

APONTE

VISIONARY
APONTE:
ART & BLACK
FREEDOM

King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center, NYU

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Visionary Aponte: Art and Black Freedom takes as its point of departure an extraordinary—and now lost—historical artifact: a so-called “Book of Paintings.” Its creator was José Antonio Aponte, a free black carpenter, artist, and former soldier who was also the leader of an ambitious antislavery conspiracy in Cuba in 1812. During his trial, Aponte was forced to provide testimony describing each of the pictures in his book. They portrayed a wide array of subject matter, from Biblical scenes to landscapes to episodes in the history of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Using those descriptions, fourteen contemporary artists have reimagined Aponte’s book for our present, inviting us to think about the role of art and history in making social change.

LIST OF ARTISTS

José Bedia

Leonardo Benzant

Juan Roberto Diago

Édouard Duval Carrié

Teresita Fernández

Emilio Martínez

Clara Morera

Nina Mercer

Glexis Novoa

Vickie Pierre

Marielle Plaisir

Asser Saint-Val

Jean-Marcel St. Jacques

Renée Stout

Curated by: Édouard Duval-Carrié and Ada Ferrer, with Laurent Dubois, Tosha Grantham, and Linda Rodríguez

José Antonio Aponte was a free black carpenter, soldier, and artist in Havana.



José Nicolas de Escalera, Uniform of the Batallón de Morenos de la Habana, 1763, drawing. Courtesy of the Archivo General de Indias (Fondo Mapas y Planos, 25).

In 1812, he was accused of masterminding a major conspiracy and rebellion against slavery in Cuba, then one of the most profitable sugar plantation economies in the world. As the island's Spanish authorities investigated Aponte, they found hidden in his house an unusual work of art, made by Aponte himself.

Authorities called it a "Book of Paintings," though the term is somewhat misleading. It featured 63 images that combined painting and drawing with collaged cutouts taken from decorative fans, engravings, and books. His intricate compositions portrayed Biblical stories and lush landscapes; black men as emperors, warriors, and librarians; scenes from Egypt and Ethiopia, Rome and Spain, Havana and the heavens.

Though Aponte testified that he made the book for the King of Spain as a gift, in the run-up to the rebellion he used the book for a very different purpose. He showed his co-conspirators the book's battle scenes to illustrate how they should organize their own rebellion in Havana, and he pointed out pictures of powerful black men and of himself as would-be king to show them that other worlds were possible.

During his trial, Aponte was forced to describe the pictures in his "Book of Paintings."



"Expediente sobre el declarante José Antonio Aponte y el sentido de las pinturas que se hayan en el L. Que se aprehendió en su casa. Conspiración de José Antonio Aponte, 24 de marzo de 1812." Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Asuntos Políticos, legajo 12, expediente 17. Courtesy of Archivo Nacional de Cuba.

Convinced of his guilt and the threat he posed to slavery, authorities hanged Aponte in public on April 9, 1812. His head was severed from his body, secured on a post, and placed in a cage about a block from his house, at an important crossroads in the city. There, it would serve as warning to other potential rebels. Then sometime after his execution, the "Book of Paintings" disappeared.

Aponte's trial testimony is thus all that remains of his fascinating book. The page above is reproduced from that testimony, housed in the Archivo Nacional de Cuba. The interrogator's questions are highlighted in yellow. Underlined is Aponte's answer to the question of why he drew what he did: "for reason of History like everything else in the book."

A transcription of Aponte's testimony about his "Book of Paintings," prepared by Jorge Pavez, is available on the digital humanities website Digital Aponte. The site includes other important information about the book, Aponte, and his Havana.

Visit <http://aponte.hosting.nyu.edu>.



Aponte's story did not end in 1812.



Commemoration in Havana on anniversary of Aponte's execution, 2013. Photograph courtesy of Amílcar Ortiz Cárdenas.



Aponte Vive banner at *Misterios de Vodú* performance, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Caridad Diez

Well into the twentieth century, the phrase “más malo que Aponte” –more evil than Aponte—was widely used as an insult. At the same time, people in black and working-class Havana neighborhoods drew inspiration from Aponte and kept his memory alive over many generations. In the 1930s, a group of Spanish Civil War veterans petitioned for the street named after Aponte's executioner—Somersuelos—to be changed to Aponte. In the 1940s, a commemorative plaque was dedicated to him, though it was stolen in the 1990s. Today in Cuba, two Aponte Commissions develop antiracist cultural programming, and a monument to Aponte—a sculpture of Aponte breaking out of a cage—has been proposed.

Visionary Aponte is a living monument to Aponte—one that strives to envision, as Aponte himself did, black history and freedom beyond a single place and time and to consider the role of art and history in imagining and making social and political change.



José Bedia Studio

JOSÉ BEDIA

Born in 1959 in Havana, Cuba
Lives and works in Miami, FL
<http://josebedia.com>

Láminas 24-25

“ . . . the author of the book presents himself in this portrait displaying on his chest a Laurel of fidelity, a palm for victory, what seems like a compass to the left is seen the carpentry bench where he made said Book . . . and childhood represented by a figure of a boy tied to a column and in the foreground the face of an old man . . . also shown on the bench are an inkwell, rulers, and pots of paint.”

José Bedia is an internationally acclaimed Cuban painter whose art is inspired by many sacred sources, including initiation into the Brillumba lineage of the Afro-Cuban religion Palo Monte. Bedia's work often critiques colonial histories by combining myths, symbols, and ritual elements with references to nature and global warfare. His time in Angola as part of the cultural brigades that supported the Angolan-Cuban War against Namibia and South Africa (1985) amplified his quest for the African and indigenous roots of American cultures. He has conducted extensive research in Peru, Mexico, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Zambia, Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania and Laos. Bedia studied at the San Alejandro Art Academy and the Instituto Superior del Arte. He participated in the first Havana Biennial (1984) and first showed abroad in Paris in *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989). He represented Cuba at the 1990 Venice Biennale and received a Guggenheim Fellowship (1992). Bedia and his family moved to Mexico in 1991 and settled in Miami in 1993. His art has since been exhibited in the Havana, São Paulo, Venice and Beijing Biennales. His work is featured in numerous collections, including the Museo Nacional Palacio de Bellas Artes (Havana); MoMA, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney, and Guggenheim (New York); Tate Modern (London); Hirshhorn Museum (Washington, DC); La Colección Daros (Zurich), MEIAC, DA2, IVAM, CAAM (Spain); and MOCA and PAMM (Miami).

