

Introduction

Life Streams: The Cuban and American Art of Alberto Rey

LYNETTE M. F. BOSCH

This book is a collaborative project intended to provide an overview of the life and artistic career of Alberto Rey, a Distinguished Professor at the State University of New York at Fredonia. The catalyst for this volume is a projected exhibition of Rey's work at the Burchfield Penney Center for the Arts in Buffalo, New York, titled *Biological Regionalism: Scajaquada Creek, Erie County, New York, USA* scheduled for March 14–June 22, 2014. The art historians and curators contributing chapter essays to this volume are an interdisciplinary group composed of the book's editors, Lynette M. F. Bosch (State University of New York, Geneseo, Department of Art History)

and Mark Denaci (St. Lawrence University, Department of Art and Art History), along with contributors Jorge Gracia (Samuel P. Capen Chair, SUNY Distinguished Professor, University of Buffalo, Department of Philosophy and Department of Comparative Literature), Isabel Alvarez Borland (Murray Professor in the Arts and Humanities, College of the Holy Cross, Spanish Department), John Orlock (Samuel and Virginia C. Knight Professor of Humanities, Case Western Reserve University, English Department), Sandra Firmin (Curator, University of Buffalo Gallery), and Benjamin Hickey (Curator of Collections and Exhibitions, Masur Museum). Each of the essays in

this volume reflects an aspect of artistic, literary, critical, or historical theory that addresses aspects of the complex artistic trajectory that Alberto Rey has traveled in his life and career.

Rey's work includes painting, sculpture, video, and installation, and is currently focused on exploring issues of ecological sustainability through imagery related to fish and fishing and the waterways in which fish live. Throughout his career, Rey has focused on giving visual form to his concerns with identity and identities, an aspect of his work that springs from his hyphenated identity as a Cuban-born American. Rey is an indefatigable traveler, who has extensively explored the United States, Cuba, Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Iceland, searching for ways in which he can relate the individual human experience to the larger universal life of our world. As an artist whose work is part of major national and international museums and collections (Brooklyn Museum, Albright-Knox Gallery, Bronx Museum, Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, Extremaduran and Latin American Museum of Contemporary Art, Badajoz Spain, and the Burchfield Penney Art Center, among others), Rey has achieved a significant level of recognition

in the world of contemporary art. The exhibition at the Burchfield Penney Art Center is a meaningful opportunity for Rey to bring his work to his home community. Rey's paintings are of fish and landscapes that function as symbols and metaphors for the people he has met and the places in which he has lived. The allegorical possibilities thus created by this network of associations opens a space for the spectator to engage with Rey and with the cultural environments represented in his work.

Rey is an artist, a husband, father, son, brother, and active community activist and conservationist, with strong memories of his late sister, and his home is in Fredonia in Western New York State. He is also a transnational Cubanborn American, who has lived his life in the United States on the hyphen of two identities. Brought out of Cuba at the age of three, Rey went, with his parents and sister, first to Mexico, then Miami, then Barnesboro, Pennsylvania, before settling in Fredonia, in 1989, to become a professor of drawing and painting. Cultural diversity is part of his identity, and a personal search for meaning has generated his desire to know and understand different people and cultures. This desire stems from his identifi-

cation with different groups and cultures, from his Cuban origins to his present life in Western New York State.

In Cuba, Rey's family belonged to a self-identified group of Cuban *criollos*, who had settled in the small, rural town of Agramonte, where they owned a small farm that they worked on themselves. They were a diverse family of mixed ethnic roots, who considered their home culture beyond Cuba to be Spain, because most of the family had come from Spain, with a few coming to Cuba from the Canary Islands. Consistently, Rey's family on all sides had always lived in small, rural villages. As a result, the family had practical skills that assisted them in surviving and adapting in Cuba and in the United States. Always, Rey's family worked hard in both countries at a range of manual jobs, from farming and small manufacture to small business, along with hunting and fishing as pastimes and to supplement their diet. Rey's father, who had an exceptional talent for mathematics, earned a PhD in education at the University of Havana, which enabled him to retrain in the United States as a teacher of Spanish. The family settled in Barnesboro, Pennsylvania, and slowly rebuilt their lives to the same modest level of

