

HUMBERTO CASTRO

KENDALL CAMPUS ART GALLERY • MIAMI DADE COLLEGE



Humberto Castro: "The Hunter, the House and the Bait"

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Humberto Castro's life experience seems supremely relevant to his new installation at the Kendall Campus Art Gallery of Miami Dade College. Castro was born, educated and entered artistic maturity in Havana, Cuba. There, his art achieved considerable recognition, despite the fact that it was often overtly critical of the prevailing regime. His "Power and Existence Series" of 1987-89, for example, dealt with subjects of violence, power and control. After participating in a traveling exhibition in Europe in 1989, Castro decided to remain in Paris.

During the 10 years he lived as part of an international community in Paris, Castro's work moved from themes of political and social conflict to those involving more internal struggles. The naked male figures that had long been at the center of his art were no longer oppressed by a political situation, but by the human condition and by states of mind and being, which they personified. The work of his Paris period often focused upon figures from myths and classical literature, such as Icarus, Ulysses and the Minotaur. While the aspirations, struggles and pains of these figures are of universal resonance, Castro also viewed them through the filter of his Cuban experience. Figures seeking escape by flight and homelands by sea are recurrent themes in his art, as are representations of boats, rafts, oars and maps of Cuba.

In the early '90s, Castro began to travel to Miami about once a year, visiting family members who had moved here and exhibiting his work at the Ambrosino Gallery. In 1999, he and his Cuban wife Gipsy moved to Miami, buying a house in a quiet, residential neighborhood. While they had enjoyed living in Paris, Miami's Cuban community made them feel at home.

Castro's preoccupation with universal human experience and specifically Cuban reference come together in "The Hunter, the House and the Bait." The installation consists of three elements. One is the over life-size figure of a tightrope walker (made of papier mâché, plaster and wood and

painted with gold metallic paint. The figure stands securely on a metal wire set about 12 feet above the ground, his step unwavering and his success assured. His long arms are outstretched, each holding an extended oar. This is the "hunter" of the title, an individual who set out on a quest and achieved his goal.

Leaning upon the opposite wall is a vertical row of seven large, two-sided oars to which are attached an assortment of body fragments executed in the same manner and colors as the figure on the high wire. These elements, however, represent "the bait," those who failed in their endeavors. Arms appear to reach and grope for one another and one partial figure appears to have been impaled by the oar, the fragments clearly offering images of struggle and lost hope (*Gericault's Raft of the Medusa* is called to mind). While the reference to those who tried to flee Cuba by boat and failed is clear, the artist maintains that he is trying to make a larger statement about life's journey, about how each of us experiences success and failure, both shattered and realized dreams.

This notion is reinforced by the third element in the installation, an eight-foot-tall house made out of suitcases, which the viewer is invited to enter. According to the artist, "the house" is the goal to which "the hunter" had aspired. It represents a safe haven, the new home and start for the Cuban and other immigrants who come to America seeking a better life. Suitcases carry the treasures and belongings of those who move, symbolically transporting their memories and cultures as well. In forming the house of suitcases, Castro enlisted the help of about 100 art students at Miami Dade. He asked them not only to collect old suitcases from their homes and from thrift shops, but to write on one side their hopes and aspirations so that he could build a house of dreams.

The installation draws upon the artist's past and present while looking ahead to his future, to new goals, opportunities and artistic creation. It appears that Castro has arrived at a point in life where he feels he has achieved a secure balance. The "hunter" has come home.