Bedia's "Júbilo de Aponte" responds to several images in Aponte's "Book of Paintings," among them Aponte's self-portrait, the battle scene between white and black armies, depictions of Havana fortresses, the Virgin of Regla, and the Abyssinian lion. Bedia arranged the piece to suggest a construction, a monument or mausoleum, to Aponte's memory. All of the elements are interlinked and united by a black ribbon—white ribbons are mentioned several times throughout the text as one of the objects that authorities confiscated in his house—so he turned them black instead to allude to a state of mourning.



Júbilo de Aponte, 2017, mixed media on mixed papers, 106 x 143 inches. (courtesy of the artist)



Leonardo Benzant Studio

LEONARDO BENZANT

Born in 1971 in Brooklyn, NY
Lives and works in Queens, NY

Láminas 16-17

“Asked what flag is in the hand of the Queen he has referred to as Candace, he said: that it is the flag of Abyssinia [with] a Field of Yellow, Lion, Scarlet Cross, and Sword.”

Leonardo Benzant’s art draws upon his Afro-Dominican/Haitian-American heritage. His practice includes painting, performance, sculpture, sound and installation as he investigates deeply personal experiences of identity, ancestry, family, community and spirituality. Benzant, at times, metaphorically refers to his practice as a form of Urban Shamanism that enfolds information from the uniquely shared histories of code switching, double-consciousness and multiple narratives that people of African descent inherited or adopted as survival strategies for daily life. As a result, his work straddles two worlds— bridging the visible and invisible—while embodying the dynamics of being both sacred and secular. Benzant was recently an artist in residence at Galveston Artist Residency in Texas. His work was featured in the solo exhibition, *Afrosupernatural* (Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ). He has participated in group exhibitions, including notable shows at Jenkins Johnson Gallery (New York, NY), The Third Line (Dubai, UAE) and 101/EXHIBIT (Los Angeles, CA). His art is featured in numerous private collections as well as the permanent collection of The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture (Charlotte, NC). He is a recipient of the 2017 Joan Mitchell Foundation Painter’s and Sculptor’s Grant. Benzant attended Pratt Institute.

While Benzant was beginning to work on his “Serenade for Aponte,” he was mistaken for someone else and detained by Galveston police. That personal experience of interrogation deepened his sense of connection to Aponte. The energy of intimidation became embedded in the work, yet transmuted as he sewed and beaded. Benzant intends his sculpture as an *nkisi*-inspired power object, one that allowed him to explore feelings of being captured or cornered, while offering an opportunity to make something impactful, transformative and transportative, like alchemy.



The Tongue On The Blade: Serenade for Aponte And All Those Who Have Vision, 2017, from the series K7: Kalunga Gives Birth to New Worlds, mixed media, dimensions variable. (courtesy of the artist; photograph by Yolanda Navas)



Úrsula Lambert

JUAN ROBERTO DIAGO

Born in 1971 in Havana, Cuba

Lives and works in Havana, Cuba

Pan American Art Projects, Miami, FL

<http://panamericanart.com/portfolio/roberto-diago>

Láminas 44b-45

“ . . . the black King named TARRACO . . . is the one who invaded Tarragona from which he took that name: he appears with black soldiers, some in red boots, all with spears and Swords, carrying six yellow flags.”

Juan Roberto Diago graduated from the San Alejandro Academy in Havana (1990) and began to exhibit his artwork soon after. Diago comes from a family of artists and the work of his grandfather, after whom he is named, was a big influence. The senior Roberto Diago, despite his short life, was one of the pivotal voices of Cuban art in the 1940s. From the beginning of his career, Diago has been preoccupied with the theme of identity, which he renders and conveys through social inferences. Thematically, the unifying thread in his oeuvre has been his critique of racism in Cuba; something that does not “officially” exist but is present in daily life. His early pieces were distinguished by the use of materials such as discarded wood and metal, as a reference to the living conditions of black people. Although black people do not exclusively endure these conditions, they have historically lived in the poorest neighborhoods and thus subjected to the worst overall living situations. This inspired Diago to make numerous installations that represent scaled-down houses that look like real. Since the 1990s, Diago has participated in numerous exhibitions in Cuba and abroad. He represented Cuba in the 1997 Venice Biennale. His art is represented in prestigious collections globally, including the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana, Cuba; the CIFO (Cisneros Fontanals) Art Foundation in Miami, Florida; and the Rubin Foundation Collection, New York.

The artist, who was unable to travel to the opening, explains that Aponte inspires him “because he is a warrior, an angel of resistance, and of love.”



