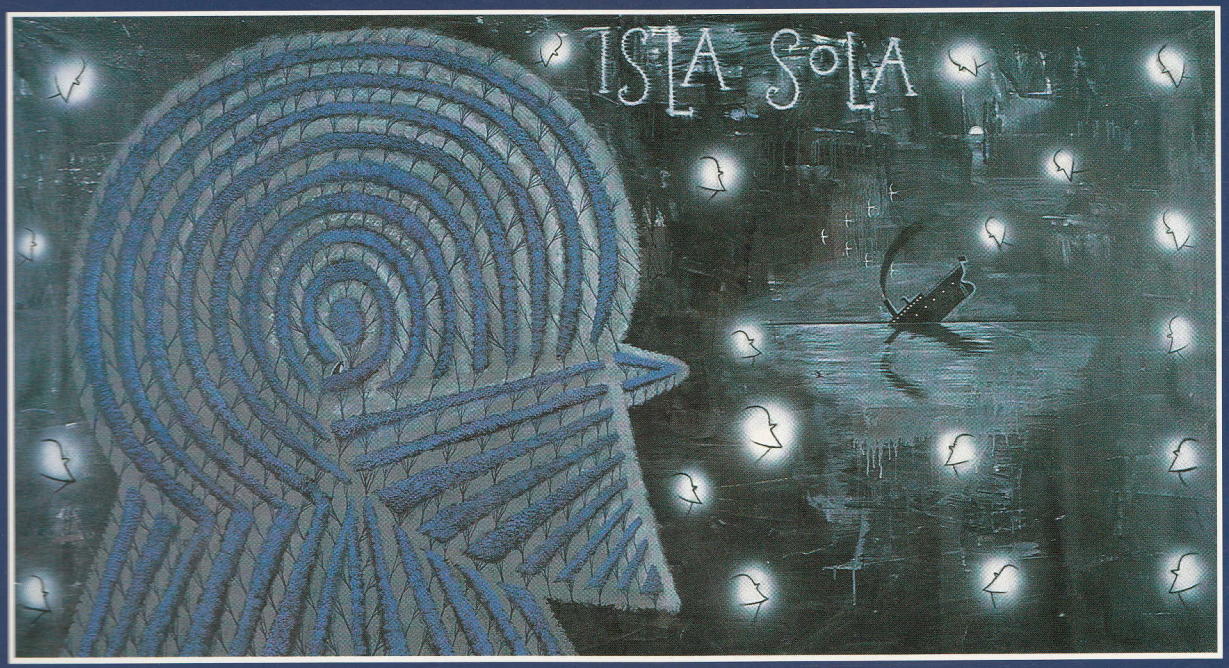
José Bedia



The Art Museum
AT FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
Miami, Florida

José Bedia

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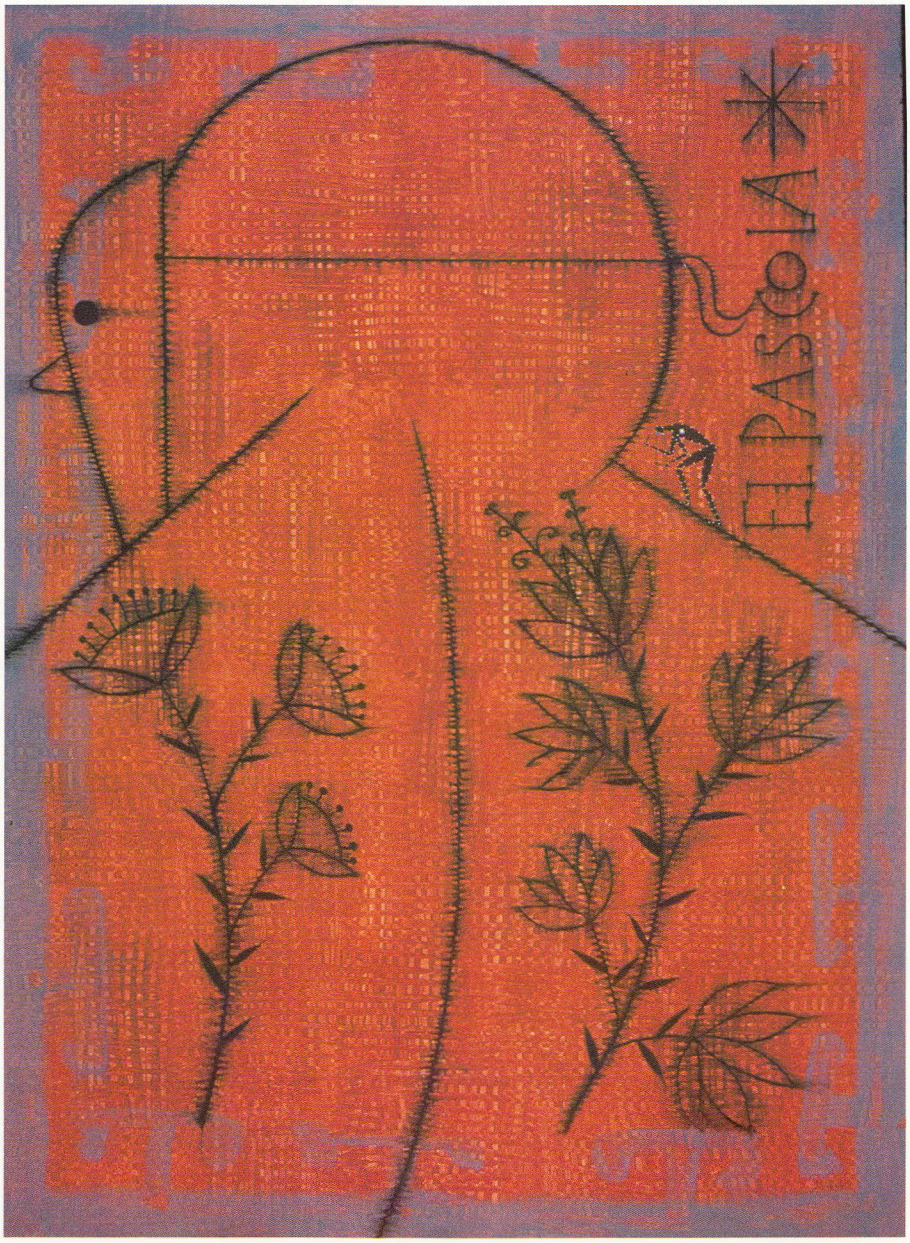
Curated by Dahlia Morgan
Essay by Roni Feinstein



