Nouveau, it's all there."

[Salinas] "Yeah, we have two bookstores in Miami: La Universal and La Moderna Poesía. Over there, you walk three steps and you find a bookstore."

[Bosch] "Oh, the antiquarian bookshops also, I mean, the things that you could find if you're interested in the concept of book and what's in them. It's a major center. Now, while you're following this sort of trajectory in your own work at the same time you're looking around at other artistic productions, how are you situating yourself with the development of twentieth-century art? Were you conscious of it? Were you thinking that you formed part of something? Or were you thinking of yourself as 'I'm something different, on the side, kind of getting along. Every so often I touch base with something'?"

[Salinas] "That second point. I strive to find a language that people can recognize in me by the work and not by my signature. And yes, I received a lot of influences from the different artists with whom I had contact in Barcelona . . ."

[Bosch] "Who were you especially looking at or having contact with?"

[Salinas] "There is a guy by the name of Albert Rafols Casamada—very abstract—in the manner of Diebenkorn here in the U.S. He definitely influenced me, although his work is much more colorful than mine was at the time when I was living in Barcelona. But it attracted me because deep down I knew that I am a colorist and therefore this is really what I want to do. Also Tàpies because of the strength of his work and the power that you encounter with all the texture, all the effects that he has. . . ."

[Bosch] ". . . so those were your touch points for what was happening."

[Salinas] "Yes, but, at the same time, I was trying to do my own thing."

[Bosch] “Obviously, the big thing in terms of the discussion that we’re having has to do with identity, so your identity as an artist is going to be one of the things you’re going to be going for, but I’m struck by the facts that you’re traveling around to all of these places: you’re living in the United States, you’re living in Barcelona . . .”

[Salinas] “. . . and Mexico.”

[Bosch] “. . . and you’re Cuban. So, how Cuban were you in all of these places?”

[Salinas] “I don’t know. You see, that is what I’ve been told by other artists. They tell me, ‘In Cuba most people paint figuratively.’ But that’s not totally true because I can recollect that the members of El Grupo de los Once were all abstract . . . Hugo Consuegra for example. Some were geometrical, like Raúl Martínez. Still, somehow the Cuban psyche connects better with the figurative work.”

[Bosch] “You are thinking of Carlos Enríquez.”

[Salinas] “Victor Manuel, Portocarrero. . . . But we tend to generalize: that also has to do with the human condition.”

[Bosch] “So, the question is, How Cuban was your art, since you weren’t painting the palm trees with the *bobío*, the *campesino* . . . ?”

[Salinas] “Let’s get back to when I moved back to Miami and started doing a series I called, ‘Penca de palma triste.’ In a way it dealt with the situation that our country was living at the moment and is still living. It was a political commentary because the palm tree is . . .”

[Bosch] “. . . the symbol of the quintessential Cuban plant.”

[Salinas] “So it has been said for a long time. I didn’t do the whole palm tree but the branch—*la penca*.”

[Bosch] “A piece of it which is very interesting considering the disjunction of exile: you’re just a piece of Cuba, so you just need one piece of the palm tree.”

[Salinas] “Even more, it gave me the chance to project my abstract sense of painting into the work because even though you could see the *penca*—you could also see maybe a waterfall. It could be the tail of a very exotic bird. . . . The interpretation falls in the hands of the observer.”

[Bosch] “In Barcelona, how did you feel? Some Cubans go to Spain and say, ‘Oh, I’m home again. This is so familiar, it’s such a familiar culture.’ But other Cubans go to Spain and they think, ‘Whoa, these people really are foreigners!’ ”

[Salinas] “They really are different!”

[Bosch] “Were you more Cuban in Spain than in the United States, for instance?”

[Salinas] “Definitely. The first two years were very hard for me because the people over there react differently to different situations. I

remember that once I was in a bus and I was sitting down and this old lady came inside the bus and I offered her my seat. And she just looked at me and didn't say anything, didn't move. And I thought, *This is a strange reaction to a nice courtesy*. Another time some old lady dropped something on a corner and I was standing next to her and I picked it up and gave it to her and she didn't even look at me either. And I was really flabbergasted."