Tarraco, 2017,
mixed media on
canvas on cardboard,
34 x 22 inches.
(courtesy of the artist
and Pan American
Art Projects, Miami)



Associated Press 2009

ÉDOUARD DUVAL CARRIÉ

Born in 1954 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti
Lives and works in Miami, FL
Pan American Art Projects, Miami, FL
<http://www.edouard-duval-carrie.com>

Lámina 1

“ . . . the print that represents the Eternal Father upon a mirror is the creation of the world when God made the Firmament along with all things, and so the illustration is inscribed with the W[ord] that says “beginning” . . . ”

Édouard Duval Carrié was educated at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, in Paris, France; and at the University of Loyola Montreal, in Quebec, Canada. Duval Carrié’s art belongs to many prominent museum and private collections globally, including the Davenport Museum of Art (Davenport, Iowa, USA); Pérez Art Museum Miami (Miami, Florida, USA); Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens (Paris, France); Musée du Pantheon National Haïtien (Port-au-Prince, Haiti); and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey. In his work, Duval Carrié portrays a “Marvelous Reality,” as defined by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier in the prologue for his book, *The Kingdom of this World*, a story about Haiti that strongly influenced the artist. As a result, Duval Carrié enfolded into his art the fantastic world of his country—by rendering its illustrious myths and legends—in ways that clearly critique the prevailing social and political order within Haitian society. Duval Carrié’s art also features important aspects of Haitian history, including revolutionary heroes and other relevant figures. He references them to comment on the vital impact of Haitian history on contemporary society, including the legacy of slavery and independence and its weighted imprint on the country’s development up to the present. Duval Carrié and his art also emphasize the neurological effects of immigration, exile, and displacement on daily Haitian life, at home and abroad.

Duval Carrié has long been interested in connections between Haiti and the Spanish Caribbean, and José Antonio Aponte is key for understanding the Haitian Revolution’s impact in Cuba. Duval Carrié was also drawn to other aspects of Aponte’s “Book of Paintings,” from his depiction of the biblical story of creation, to the representation of goddesses such as Minerva to the presence of Prester John and Ethiopia. The four paintings here, which respond to two of Aponte’s láminas, convey a sense of how Aponte condensed in his book not only his own history, but that of the whole of the Black Atlantic—a feat in itself and a unique enterprise but unfortunately lost to us.



Prester John and His Emissaries, 2017, mixed media on Arches watercolor paper in artist frame, 36 x 26 inches. (courtesy of the artist and Pan American Art Projects, Miami)



Teresita Fernández Studio

TERESITA FERNÁNDEZ

Born in 1968 in Miami, FL
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY
Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York, NY
<http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/teresita-fernandez>

Láminas 10-11

“ . . . the planet Jupiter in the sign of Sagittarius, its star bright. Father he of Vulcan, the first blacksmith, who was cast with a kick to the Pyrenees[?] mountains, and looking for the best metals, he found gold, made a forge, and fashioned rays sending them to his Father to return to his grace, of which he still had hope . . .

Teresita Fernández is best known for her prominent public sculptures and unconventional use of materials. Her work is characterized by an interest in perception and the psychology of looking. Fernández’s experiential, large-scale works are often inspired by a rethinking of the meaning of landscape and place, as well as by diverse historical and cultural references. Her sculptures present spectacular illusions that evoke natural phenomena and engage audiences in immersive art experiences and conceptual way-finding. Fernández is a 2005 MacArthur Foundation Fellow and the recipient of numerous awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship, an NEA Artist’s Grant, and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Biennial Award. Appointed by President Obama, she is the first Latina to serve on the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. Fernández’s works are included in many prominent collections and have been exhibited both nationally and internationally at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; The Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; and Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy, among others. Fernández received her MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University and her BFA from Florida International University.

For *Visionary Aponte*, Fernández reflected on Aponte’s understanding of the cosmos as a space of both personal and political reprieve, a space inherently democratic because it could not be colonized. The piece, in pyrite, oil, graphite, and gold, also evokes West African alchemy traditions, with which Aponte and his co-conspirators may have been familiar.



Aponte (Láminas 10-11), 2017, pyrite, oil, graphite on wood panel, 21.5 x 36 x 2 inches overall. (courtesy of the Artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York; photograph by Yolanda Navas)



EMILIO MARTINEZ

Born in 1981 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras
Lives and works in Miami, FL

Lámina 67

“ . . . represents Nerpomene Goddess of battles.”

Emilio Martinez is an Honduran-born American artist who embraced painting as a means of expression. He was born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras in 1981. He immigrated with his family to Miami in 1994, where he has resided since. His work comes to life through his persistence of the dream realm – created through the constant repetitive dreams from his childhood memories. He has ongoing contact with the spiritual world through icons, symbols and texts from an unknown past of ancient primitive indigenous descendants. His work comes to life through the bicultural puzzle, which he decodes. On a daily basis, he uses a sketchbook where he records his obsessions, passions, and fears.

Martínez’s work has been exhibited at the University of Syracuse, the Purvis Young Museum of Art (Miami), the Little Haiti Cultural Center (Miami), and the Instituto Cultural de México (Miami), among others.

Martínez’s piece for “Visionary Aponte” takes up the figure of Nerpomene, who appears in lámina 60 of the “Book of Paintings” and whom Aponte calls the “goddess of battles.” Martínez interprets Nerpomene as a beast-like creature, a whirlwind figure composed of many spirits around her, all heeding her call to wage total war against unjust rule. The piece strives to reach back into to faded history to extoll a heroic visionary, while inviting others to survey the world view of Aponte and his legacy.



Nerpomene, 2018, mixed media on paper, 38.5 x 40 inches. (courtesy of the artist)



Clara Morera/Dorfsman Fine Arts

CLARA MORERA

Born in 1944 in Havana, Cuba

Lives and works in Winston-Salem,

NC and New York, NY

<http://www.dorfsmanfinearts.com/blue-door>

Láminas 6-7

“Governing Claudius, also called Prester John, who wore Lion’s Claws as boots and is painted at right . . .”

Clara Morera studied at the National School of Visual Arts and graduated from the San Alejandro Academy, both in Havana. Throughout her studies she focused on painting. She has also worked for many years in a range of disciplines including tapestry, soft sculpture, drawing and multimedia installations. Morera is a member of the Afro-Cuban Art group and Grupo Antillano. Her work was featured in the Grupo Antillano exhibition, *Drapetomania*, at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD, San Francisco, CA). Morera has also exhibited in noted public collections such as the Museum of the Americas in Washington, DC (1992); the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana (1970); and recently at Castle Galleries, New Rochelle College (NY); the Lyman Museum (CT); Newark Museum (NJ); the Lowe Museum of Art, University of Miami (FL); and Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African American Art, Harvard University, Cambridge (MA). Morera’s work has been written about in *Small Axe: a Caribbean Journal of Criticism* and *Revue Noire*, among others. “A specific feature of Morera’s oeuvre,” writes Ana Belén Martín Sevillano, “is the recurrent depiction of feminine figures . . . represented in unconventional attitudes in an attempt to break down the traditional imaginary.”