comfort they had in Cuba, and with the same practical skills. Rey's current life has combined aspects of his family's history. He is a professor of art and a professional artist, the first in his family, and he lives in the small, rural town of Fredonia, where he continues to fish (although he releases his catch), as part of the set of skills that his family traditionally possessed. As a result of his experiences of assimilating from a mulatto Cuban culture into a mainstream American culture in Barnesboro, Rey's initial problematic encounters with early discrimination taught him to accept difference in himself and others. He also learned how to relate to different cultures, being neither fully Cuban nor fully American or even Cuban American, as he lacked a Latino community, while growing up in Barnesboro. Presently, Rey has achieved a level of comfort with international culture that enables him to connect to different groups at every level of society that he meets as he travels for his work. The desire to extend his understanding of people and cultures that he learned from his personal experience of being outside both his home cultures has brought him, after a long trajectory, to the study of fish and their worlds. The path that led Rey to this juncture of his

life started, in 2000, with a series titled *Trout Encounters* and two other series, *Biological Regionalism* and *The Aesthetics of Death*. The series were a way for Rey to address recent changes and losses in his life by connecting his life to the natural environments we share with the animals living alongside us. It is *Biological Regionalism* that is the focus of the Burchfield Penney Art Center exhibition.

For Rey, trout have become a symbol of a variety of personal and global issues. For the directorial staff of the Burchfield Penney Art Center, and for the artist and the authors of this book, one major goal of this exhibition and book is to communicate Rey's intentions so that all can understand the meaning of his images. A secondary goal is to enable the spectator of this exhibition and the reader of this book to relate their own life experience and personal concerns about our place in the natural world to the images Rey has created. Part of Rey's intention is to provide a communicative structure in which participant spectators can increase their understanding of their lives by looking at Rey's work. Hence, a meditative dimension is intended to bridge the solipsistic gap that separates us from one another by providing a link through his images.

Another part of Rey's desired outcome is that, by seeing the streams, countries, and the biodiversity of trout, the active spectator can have a direct experience of nature akin to that which was Rey's catalyst for this series. Through Rey's paintings, this exhibition, and this book, engaged spectators can learn about environments they might not otherwise see, and participate in experiences of nature they might otherwise miss.

One goal of this book, in conjunction with Rey's past, current, and future exhibitions, is the establishment of a renewed understanding of American cultural and environmental diversity in relation to the global; Rey's desire is to connect specific manifestations of these aspects of human experience to the universal whole. The authors of this book have written a series of essays that trace Rey's trajectory so that his process and his artistic intentions can be transmitted. Each of the essays forming the book's chapters was selected to contextualize a different and individual aspect of Rey's art and life, with the goal of presenting a unified and cohesive explanation of Rey's work.

The first essay in this volume is Lynette Bosch's "Alberto Rey: Intersections," which provides a biographical overview

of Rey's life, his artistic concerns, and the different stages of his artistic career. The essay presents Rey as an artist who connects his experience, observations, and research to the works of art that he creates. Initially and primarily a painter, Rey's artistic repertoire expanded as he explored different subjects and concerns, and Bosch's essay traces how the changes in his artistic expression respond to the events of Rey's life.

Jorge Gracia's essay, "The Construction of Identity in Art: Alberto Rey's Journey," specifically addresses, from a philosophical perspective, the formation and definition of identity—national, cultural, individual, or familial—in all of the aspects conveyed by the word *identity*. Gracia focuses on discussing the balance that hyphenated identity requires of an individual who moves between two cultures as he describes how Rey has fused the different aspects of his identity into a cohesive body of work. Drawing from philosophy, critical theory, and personal experience as a Cuban-born American, Gracia addresses the subject of identity from a scholarly, yet personal, perspective, producing an essay that is layered with interpretive possibilities for individual works by Rey. As a scholar of philoso-

phy, Gracia employs authors as diverse as St. Augustine and David Hume to explicate the process of being and becoming that is intrinsic to the definition of self.