[Bosch] "I find that when I speak with some Cuban Americans, they say 'When we're in the United States, we're more American, but when we go Spain, we're more Cuban all of a sudden, because of the shock of what should be the same but isn't.'"

[Salinas] "You'd think the language would unite us more and it doesn't."

[Bosch] "And yet there are people who feel very much at home in Spain so it is such an individual jump, but for you it wasn't. Now you're Jewish too . . . so now you're Jewish in Spain, the country that threw Jews out. How was that for you?"

[Salinas] "In Barcelona that's an interesting situation because the Catalans feel that they are different from the rest of the Spaniards, and they call themselves the Jews of Spain. And it's because they are more into culture, more into working; they are the real producers of industry and other stuffs in Spain. In that respect some of my Catalan friends would tell me: 'I'm not going to Madrid until they require a passport from me.' There's this . . ."

[Bosch] ". . . separatist mentality—I think it is still very much there. Recently they're starting to refuse to speak Spanish; they want to just speak Catalan."

[Salinas] "That's affecting their perception of universalism because they always talked about '*el catalan universal*' . . . Many intellectuals that speak Spanish and were living in Barcelona are leaving. And if you go to study at the University you have to really learn your Catalan because otherwise you won't be able to survive."

[Bosch] "So, if you think about your life, you have kept moving. And if you think about the history of the Jews, they keep moving. Is this part of your experience of 'I'm a Jew, I move?'"

[Salinas] "Yes. I move and I adapt. But the Catalans reject this type of adaptation and it's hurting them. After all they are only, what? six million? It's a small number in the context of the whole country."

[Bosch] "But if you think about it, how many Cubans came to Miami and refused to adapt to the United States?"

[Salinas] "I know old men who haven't been able to learn one word of English and they don't want to. Which I think is sad."

[Bosch] “So it’s that closing off again of the world.”

[Salinas] “And many Americans that were living in Miami moved. They didn’t want to dealing with the new situation. Many have gone into Broward County, to Fort Lauderdale.”

[Bosch] “Because again, it’s that intransigence that doesn’t allow for that opening up and deal with the global situation. Now, let’s head to the Diaspora and the situation while that was happening. Obviously, the idea of exile is something that everybody came here with. So this was a Cuban exiled community. It wasn’t a bunch of Cuban Americans because there’s been a big shift in terms of how Cubans identify. I can remember coming—I was eight years old when I came in ’61—as a refugee. And then there was the period where you were an exile. And then there was the idea that ‘We’re not going back, we better adapt’ and so the adaptation process began. And then suddenly we were Cuban Americans. So how did you go through this and what were things like for the artistic community when you first arrived?”

[Salinas] “When we started exhibiting as a group, Grupo GALA with Enrique Riverón, José Mijares, Osvaldo Gutiérrez, Rafael Soriano, Rosana McAllister (who was Argentinian, but we adopted her). She told me once that she was Cuban, because she lived in Cuba and had to leave when Castro came. So she considered herself part Cuban. But that’s why the Grupo GALA means Grupo de Artistas Latino-Americanos—because of her. Otherwise, it would have been Grupo de Artistas Cubanos. But being that Rosana was Argentinian, we broadened it. And we started looking for places to exhibit and the first place was Bacardí. At the time they had a gallery on the first floor of their building. I remember that Gloria Luria had a nice gallery in North Miami and she gave us an exhibition because we were gaining a reputation as a group and individually, because we kept exhibiting individually and as a group every once in a while. But, as a group there were conflicts—clashes of personalities. Mijares always introduced an obstacle, to do things, to move on . . . We used to meet at Riverón’s home maybe once every two weeks, sometimes once a month.”

[Bosch] “. . . to plan the exhibition.”

[Salinas] “Yes, and just to chat and exchange ideas and see what we were doing.”