The Preboste Juan (King Juan), 2017, mixed media on canvas, 72 x 48 inches. (courtesy of the Artist and Dorfsman Fine Arts, Miami; photograph by Yolanda Navas)



Kelily Anderson-Staley

NINA ANGELA MERCER

Born in 1973 in Washington, DC

Lives and works in Bronx, NY

<http://windowsdoorsclosetsanddrawers.blogspot.com>

Lámina 26

“Informed of this, King Don Rodrigo, represented below, commanded Diogenes to come out of the jar [and Diogenes] answered that as long as his Majesty the King did as he himself did, in his poverty, he would obey him.”

Nina Angela Mercer is a cultural worker. Her plays include GUTTA BEAUTIFUL; RACING MY GIRL, SALLY; ITAGUA MEJI: A Road & A Prayer; GYPSY & THE BULLY DOOR; and MOTHER WIT & WATER BORN, a trilogy, including BETWEEN WHISPERED BLOOD-LINES. Her work has been shared at the former Warehouse Theatre and The Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company (Capital Fringe Festival, Washington, DC); Rutgers University-Newark and New Brunswick (New Jersey); and in New York at Wings Theatre, Brecht Forum, The Classical Theatre of Harlem, Dr. Barbara Ann Teer’s National Black Theatre, The Nuyorican Poets’ Café, Abrons Arts Center/Henry Street Settlement, Dumbo Sky and The Little Carib Theatre. Mercer’s writing is published in: The Killens Review of Arts & Letters, Black Renaissance Noire, Voices Magazine #SayHerName Edition and Continuum: The Journal of African Diaspora Drama, Theatre, and Performance. She has performed in collaboration with Betty’s Daughter Arts Collaborative, Angela’s Pulse, Abigail DeVille and Charlotte Brathwaite, BWA for BLM and others. Mercer is a co-founder and co-director of Ocean Ana Rising: www.oarinc.org. She is currently a doctoral fellow of Theatre and Performance at The Graduate Center-CUNY. She holds an undergraduate degree from Howard University and a MFA from American University. She currently teaches at Brooklyn College. Find updates on Mercer’s work at <http://windowsdoorsclosetsanddrawers.blogspot.com>.

Mercer’s “Invocation for José Antonio Aponte” calls on the energy that emboldened Aponte to channel The Word into a transnational, visual manifesto of liberation for black Cubans. But Mercer also calls out to ancestral multitudes at the diaspora’s threshold and birthing space--the ocean, Yemonja, Mami Wata, Our Lady Regla--transcending time and perceived national boundaries. We are here now, and before before; we are future, and the living embodiment of sacred cosmologies always returning to push us forward.



Invocation for José Antonio Aponte: Lámina 26, still, 2017, HD digital video with audio, written and performed by Nina Angela, video by Toshi Sakai. (courtesy of the artist)



Glexis Novoa Studio

GLEXIS NOVOA

Born in 1964 in Holguín, Cuba

Lives and works in Miami, FL and Havana, Cuba

David Castillo Gallery, Miami, FL

<https://davidcastillogallery.com/artist/glexis-novoa/>

<http://www.glexisnovoa.com/>

Láminas 8-9

*“. . . jumping to the dock, greed meets death;
there is also virtue as the right of Commerce and
farther down happiness, cut from an engraving
and superimposed on the paper, in execution of
the idea the declarant expressed above.”*

Glexis Novoa was born in Holguín and grew up in Havana. He received a degree from the National School of Arts (1984). While Novoa has lived in Miami since 1995, he maintains a studio in Vedado (Havana) and works on site specific murals and ephemeral projects globally. Since 1987, Novoa has had solo exhibitions at the Cheekwood Museum, (Nashville); in Miami at the Lowe Museum of Art (University of Miami), Locust Project and the former Miami Art Museum; at the Worcester Art Museum (Worcester, MA); the Snite Museum of Art (University of Notre Dame, IN); and in Havana at Espacio Aglutinador, Castillo de la Real Fuerza, El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes and La Galería Habana, among others. Novoa's work has been featured in many group exhibitions globally, including *Lost in Landscape*, Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (Trento, Italy); *Politics: I do not like it, but it likes me*, Center for Contemporary Art Laznia (Gdansk, Poland); *Perder la forma humana*, Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, (Madrid, Spain); *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, El Museo del Barrio (New York, USA); *Crisis | América Latina | Arte y Confrontación (1910-2010)*, el Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes (Mexico City); and *Arte ≠ Vida: Actions by artists of the Americas, 1960-2000*, El Museo del Barrio (New York, USA). Novoa's awards include grants from The Joan Mitchell Foundation and Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation. His work is featured in important private and public collections. He has also completed several notable public art commissions.



Fatality, 2016, sumi ink drawing on Arches watercolor paper, 30 x 22 inches.
(courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami)



VICKIE PIERRE

Born in 1970 in Brooklyn, NY
Lives and works in Miami, FL
www.vickiepierre.com

Lámina 35

“ . . . means the dream for a woman who has a sleeping man lying on her body.”