Isabel Alvarez Borland brings her experience as a scholar of literature and specifically of Cuban American literature to bear on her exploration of meaning for Alberto Rey's works in her "Alberto Rey's *Balsas* Series in the Cuban American Imagination." Alvarez Borland's essay follows a chronological and thematic progression as she relates Rey's work to that of other Cuban American writers and artists, thus contextualizing Rey within his peer group of Cuban Americans who employ art (literary and pictorial) to address and communicate their experience as bicultural Americans and transnationals. The essay focuses on the iconic use of rafts as metaphorical vehicles for escape, transition, travel, exile, immigration, danger, and expectation. For Cuban Americans, as for other groups (Haitians, Laotians, Vietnamese), for whom rafts or *balsas* represented escape and a new life, images or descriptions of rafts and voyages on rafts resonate as a major cultural markers of their Cuban identity. But Alvarez Borland's essay does not confine itself to Rey's *Balsas* series, as she addresses

the symbolic, metaphorical and allegorical aspects of each of Rey's progressive groups of works that trace his patterns of thought. Thus, from an interdisciplinary perspective, Alvarez Borland addresses Rey's artistic trajectory, employing a variety of critical approaches.

Mark Denaci's essay, "Absent Presences and the Living Dead: Alberto Rey's Haunted Aesthetics," contextualizes Rey within the history of aesthetics and art criticism as he analyzes Rey's visual strategies for creating meaning in his images. Denaci places Rey within the parameters of debates about art and representation in which Clement Greenberg, the critic who arguably reinvented painting, and Martin Heidegger, the controversial philosopher who attempted to redefine art itself, play crucial roles. Greenberg's questioning of the validity of thematic subject-oriented painting is well known, and Denaci's analysis of how Rey comments on, subverts, and moves beyond Greenberg's strictures provides an understanding of Rey's subtle engagement with issues of presence and absence in representing ideas and identities. Denaci's overview of Rey's response to these aesthetic debates begins with Rey's early series, which are directly about identity, and ends with Rey's cur-

rent concerns with environmental issues and mortality. Denaci's essay is a bridge for this book's first three chapters to the remaining text, which is more focused on Rey's interest in painting fish, a project that he began in 2000.

Lynette Bosch's "Trout as Form and Symbol" initiates a concentrated emphasis on Rey's three most recent series: *Trout Encounters*, *Biological Regionalism*, and *The Aesthetics of Death*. To provide an art historical context for Rey's work, Bosch gives an overview of landscape painting and the painting of fishing and angling that includes consideration of sixteenth-century scientific naturalism and continues to contemporary painters of fish, who are Rey's peer group. Bosch also provides an analysis of how Rey's recent artistic focus on fish is connected to his earlier series, making the argument that Rey's path to his current work is continuous and cohesive with his personal and artistic accomplishments. Bosch's essay segues into John Orlock's essay, which provides a very different approach to the subject of fish and the history of fishing from that taken by the other contributors to this book.

John Orlock's "Reading the Waters: Early Works of Influence on the Lit-

erature of Fly-Fishing” is an essay that does not seek to directly address Alberto Rey’s work, but which concludes with a “Postscript” from Rey that responds to Orlock’s evocative essay. Orlock begins his discussion of the cultural significance of the literature on fly-fishing in Classical antiquity and concludes with Ernest Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories and Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*. Sir Izaak Walton’s *The Compleat Angler* is central to Orlock’s discussion, as it is the single most important manual of fishing that exists. First published in 1653, *The Compleat Angler* was and is the summation of knowledge about how to fish and how to think about fishing. Orlock’s discussion emphasizes the philosophical and spiritual aspects of fishing and the role that these elements play in both the culture of fishing and its literature. Thus, even though Orlock’s essay is not about Rey’s work (because Rey has only rarely illustrated any literary work about fishing), Orlock provides a larger understanding of the nature of fishing and the literary contribution that helps us to understand why fishing became so important for Rey. Orlock also touches on concerns that parallel those of Rey in the areas of resources, changing attitudes

toward landscape, and environmental issues that are part of the literature of fishing. Therefore, this essay provides a window into the ideology of fishing that is the foundation for Rey’s personal and professional exploration of this human endeavor.

