The story of contemporary Cuban art is a fascinating and surprising one. Ironically, it was Fidel Castro and Che Guevara who first envisioned the Havana Country Club, a symbol of a wealthy ruling class, as a national art school with international aspirations. Cuba’s Instituto Superior de Arte opened its doors in 1976. It consists of five schools for the visual arts, dramatic arts, music, modern dance, and a ballet school, which is said to be the largest in the world. Additionally, art schools for primary and secondary education students have been set up all over Cuba. As a result, Cuban artists are well trained and highly esteemed, with the island donning a more sophisticated artistic culture than any other country of similar means.

Official support of the arts, however, does not necessarily translate into freedom of expression. While Cuban artists are encouraged to create, their art was and is to be within the scope of the “Revolution.” As a result, Cuban artists have become especially deft in infusing hidden meaning into their work, and are touted by international critics as “masters of double entendre” and subtle resistance while avoiding overtly political statements.

The inventiveness and ingenuity of these artists are further enhanced by the lack of resources that has marked the country since the 1951 embargo by the United States and the restrictions imposed by Castro. The limitations have led Cuban artists to reenvision, modify, and manipulate iconic objects in ways that imbue them with new meaning and significance far beyond their utilitarian purpose, incorporating them into works of art that straddle the fields of conceptual and pop art. The resourcefulness and inventiveness that have gone into maintaining classic cars and making them an international attraction are also found in Cuban contemporary art.
The Merger’s inventive and often brightly hued works often incorporate items that are either remnants of “pre-revolution” Cuba or have simply run their course, imbuing them with new life and meaning. The history of the items often makes them symbols of the country’s more sinister political side.

Inflación embodies all of the above and is a brilliant example of this process, depicting a pool table in an unlikely but recognizable shape of the American continent, with North and South America clearly delineated, if not separated. While a pool table would not normally evoke notions of resistance, Cuba has a unique relationship with billiards. Given the country’s history before Castro as a gambling center for wealthy Americans, pool has since been viewed as a gambling vice. Banned for decades and still not officially sanctioned, the sport has gained the allure of forbidden fruit, resulting in an underground world of billiards clubs, with dilapidated pre-revolution pool tables or new ones haphazardly crafted by amateurs.

According to the artists, the inspiration came when they themselves played on such a table, uneven and slanted to one side, which resulted in the uneven distribution of the balls, thus impacting the odds of winning or losing. Also seeing the connection between games and social and political theory, not to mention such sayings as “life is a game,” The Merger artists saw the pool table as a perfect metaphor for political and social realities within the Americas, which includes their own country. The result was a series of works titled Game Theory, of which Inflación is a part.

Inflación’s shape allows the artists to assert their identity as inhabitants of the Americas and as American artists, and consequently concerned with the state of affairs within their continent. It also lends the work social, cultural and political undertones and innuendo, stemming not only from the artists’ own experience within Cuba, but from the long history of the continent itself. Despite the wealth of the culturally rich and diverse nations, there are social and economic inequities that have gained Latin America the distinction as the most unequal region in the world, with the highest poverty rate. The region’s shared history of conquest, colonization, and foreign intervention and meddling, most often to secure the interests of corporations, has left behind a trail of political turmoil and instability. It has also created a sense among the people of the region that their fate is not in their own hands, but is the result of a zero-sum game controlled by the seemingly random economic and political decisions of others, whose attitude is let the chips fall where they may.

As artists of the Americas, The Merger artists feel obliged to address or at least draw attention to the discrepancies and inequities in this part of the world, depicting the continent in an uneven and downward slant that accommodates a barrage from the north, while making the climb upwards more daunting. In addition, the thread thin line that seems to barely connect north and south further highlights the difficulty if not the impossibility of retrograde or anadromous movement, adding a Sisyphean element that makes the process of accessing the North a hopeless one, especially as one considers the often-unfilled aspiration of many people from Latin America who want to migrate to the north.

And yet, the interpretation of history and politics is subject to unique and even divergent perspectives, shaped by our own experiences and even our geographic position in the puzzle that makes up the world. Consequently, a work that navigates such issues is inevitably impacted by the viewer’s own political, social, and cultural reality, thus subject to his or her own interpretation, making the work as much the viewer’s as it is the artist’s.

About the Artists

A collaborative art team, The Merger was co-founded by three friends, who are considered among Cuba’s foremost contemporary artists. Having proven themselves in their individual art endeavors, they first exhibited as a team in 2009 at the X Havana Biennial, finding that a collaborative approach enriched their art and made them far more creative and productive. Of the three, Niels Molerio Luis, photographer and painter, and Mario Miguel González, a master at manipulating metal, both born in the early 1970s, are self-taught artists. Alain Pino Hernandez (b.1969), painter, draftsman, printmaker, photographer, and sculptor, was academically trained at the Superior Institute of Art in Havana, Cuba’s national art school.

While sculpture is their strong suit, The Merger artists also work with watercolor or acrylic on canvas, gouache, drawings, silkscreen, photography, and tapestry. Their process requires that no final work, especially sculpture, is produced without first depicted in a variety of media, including paintings, drawings, and often silkscreen. This is their way of working through their concepts and each remaining loyal to his original artistic instincts. For their sculpture, they have experimented with, and use a variety of materials, including black steel, stainless steel, bronze, aluminum fiberglass, translucent silicone, Murano glass, marble and wood.

The Merger’s work has been exhibited all over the world. The team has participated in many art fairs, including SCOPE Basel, the Latin American Art Fair in Miami, and the Shanghai Art Fair. Their work is also included in the permanent collections of the Phoenix Art Museum, the La Jolla Contemporary Art Museum, and in many private collections throughout the United States and the United Kingdom.

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