Vickie Pierre is a Haitian American, mixed media artist born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, where she studied at the School of Visual Arts. Pierre's practice includes various techniques and materials such as painting, drawing and collage, as well as assemblage and installation. Her continued focus is on the exploration of self-identity, with references to feminine tropes and historic and contemporary cultural politics, while concurrently observing and considering latent associations to Haitian culture and mythologies. Pierre has participated in exhibitions worldwide, including National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.; Miami Art Museum (Perez Art Museum Miami), Miami, FL; White Box, NY, NY; Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, FL; Musée International des Arts Modestes, Sete, France and Museo Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, San Juan, PR, among others. Her artworks can be found in private collections as well as public institutions, including Progressive Art Collection, Cleveland; Millennium Partners Collection of Contemporary Art at The Four Seasons, Miami, Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland and the Liza and Arturo Mosquera Collection, Miami. In 2017, Pierre was a recipient of the South Florida Cultural Consortium Award for Miami-Dade County. The artist lives and works in Miami.

In Pierre's piece, titled *Lámina 35*, the anthropomorphic forms represent a female and a male (José Antonio Aponte) reposing in a dream state. The figures are bejeweled and bound by elements of the natural world, evoking the Yoruba religion believed to have been practiced by Aponte. The length of rope around the black figure foreshadows the capture of Aponte by the Spanish government in Cuba and the subsequent hanging and decapitation of the revolutionary leader.



Lámina Thirty-five: Means the dream of a lady who has a sleeping man lying on her body, 2017, acrylic, metallic paint and collage on Rives BFK paper, 15 x 22 inches. (courtesy of the artist)



Marielle Plaisir Studio

MARIELLE PLAISIR

Born in 1985 in Le Havre, France

Lives and works in Miami, FL

<http://marielleplaisir.wixsite.com/marelle-plaisir>

Láminas 2-3

“ . . . the Punishment and banishment from Paradise of our first parents, who as they leave encounter a demon in the figure of a monkey who throws their sin in their faces with the same apple, the Owl Administerer of death (is down below), the Serpent that deceived Eve . . . ”

Marielle Plaisir is a French-Caribbean multimedia artist who spent her childhood and adolescence in Normandy (France), before settling in Guadeloupe (French Caribbean) and later in Miami. Her strong attachment to her island occurred after her studies during which time Plaisir searched for and, from reading history, learned more details related to her past and her identity. As a result, she combines painting, drawing and monumental installations with performance to present highly intense visual experiences. Plaisir’s art blends life and fiction in both autobiographical and historical narratives from the Caribbean that touch upon universal themes like power, domination, life and death. She is inspired by Italian quattrocento, Latin American and Caribbean literature. Plaisir incorporates textiles, fibers and fabrics that are socially meaningful into her work. She uses her daily practice to examine the many roles of the individual within society. Her art conveys a sense of humor and beauty while exploring any evidence of society’s humanity that she may discover in our increasingly digital world. Plaisir’s art is poetic. Her essence is theatrical. Her work may appear in many forms, including monumentally-scaled installations or itinerant in-situ performances within exhibitions. Her compositions have been used as children’s book illustrations and other publications and as drawings for animation. Since 2000, Plaisir has exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions worldwide. She has also participated in various international contemporary art biennials.

Plaisir was drawn to Aponte’s story—which she saw as at once unreal, beautiful, poetic, formidable, tragic, and cruel—and to Aponte the man, who she imagined as a character filled with holiness, goodness, and humanity. Her series of drawings, titled “The Book of Life,” do not depict particular pages of Aponte’s book. Rather they evoke the way Aponte escapes from the world by deconstructing his time and place, moving through mythology, religion, death, war, love. For Plaisir, Aponte’s “Book of Paintings” represents a kind of beautiful exile, his process of dreaming about a better world.



Aponte Lámina 23, 2017, inks, gold pigment, pencils on 300g paper, 18 x 12 inches. (courtesy of the artist)



Asser St. Val Studio

ASSER SAINT-VAL

Born 1974 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Lives and works in Miami, FL

<https://www.assersaintvl.com>

Láminas 12-13

“Asked about what idea he had for the meaning of the figure of a young woman with a paper in her hand, cut out and placed on top, with the following inscription: My son, Peace is made, he said: That as he considered said adornment fitting, he cut it from a fan and, just as he found it, put it to use in his work.”

Asser Saint-Val is a painter, sculptor and installation artist. Cumulative and objective, Saint-Val's pictures, objects, and environments engage the aesthetics and metaphors of melanin (the organic compound responsible for human skin, hair, and eye color) and neuromelanin (a pigment found specifically in the dopaminergic neurons at the base of the brain). Saint-Val's images explore the metaphysical reality and materiality of melanin and neuromelanin in relation to identity, his conscientious artistic voice, and his understanding of the roots of racism. Saint-Val's paintings portray quasi-figurative images that evoke ideas central to modern debates on race and biology. Blending traditional and unconventional art materials (including coffee, chocolate, ginger, and tea), Saint-Val strives to create a surreal fantasia that activates the audience's imagination with multisensory environments.

Asser Saint-Val moved to South Florida in 1988. He earned BFAs in painting and graphic design from the New World School of the Arts. His work has been exhibited in Florida, New York and throughout the Caribbean. His art is featured in prestigious private collections, including: Francie Bishop Good, Dr. Arturo Mosquera, the Rubell Family and Carlos Sanchoo. Saint-Val has twice received the South Florida Cultural Consortium Fellowship Award. In 2012, he created *The Philosopher's Stone*, a large-scale interactive public installation and his largest work to date, with support from the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners.

In approaching Aponte's trial testimony and "Book of Paintings," St. Val was particularly drawn to Aponte's use of Greek mythology. As a scholar, artist, and genius ahead of his time, Aponte was exploring ideologies of gods and goddesses from Greek Mythology as a tool for transformation, self-empowerment and revolution. St. Val also believes that Aponte used these figures to make connections to himself as a spiritual entity, anticipating a new spiritual philosophy of Afro-Centrism, in which black scholars trace the genesis of the melanated people as far back as Atlantis and Lemuria, the Dogon people, and the star Sirius.