Following Orlock’s essay, Rey provides an “Artist’s Statement” that addresses the exhibition he has designed for the Burchfield Penney Art Center. In his *Biological Regionalism: Scajaquada Creek, Erie County, New York, USA*, Rey explains why he has focused on this particular body of water and what it means to him as a member of its community and as an artist. For Rey, the Scajaquada is part of a globally connected system of waterways close to his home. And in his “Artist’s Statement,” Rey communicates his artistic intentions, goals, and reasons for why his current work continues to follow the path on which he decided in 2000, when he began *Trout Encounters*.

Sandra Firmin’s “Time Submersion: A Portrait of Two Creeks” analyzes, describes, and interprets two of Rey’s exhibitions belonging to his *Biological Regionalism* series. Firmin’s concentration on *Biological Regionalism: Ellicott Creek, Amherst, New York, USA*, 2010 and

Biological Regionalism: Scajaquada Creek, Erie County, New York, USA, 2013 enables her to reach back to Classical literature, the literature of fishing, and the representational history of fishing contextualized within contemporary ecological concerns in a way that supplements previous considerations of these topics by this volume's other contributors. Firmin's goal is to meticulously examine Rey's working process from idea to display. In so doing, she explains how Rey researches each area and each part of his ongoing series so that he can become a part of the community and the environment he has chosen for his next investigative and artistic journey. Firmin's essay takes us directly into Rey's creative process and into the message he wishes to communicate to his audience.

Benjamin Hickey's "Alberto Rey: Beneath the Surface" focuses on Rey's project for the Masur Museum in Monroe, Louisiana. Hickey begins his essay by contextualizing the Louisiana project in connection with the exhibition *Biological Regionalism: Largemouth Bass, Ellicott Creek, Amherst, New York, USA* and the painting *Biological Regionalism: Brown Trout, Hosmer Creek, Hosmer, New York, USA*. The essay describes the Louisiana project, *Biological Regionalism:*

Bayou Desiard, Monroe, Louisiana, USA, from its inception to its enactment, and it traces Rey's research process from his asking for maps, objects of significant local resonance, books, and images of the area, to the many trips required for his personal exploration of the environment on which he will focus. Hickey also emphasizes Rey's scientific interests and his collaboration with local scientists and area organizations, populations, and research resources. Hence, Hickey's essay is a pragmatic portrait of how Rey enacts his work. Additionally, it contextualizes Rey's imagery within the ongoing dialectic of "high" and "low" art.

This thematic subject category, where species of fish connect Rey to universal realizations about our place in the cosmos, has been the focus of Rey's creative energy since 2000, when he began the series *Trout Encounters* as an extension of his interest and developing skill as an angler. *Trout Encounters* was also developed from Rey's desire to break out in new directions as an artist. For Rey, the representations of fish became a way whereby he could address the different stages of life and a new visual medium in which he could think and communicate his personal life experience. As someone who always felt

culturally “different” from others because he was Cuban in the United States, Rey has always been interested in cultural difference and the interaction between individuals and their environment. Because he grew up in Barnesboro, without either a Cuban American or a Latino group to ground him in his Hispanic identity, Rey learned to connect to the landscape around his home as a way of defining himself. Early hostile encounters, as he was learning English, that were the result of how he looked and his different ethnicity, led him to appreciate building bridges between different cultures. In painting fish, Rey transfers the skills he learned early into learning about a different cultural environment—the world of fish and their surroundings linked to the local cultures that share habitat with the fish he studies. By incorporating the differences between humans and fish into his work, Rey addresses communal identity through that which is shared—life and death and a world of survival and adaptation.

Because the lives of fish are short, precarious, and filled with danger, the vulnerability of these creatures brought Rey to confront his own mortality and that of his close family, affected by illness and death during the years when he began to paint

fish. *Trout Encounters* led to the current series *Biological Regionalism*, in which Rey records his observations of fish populations and their environments, as well as *The Aesthetics of Death*, which deals directly with evanescence and mortality. It is the *Biological Realism* series that provides the works for the Burchfield Penney exhibition. Through his renditions of fish and their environments, Rey addresses the spectator on a variety of subjects, such as personal identity, the trajectory of life, death’s proximity, the impact that our actions and behavior have on our environment, and how through the observation of one fish a universal connection to life’s significance can be understood.