[Bosch] “How did you survive financially? Because at that point it is not as if Cubans had a ton of money to spend on art and you guys didn’t have much money, so how did you manage to get money for materials and sell work?”

[Salinas] “I worked as an architect—painting was a sideline—but it wasn’t what I loved to do. Until I got the Cintas Fellowship for the

second time in 1970 (the first time was in 1969) and I decided to quit architecture and devote all my time to painting. And it's worked out. To me, painting is not work. It is something that transcends labor. I love to be in my studio painting because I forget about everything else. I'm so concentrated on it that it is like a meditation. I concentrate on what I'm doing and I enjoy it while I'm doing it. I enjoy seeing a wide space being developed into something that has life. It's always been the most important thing in my life. And architecture was never so."

[Bosch] "Architecture was the means to the end of being able to paint and because you had the skill and there was no money you practiced that until you could take off."

[Salinas] "But remember that I had started by studying painting . . ."

[Bosch] "Right, but you were in a manner of speaking already established in the United States because you had been exhibiting here. You weren't exactly new to the American system, you understood already how things worked in the art world in the United States . . ."

[Salinas] "I had lived in San Antonio for two years, yes, and in Mexico."

[Bosch] ". . . and you were educated here in a manner of speaking, so you had a kind of advantage that some of the other artists who arrived and did not speak English, for instance, did not have. But still, it couldn't have been easy."

[Salinas] "No, it was never easy. I remember in 1963, '64, I was selling paintings for twenty-five dollars."

[Bosch] "And of course people had a hard time paying you those twenty-five dollars. "

[Salinas] "And they were buying it on time. Five dollars a week, or five dollars a month, that's right."

[Bosch] "Were these people the same who bought art in Cuba and had left collections behind or people who began to do this here?"

[Salinas] "Both. There were a lot of people who had collected in Cuba and they wanted to re-create their collections; they had left good stuff in Cuba. I have a friend who left Portocarreros, Amelia Peláez, stuff like that. My cousin, Chalon Rodríguez Salinas, left a whole collection in Camagiüey where he lived."

[Bosch] "So they started going after artists that they had already owned, trying to build up collections again and then . . ."

[Salinas] ". . . substitute, yes."

[Bosch] "Can you think of anyone in particular who provided important pieces to the art world in Miami?"

[Salinas] "José Manuel Martínez Cañas for sure. Mario Amiguet, Frank Mestre . . . There weren't too many."

[Bosch] “No, I understand that there weren’t crowds. So mostly you were selling a painting here and there to people who you never saw again. And who then have disappeared with their Salinases, not knowing what they have.”

[Salinas] “And now some of these paintings are appearing on the internet. A friend of mine who lives in Orlando calls me every once in a while and says, ‘Hey, there’s a painting of yours—is that yours for sure?’ And then he tells me where to go to look at it and I look at it and every time that I have looked it’s been mine, yeah. So I’m talking about paintings from 1963, ’64, ’65. It’s like encountering old friends.”

[Bosch] “At that point then what you really had was this scene where these people were on the one hand desperate for culture and for reestablishing cultural patterns and on the other hand absolutely no money with which to do it.”

[Salinas] “It was a tough situation.”

[Bosch] “When did it get easier? When can you think of that you said ‘Okay, whew, the worse is over!’ ”

[Salinas] “For me, it was in the ’70s. And then I moved to Barcelona in 1974. I was lucky because I remember in Madrid I met Juana Mordó who was the dean of the art dealers in Spain at the time and she loved my work; she kept some of it; she sold some of it; and she put me in touch with people in Barcelona—that’s where I finally landed—and then somehow things worked out because . . . I didn’t know anybody there but Juana Mordó introduced me to many people, that’s how I started developing a network.”

[Bosch] “One of the things that comes in throughout your career is a kind of mystical, metaphysical aspect to your work. Talk a little bit about that.”