José Antonio Aponte, Ferrer Ada, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 2017, mixed media with kinetic motion on Masonite, 4 panels at 24 x 24 inches each; 48 x 48 x 3 inches overall. (courtesy of the artist; photograph by Yolanda Navas)



Atelier Jean-Marcel St. Jacques

JEAN-MARCEL ST. JACQUES

Born in 1972 in Richmond, CA

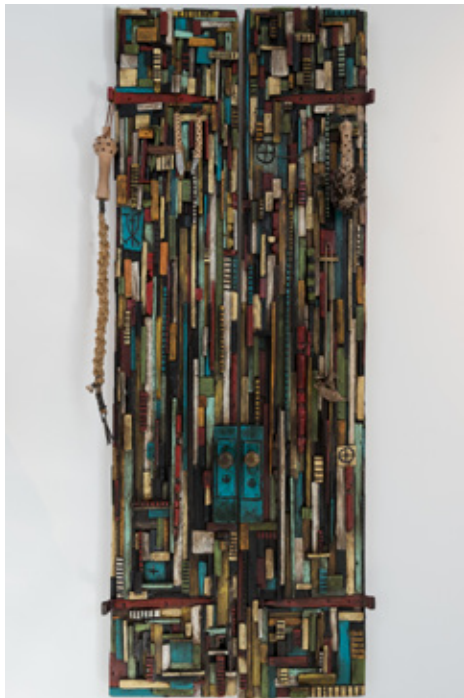
Lives and works in New Orleans, LA

Láminas 44b-45

“Several black nuns arrive at a temple named the resurrection, which was built in thirty days by Saint Matthew. He is shown to one side, converting those same women and also Saint Paulinus of Nola, of the same color as they are.”

Jean-Marcel St. Jacques is a California-born self taught artist with deep Louisiana Creole roots and a couple of academic degrees in other subjects. His first love is music, and he spent much of his life as a poet and performing artist until Hurricane Katrina hit and sent him into a silent meditation from which emerged Jean-Marcel the visual artist. St. Jacques's great-grandmother made patchwork strip quilts and his great-grandfather was a hoodoo man who collected junk for a living. As a visual artist, he works mainly with wood and junk. His wooden quilts represent a way of being with the spirits of his great-grandmother who quilted and his great-grandfather who collected junk. They are also a way of finding a higher purpose for the pile of debris left by Hurricane Katrina, to find beauty in the ugliness of one of this country's worst human disasters and, on a more practical note, to save and rehab his house for him and his family. St. Jacques has pieces in the permanent collection of the American Folk Art Museum.

Jean Marcel's doorway--created in collaboration with Renée Stout's work for this show-- is both an altar in homage to the spirit of Aponte, as well as a crossroads or portal between the mortal world and the spirit world, inviting Aponte's energy to enter and assist the people of the African Diaspora in our ongoing struggle for the right to be ourselves. It also functions as symbol of our ability to open the door to new possibilities as we discover the power we have to create a better world for ourselves. All of the wood used in this work is reclaimed from his Katrina-damaged home in the Tremé neighborhood, built not too long after Aponte's execution.



Portal for Aponte, 2017, mixed media on French Creole double door with five weapons fabricated by Odinga Tyehimba in homage to the Abakuá/Leopard Society in collaboration with the artist, 96 x 33 x 7 inches. (courtesy of the artist; photograph by Yolanda Navas)



Mary Noble Ours

RENÉE STOUT

Born in 1958 in Junction City, KS
Lives and works in Washington, DC
<http://www.reneestout.com>

Láminas 44b-45

“Asked again why he mingled the destruction of the army of Senaquerib with the invasion of Tarragona when nothing connects one with the other, he said: that even though the two events do not go together, he included that of Senaquerib by reason of History, like everything else in the book . . .”

Renée Stout grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and received her B.F.A. from Carnegie-Mellon University in 1980 where her focus was on painting. However, in 1985, immediately after moving to Washington, D.C., she began to explore the spiritual and cultural roots of her African American heritage through her increasingly sculptural works, which found their early inspiration in the aesthetics and philosophy of Kongo ritual objects. Stout's art attracted the attention of museum curators across the United States and led to her becoming the first American artist to have a solo exhibition in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. Inspired by the African Diaspora, historical and current world events, as well as everyday life in her DC neighborhood, Stout now creates in a variety of media, including painting, drawing, mixed media sculpture, photography and installation. She has been the recipient of awards from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Bader Fund, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, the Gottlieb Foundation and Anonymous Was A Woman. She was also the recipient of the Driskell Prize, awarded by the High Museum of Art (Atlanta, GA) and the Sondheim Award from the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts. Stout's work is featured in many museum and private collections, nationally and internationally, including the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

Renée's homage and contemporary reinterpretation of Aponte's "Book of Paintings" aims to create the same kind of focal object or talisman for a revolution that was Aponte's original intent for his book of collages, drawings and paintings. And like Aponte, she has purposely left the imagery open-ended in order for it to be interpreted on many levels. It is her desire that re-imagining the book will help us to channel our collective energy to coax the original out from its hiding place.



Book of Paintings, folio, 2017, acrylic on wood panel, 22 x 15 inches. (courtesy of the artist; photograph by Yolanda Navas)

Narratives of Freedom and Oppression

Édouard Duval Carrié

Histories of the Caribbean are always full of surprises. European explorers and subsequent waves of colonists occupied and displaced locals almost to the point of extinction, while documenting their own advances against indigenous peoples. To this day, it is the conqueror's voice that dominates, as that of the vanquished has all but disappeared. Certain accounts did try to document the vast upheavals that resulted in the wake of the "discovery." One such document is the long letter written to King Charles I of Spain by Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, denouncing the horrors that followed that first encounter. His *The Destruction of the Indies* described in detail the horrors inflicted on the "docile and gentle Indians" by the conquistadores. The document found its way to the enemies of the Catholic Church: reformists and Protestants who published it in a widely-distributed, illustrated pamphlet. What is of great interest to me is that the pamphlet in question was illustrated by an artist and engraver (Theodor DeBry) who, as far as we know, never set foot in the Americas. His fanciful and Europeanized visual depiction of the Taino are still used today in contemporary representations of native Caribbean people.