In his work, Rey enables connections and meaning for the images he creates, which are, first and foremost, works of art of great aesthetic beauty, through his ability to represent the forms of the natural world he has come to know as an angler and fisherman. In Rey’s paintings, we see trout and other fish living within their natural environments. We experience their perception of their world and we come face to face with the realization of the value of their existence for us. One need not ever have fished to understand the validity of the lives presented by Rey or to connect to

the experience of being in these landscapes and streams. The encounter with the varieties of trout and other fish represented by Rey reminds us that we are part of a larger biosphere and that what happens in each of its parts affects the whole.

Rey's paintings of fish are also about memory, time, and a reminder that what is here now may be gone. In the evanescent, transitory, and diminishing populations of fish, there is a reminder of the plenitude that once existed. In painting these fish, Rey paints an America of the past, and brings us back to a time when the national identity was based on a concept of never-ending bounty—a message that was clear in the paintings of American artists such as Thomas Doughty or John James Audubon. Rey's fishing grounds cover territory once fished by Native Americans, who fished for subsistence. These populations became displaced as European settlers took over the territories, and subsistence fishing became sports fishing in the European traditions, as industrialization and leisure changed the nature of the activity. Yet, even these early artists, who worked when the landscape was relatively untouched and the birds and animals were plentiful, were aware of the vanishing resources they

were recording. Even as Audubon created his series, he understood that he was preserving them at the peak of their already threatened abundance.

Rey's paintings evoke the varieties of life experience that we share with all other species: the desire to survive, hunger, reproduction, existence, being in the moment, and the tension that exists between competing drives. It is the competition between the human need for food and the fish's instinct for survival that is the crux of fishing. This contest is the catalyst for Rey's observations about the environments in which these contests unfold, which he explores in his work and in this exhibition. At this point in his career as a guide and naturalist, Rey knows that the scarcity and vulnerability of trout means that wild trout should not be harvested, as each death depletes the population. In some cases, such as that of the Scajaquada Creek, the depletion is critical, as trout seldom swim there. For Rey, fishing is now concentrated in the process of angling and not in the taking or eating of fish. Thus, Rey continues to fish because, for him, it provides a level of spiritual satisfaction that enables him to make sense of his life's trajectory and its complicated essence. This exhibition is Rey's way of communicat-

ing what he has learned as an artist who observes and records, and as someone who lives in present-day realities that have developed from his and our collective and historical past.

As Rey has worked on this series, he has developed his interest as an angler and guide into concerns about the environments in which trout live and the erosion of these environments resulting from global pollution and unregulated urbanization. Rey's intention in the creation and presentation of this series, whenever and wherever it is exhibited, is to draw attention to the natural environment that is being slowly but inexorably compromised and to create a record of what we now have that might someday disappear.

Biological Regionalism varies in locale and has become global in localization of the specific diverse species and landscapes Rey represents. The nature of the images Rey has created has changed over time, as the main theme has expanded to address Rey's life, his identity as a Cuban American artist, the illness and death of members of his family, and his concern that the increase in environmental destruction that is happening will cause the loss of our connection to nature. In essence, *Bio-*

logical Regionalism is about life and death, the personal and the universal, and the complex ways in which we either engage with or destroy our natural environment. Such connections are also a reflection of how we relate to ourselves and the people who form our lives and with whom our destinies are linked.

Each of the authors of the articles found in this book understands the connections between Rey's life and his work as an artist. It has been our goal to bring to the reader of this book and the participants in Rey's ongoing body of work an understanding of Rey's life, his intentions, and his goals. Rey represents the citizen-artist who chronicles his life as he observes and explains our world, as a member of the global and local academic, artistic, and conservation communities; a citizen of this country; and someone who lives and works in Western New York State with his wife, Janeil, and their children, Graciela and Diego. Rey is an artist who is engaged in making a record of the time in which he lives so that future generations can connect to our experience and understand how we became them in the same way that Rey seeks to explain through his art how the past became our present, as "they" became "us."