[Salinas] “I think it has to do with my Jewishness and what I learned in my home—the spirituality of my mother and my grandmother. At one time I remember a doctor friend of mine telling me that I was—he kept looking at my work, he collected my work and he was not a psychiatrist but in this way brought out some of the psychology of a humanist—antisocial.”

[Bosch] “Oh my God, you of all people!”

[Salinas] “Yeah, because there were no people in my paintings. He says, ‘Rarely do you put a person in a painting,’ and it’s true. So perhaps I always had this latent feeling of abstraction toward painting and I don’t know exactly where it came from—I gather it has to do with my Jewishness.”

[Bosch] “The Jewish mysticism, even the Kabala, pierces through the letters, opening up other realms; you go through the material form into the spiritual world. So you think that plays . . .”



[Salinas] “I believe so, although I couldn’t really pinpoint it. There’s no ‘a,’ ‘b,’ ‘c,’ ‘d’ that I can really point to in my progression in painting and the way I visualize art.”

[Bosch] “Abstraction for you, then, is an internal process as opposed to the art world abstract expressionism controlled by Clement Greenberg saying that everything has to be . . .”

[Salinas] “Harold Rosenberg, yes.”

[Bosch] “That crowd coincidentally were doing that in the twentieth century, but you are doing something completely different that is then linked to your identity as a Jew, connecting to the mystical side of Judaism, and you’re not really part of that even. So, someone comes to your work and say, ‘Oh, yes, abstract expressionism.’”

[Salinas] “There is a connection, yes, but my way was different. The path was different.”

[Bosch] “. . . even though it comes out at the same place. When you work on subjects, can you think in terms of thematic material that responds to the Jewish in terms of the way that ‘La penca’ responds to being Cuban.”

[Salinas] “I did many paintings based on the Hebrew alphabet, but I stayed away from doing the typical Jewish scenes . . .”

[Bosch] “Is it difficult to negotiate and navigate the idea of being Cuban, Jewish, American, and of having lived in Spain for a while, or is it just natural—a part of a flow of a continuum of things you are and respond to and relate to?”

[Salinas] “Natural, yes. I think that it comes natural and very spontaneously and I don’t perceive myself as one thing or another. Even though, when somebody asks me ‘What are you?’ I say, ‘I’m a Cuban painter’ even though I’m Cuban American. I always place myself in the position of a Cuban painter. And while living in Spain I remember that I had discussions with artists and poets and the intelligentsia, and most of them were leftists or communists . . .”

[Bosch] “Sure, because that was the intellectual fashion at the time.”

[Salinas] “Right away they’d place me in the band of the *gusanos*, and I had great arguments with these people. Most of them had never been in Cuba; they only had read about what was happening but they still sided with Castro against Americans and against the Cuban exiles. So it was not easy.”

[Bosch] “No, I can imagine that it wouldn’t have been easy. One of the questions that I’m going to ask you—that people always ask me and most of the time I just stare at them—is: ‘How would you identify as Cuban in your work other than the obvious, such as ‘La Penca’? Is there anything intrinsically Cuban in what you do?’”

[Salinas] “I don’t think so because I developed in the U.S. I developed with the abstract expressionist movement, with Willem DeKooning, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko . . .”

[Bosch] “And they form also part of the larger European movement, which I think is important to keep in mind.”

[Salinas] “Yeah, the U.S. art scene was enriched when the Second World War started and Max Earnst and André Breton, and even Lam came back from Paris . . .”

[Bosch] “People like Duchamp—all these waves of Europeans coming to the United States.”

[Salinas] “Dada, exactly.”

[Bosch] “You’re connecting to that also.”

[Salinas] “I definitely think so, yes. Not perhaps directly but indirectly.”

[Bosch] “Indirectly, you formed part of this global movement. And of course other Latin American artists with whom you are also familiar are also part of that continuum. And this brings us to a close. Thank you.”

August 16, 2005

*Interviewed in the artist’s home, filmed by Norma Gracia, transcribed by Paul Symington, and edited by Jorge J. E. Gracia.*