Another example where art was used in defense of the downtrodden is the fantastic document sent to King Felipe III by one of his American subjects, Inca nobleman Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala. This extensively illustrated document aimed to inform the Spanish king about the injustices of colonial rule inflicted on Andean people and enslaved Africans. Guaman Poma described in words and images the humiliations to which he and his people were subjected. King Felipe never received the document. As an artist, I have been interested in this particular document for the powerful visual language created by Guaman Poma to illustrate a world in transition and already subject to a hybrid vocabulary.

Though referenced in a novel I had read and reread by Cuban author Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*, the name Aponte never truly piqued my interest until I read Ada Ferrer's *Freedom's Mirror*, in which José Antonio Aponte figures as a major protagonist. What became evident and surprising immediately is that Aponte, too, had created an illustrated book for the King of Spain. Again, the document not only did not make it to his highness; this time it was lost, and all that was left of it were the detailed descriptions Aponte provided during his trial and interrogation by Spanish authorities in Havana. Those descriptions reveal that this artist of African descent had created a new visual vocabulary that profoundly disturbed and confounded his European interrogators.

The challenge today is to find a way to reach through those descriptions into this man's vision, to recreate or interpret, more than a century later, Aponte's visions of a black world where dignity, freedom and intellectual complexity were a given, and where they served to challenge the abject conditions to which they were subjected. *Visionary Aponte* invited a group of contemporary artists to consult this particular story and see if they, as artists, could translate the spirit of Aponte's "black worldview" into visual proclamations for our own time.

Co-curator Édouard Duval Carrié is also one of the artists of *Visionary Aponte*. He is Artistic Director of the Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance (Miami) and curator of the Global/Borderless Caribbean Series.

A Lost Book and the Historian's Archive

Ada Ferrer

I first encountered José Antonio Aponte not as an artist but as a revolutionary. The Aponte I first learned about from the seminal work of Cuban historian José Luciano Franco was the leader of the island's principal antislavery and anticolonial conspiracy during the Age of Revolution. But because Franco transcribed and published the trial testimony about Aponte's "Book of Paintings," he also allowed us to glimpse Aponte the artist.

I remember vividly my surprise on first reading Aponte's descriptions of his book. Image 6-7, which showed a black army defeating a white one, seemed potentially subversive and revolutionary in a slave society. But what of everything else in the book? What about the popes, saints, and kings; the Ethiopian Eunuchs and Greek philosophers and Roman goddesses; the heavenly constellations and lush landscapes? What, if anything, did they have to do with revolution?

Aponte showed the book to his fellow conspirators as they organized their revolution. So we know that he and his companions drew connections between the images before them and the revolution they were plotting. But what were those connections? And where was the book?

To paraphrase C.L.R. James, what historians most want to see in order to understand a revolution—the diary of an obscure rebel leader or, in this case, a book of paintings that served as guide for an antislavery revolution—seems forever out of our reach. For years I held out the hope of finding Aponte's book. On a research trip to Spain in 2002, my then 7-year old daughter greeted me every afternoon with the question: did you find the book today? The answer was always no.

I learned to work around that absence, comparing the way Aponte described the book to inquisitioners to how he spoke about it with co-conspirators. For example, Aponte testified that lámina 37 was Rome, yet he told a companion that the picture showed Henri Christophe, King of Haiti, commanding people to execute what he ordered. Describing 8-9, Aponte mentioned the *San Lorenzo* without elaborating. But we know that the ship had spent time in revolutionary Haiti, once transported Haitian revolutionaries to Cuba, and even housed some of Aponte's own co-conspirators. Using other sources to help read Aponte's words about his pictures, I was able to glimpse not only Aponte's epic histories of Ethiopia, but other more subterranean histories that linked Havana and Haiti in 1812.

By the time I finished writing about Aponte in *Freedom's Mirror* in 2014, my daughter, by then a young woman, had stopped asking me if I'd found the book. Instead, she kept insisting that a group of artists needed to collectively reimagine Aponte's book. I am forever grateful to Edouard Duval-Carrié for setting that plot in motion, to Laurent Dubois for bringing us together, to Tasha Grantham for helping it materialize, and to Linda Rodríguez for co-conspiring. The artists of Visionary Aponte have offered me new and surprising insight into Aponte's vision and new ways to think about the "everything else" in the book as part of Aponte's artistic and political vision. I hope the show that has resulted from our collective effort honors Aponte's creativity and intellect, as well as his conviction that those things were—and remain—vital to making freedom real.

Ada Ferrer is Julius Silver Professor of History and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at NYU. She is the author of two prize-winning books: *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* and *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*.

Aponte and the Possibilities of Art Linda Rodríguez

The loss of Aponte's "Book of Paintings" felt like a weight. Its absence seemed to limit what we could know of him as an artist. How did he use color? What was his approach to composing each of his pages? Did figures overlap for some kind of textural effect? Aponte tells us, though, exactly what kind of artist he was. On the first day of his testimony about the "Book of Paintings," a Spanish judicial official asked him if the book was indeed his work. Aponte's response reads almost like a declaration of his artistic intent. "Not being a painter, he bought different prints and paintings to take from them, or from used fans, that which fulfilled his idea."

Aponte introduced a completely innovative method of aesthetic creation that transformed fragments into a whole. He considered his audience to be, yes, the Spanish king, but also networks of enslaved and free people of color in Havana. For all who saw his book, Aponte's novel technique matched the revolutionary content of its pages in which he visualized black militia members like his grandfather Joaquín Aponte along with black princes and queens in faraway and historic lands like Ethiopia. In colonial Havana, Aponte placed a new vision of an African diaspora in the hands of those who held and viewed his book. Aponte's actions as an artist suggest a need to invent, to move beyond known models of artistic practice and aesthetic form. That spirit has triumphed over loss as new imaginings of his "Book of Paintings" emerge in this exhibit, centuries later. Aponte's legacy reverberates in our contemporary world and asks us to imagine the possibilities of art in advancing freedom for all. Indeed, Aponte's legacy demands that we recognize artists as central to that goal.

