



## The Great Leap

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The Panama Art Biennial has an ever-changing look. From an ultra-conventional juried show that only accepted paintings on canvas, it has progressed gradually to include all media. This is due to the fact that, edition after edition—in spite of the conservative nature of this country's art institutions—the Biennial has proven to be a sort of thermometer that measures not only the expressive abilities of the younger or more current artists, but also the continuous dynamics of cultural mutations reflected, in some form or another, in contemporary artistic practices.

The year 2005 witnessed the most radical transformation in all of its history. Its founding director Monica Kupfer and general director Walo Araújo eliminated the prizes, granted each of the artists one thousand dollars for the creation of their artworks, and invited Guatemalan Rosina Cazali, a curator with a notable professional career, to be in charge of the exhibition. The result was an exhibition of high quality, distinction, and coherence. An exhibition with a personality of its own, connected by a thread of poetic containment that incorporated a good dose of critical irony and social commentary.

It is hard to exaggerate the extent to which this great leap has benefited art in Panama, its perception by the public, and the biennial itself. Furthermore, this leap defines this art event as the most progressive in the region, including the Central American Biennial. In my opinion, the competitive character and the *hit parade* quality, blessed by a prestigious jury, which surrounds many biennials with the aura of a solemn spectacle, serve only to distract from the deeper consideration that the tendencies of artistic practice and their relation to the socio-cultural context merit.

This relationship is precisely the focus of the greater part of the exhibition curated by Cazali. The medium chosen by Jonathan Harker (who won the First Prize in the previous Biennial) for his ***Panama jat*** (*Panama Hat*) is the anti-slip reflective black plastic that covers the museum's ground floor; the artist employs all the formal properties of this material, while questioning its bizarre use in an exhibition space. In addition, with its tone of lightness and mockery related to the supposed idiosyncrasy of Panamanians (and of the public persona Harker has created for himself), the piece plays with cultural misunderstandings and the way we subvert the English language.

Just like the famous hat, Harker is considered Panamanian even though he “was made” in Ecuador.

Donna Conlon participates with another of her impeccable video-performances in which an absurd, repetitive action exposes the consequences of consumerism and pollution. In this case, the artist’s hands open, one after another, like infinite Chinese boxes, a series of plastic bags that contain others, and again others, the colors and logos of which are instantly recognizable to those of us who live in this Phoenician country par excellence.

In a more formalist key, Francisco Merel also touches the fibers of our identity with his ***El diablico blanco***, a sculpture that does not merely reproduce the folkloric Panamanian Carnival mask, but rather magnifies it digitally and then erases all its color. The distortion achieves a high-tech esthetic impact, above all because of its appropriate installation within a very small room in the same tone of white, thus further enlarging the sense of scale.

José Manuel Castrellón also distorted images in his series ***Welcome to My Country*** by photographing the participants in the Miss Universe competition held in Panama directly from his television screen, as a sarcastic commentary on the exorbitant expenditure of public funds for this event, which was granted the greatest importance by the Panamanian government during the celebration of its centennial as an independent republic.

There are three artworks that dig deeply into Panama’s historical and sociopolitical background. ***Angie against the World***, a video game by Ana Luisa Sanchez Laws, invites the spectator to delve into the events that occurred during the traumatic U.S. invasion of Panama, a wound still wide open in our collective psyche. ***Möbius Nations*** by Enrique Castro Ríos is a poetic video installation with three screens that shows images and texts in random sequence to suggest human, linguistic, and environmental tensions and affinities around the world, with the axis placed on Panama and its role in the globalization process.

Of these three works, and in fact of the whole exhibition, I prefer the simplicity and power of ***The Race***, a sound piece by Humberto Vélez. Simulating a horse race at the tracks reported by his stepfather Arquímedes “Junier” Fernández who is a professional sports narrator, Vélez manages to offer us the vitality of the vernacular, a strong social critique, great sense of humor, and the emotions that this very Panamanian sport arouses. Following the peculiar style in which racehorses are named, and selecting names that address prejudices, fears, and desires characteristic of contemporary Panama, the participants in ***The Race*** are called Shit Negro—a favorite, according to Junier— Miss Panama (another favorite), U.S. Visa (as much coveted as it is denied), Oligarch, Rich Daddy, I Have a Dream, AIDS, Foreigner, and One Dollar.

More intimate works in the Biennial included the colossal sculptural installation by Lezlie Milson; the extraordinary and disquieting photographic series ***American Exurbia***, by Rachelle Mozman that portrays children from the anemic suburban middle class of

the North Eastern United States; the homoerotic video by Ramses Giovanni, and a video projection by Víctor Mares that subverts time and action; the black chest of drawers by Beatriz Cecilia Paredes, and the digital impressions on canvas by Mira Valencia, the only “paintings” in the exhibition, which ironically copy certain color ranges from the Pantone chromatic system that evoke the serene abstractions of some geometric art.

In conclusion, it was an exhibition of unquestionable merits, which nevertheless suffered due to lack of time. If this had not been the case, Cazali would have been able to prepare a more complete and solid exhibit without having to depend only on artists’ portfolios during the selection process, and to come to Panama sooner and more often in order to meet people, visit places and studios, and work with the artists in greater depth. But this drawback pales in comparison to the remarkable achievements of the 2005 Panama Art Biennial.

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