Linda Rodríguez is Visiting Scholar at the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at NYU. An art historian, she is lead scholar on the digital humanities website Digital Aponte and writes about Aponte and other artists of color in colonial Havana.

The Book Is Here Laurent Dubois

The book is here, just as Aponte intended. He imagined, after all, that the book would not just recount a history but also help create a new one. In ways he probably couldn't have predicted, it has, again and again. His interrogators and executioners were afraid of the book. They wanted to bury it and the project it represented. They used his art to condemn him. They succeeded, in a way. He was executed and his art was disappeared too. In the process, however, his executioners left behind traces that allow us to revive Aponte, in our way. As historians we are sustained by the fact that we can turn such sources against themselves, seeking to undo their intent. That is what Ada Ferrer does in her book *Freedom's Mirror*, the magical work at the basis of this exhibit.

Aponte understood that he was part of a subterranean history, that telling that history – a history of the black world, a black history of the world – was to remake that history, and the world. His book was pedagogy, exploration, pastiche, interpretation. He knew that images could tell that history perhaps better than text, for an image is always an invitation, a portal of sorts – an invitation to travel, and to dream. "What does this image mean?" his interrogators wanted to know. Did Aponte tell the truth? Did the interrogators understand the answer? And what can we, now, glean from what they wrote about what they heard?

That is the question this exhibit begins to answer. Lines of text, traces of distant work, turn out to be seeds. Planted in the minds of the artists gathered here, they have created bursts, visions, layers of color, echoes, new pages in an old book, old pages of a new book. When we look at them, gathered together – like those who gathered together at Aponte's house, around the book – we see into that past, and into the future. We are invited to tell stories, to make history. We are made ready – to travel, to dream. The book is here, and it is a wonder.

Laurent Dubois is Professor of Romance Studies and History and Founding Director of the Forum for Scholars & Publics at Duke. He is the author of six books, including *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, and *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*.

Aponte's Library



When colonial Spanish officials searched Aponte's home and workshop, in addition to his "Book of Paintings," they found a small library of a dozen books, all "old and used." Among them were histories of Ethiopia, guides to the cities of Rome and Havana, grammar and art handbooks, a Catholic catechism, *Aesop's Fables*, volume three of *Don Quixote*, a compendium of the history of the world.

Scholar Jorge Pavez Ojeda singles out a few volumes of the library that likely shaped Aponte's vision. For example, the volumes on historical Ethiopianism, including a history of Ethiopia by Luis de Urreta and a volume on San Antonio Abad by Juan de Baltasar, find echoes in Aponte's own desire to share his historical and artistic vision of Ethiopia among free people of color in colonial Havana. The biography of Maurice of Saxe might have inspired Aponte's many battle scenes, particularly because of the prominence and fame of Saxe's black battalion. The volume of *Aesop's Fables*, meanwhile, reflects Aponte's interest in Greco-Roman mythology and, writes Pavez, may have influenced Aponte's use of "aphorisms similar to those used by Aesop to denounce the ignominies of power." The early modern guide to Rome, *Grandezas y maravillas de la inclitya y sancta ciudad de Roma*, perhaps shaped Aponte's own development of a "monumental urban cartography" in his representations of locations and landmarks in Havana. Lastly, Cuba's first natural history, by Portuguese naturalist Antonio Parra, provided a visual contrast to Aponte's own illustrious black history. Parra included in his volume three images of a free black man Domingo Fernández, who suffered from elephantiasis, as an example of the limits of nature. Aponte's representations of black bodies offer heroic depictions in opposition to Parra's "monster."

As part of *Visionary Aponte*, Timothy Johnson, Director of the Tamiment Library at NYU, has curated an exhibition of Aponte's books. Six of those volumes, together with a collection of nineteenth-century manuscript documents on Cuban slavery, will be on display at Tamiment from February 23 to May 4.

Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives Elmer Holmes Bobst Library

70 Washington Square South
New York, NY 10012

Hours: Monday-Friday 10am-5pm; closed weekends

<https://library.nyu.edu/locations/the-tamiment-library-robert-f-wagner-labor-archives/>



VISIONARY APONTE: ART & BLACK FREEDOM

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, KING JUAN CARLOS I OF SPAIN CENTER,
FEBRUARY 23-MAY 4, 2018

DUKE UNIVERSITY, POWER PLANT GALLERY
SEPTEMBER 18 - NOVEMBER 17 2018

The King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center (KJCC) at NYU promotes research and public programming on Spain, Latin America, and the Spanish-speaking world. The Center offers public scholarship for academic and general audiences, highlighting the humanities and the arts, history, and politics. KJCC supports work engaging Latin America and the Caribbean, the global hispanophone diaspora, and Latinx communities of the United States.

The Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) at NYU promotes knowledge from and about Latin America and the Caribbean and fosters interdisciplinary approaches to area studies. Designated a National Resource Center by the US Department of Education, CLACS hosts public programming to further our mission and supports the study of lesser-taught languages (Kreyòl and Quechua) as an integral part of its MA program.

The *Visionary Aponte* team thanks Jorge Pavez, whose transcription of Aponte's trial testimony about the "Book of Paintings" helped pave the way, Chris Yong-García for his design work, Pilar Garrett for research assistance, Eric Anderson for improving *Digital Aponte*, Esther Allen for her translation wisdom, Amílcar Ortiz Cárdenas for the cover image, Nicola Lees and Hugh O'Rourke for the kind in-kind support, Timothy Johnson for reassembling Aponte's library, Sara Kozameh for brilliant troubleshooting, Mireille Chancy González for her deep commitment to the project, and the institutions named below for their generous support.