El Pascola (The Easter Dancer), 1996, Acrylic and oil bar on canvas, 98 1/2 x 71 in.
On loan from the Bedia Family, courtesy of Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, FL.

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José Bedia

All of the work in this exhibition dates from the mid-90s to the present with a single exception-a narrative sequence composed of 13 drawings-probably executed 1984-85, a pivotal moment in José Bedia's life and art. Left behind for safekeeping when he departed from his native Cuba with his family in 1991 (settling first in Mexico City, then in Miami in 1993), the drawings were only recently returned to the artist's hands and are being shown here for the first time. These drawings, whose rather crude outline style of rendering lacks the grace and power of the graphic style that is to characterize Bedia's later work, nevertheless lay bare the foundations of Bedia's art.

Through pictures and a simple text, which is inscribed in Spanish below each of the images, the drawings tell the story of a "cultural hero" who appeared on earth and traveled across mountains and deserts until he met the first people ("hombres"). He gave them fire and taught them its uses, invented the bow and arrow, and taught them to cultivate the earth, to fish, to navigate on the seas, and to make ceramics and weavings. He showed them the power of plants and taught them about the stars and their influences.

This childlike tale of a culture's birth reveals the artist's interest in the roots and traditions of the world's ancient cultures. It displays his respect for those who live in harmony with nature and are attuned to the spirit world. That these interests on Bedia's part were not merely intellectual or anthropological but central to his very being is witnessed by the fact that it was around this time that Bedia, a product of sophisticated art academies in Havana, in a personal search for meaning and self-definition, embraced two indigenous American traditions that stand outside contemporary Western experience: Palo Monte and Lakota. Inspired by these traditions, Bedia developed a narrative art in which symbols and metaphors are used to tell stories about his own life journey as well as about the course of culture and man's place in the cosmos. While striking no poses, Bedia's art is didactic in intent: it asserts the need for the present to acknowledge the past, for contemporary culture to recognize and preserve aspects of ancient beliefs and traditions, most particularly the conception of the connectedness of humankind to the earth and all living things. To conserve these beliefs is to remain in contact with a sense of awe and wonder, as well as with the sense of purpose that endows the figures that inhabit the world of Bedia's art with mental, physical, and spiritual vitality and grace.

It was in 1983, at the age of 24, that Bedia became an initiate in Palo Monte, a religion developed several hundred years ago by African slaves in Cuba in which beliefs and practices of the Kongo were melded with the rites of Catholicism, to which the slaves were converted under colonial rule. When Bedia was a teenager, his mother began to go to black priests and priestesses to hear what saints and spirits advised, and Bedia himself visited a priest for the first time at the age of 16. In his initiation, a priest painted white signs upon his back, did a ritualized dance, cut seven crosses into his chest, and introduced him to the Palo altar and sacred objects. These objects, together with the deities, rituals, beliefs, and language of Palo Monte (as seen in the Kongo words and titles inscribed across many of Bedia's paintings and drawings) were to inform the content of his art.

Native American art and culture had fascinated the artist since early childhood; he had learned about it first through Western movies, then from extensive reading. In work created in Cuba between 1978-83 based on the theme of the American Indian, Bedia assumed the role of an anthropologist exploring aspects of tribal culture. For an exhibition in 1981, Bedia simulated the remains of a lost American Indian culture (creating shards, arrows and beads, as well as maps of archeological excavations) to comment upon cultural destruction. His focus on Native American warriors at this time was no doubt influenced by the fact that such figures are venerated in Palo Monte as protectors of spirits and ancient traditions.

In 1985, two years after his initiation into Palo Monte, Bedia spent several weeks at the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. There he was apprenticed to a Lakota shaman who taught him lore, beliefs, and prayers, as well as the use of ritual pipe smoking and the spiritual meaning of the vapors. Bedia participated in tribal ceremonies, entered the sweat lodge for the purpose of spiritual regeneration, and discussed with the elders the parallels between Palo Monte beliefs and their own. From this point, one finds in Bedia's art a melding of Kongo and Lakota traditions, which themselves often overlap. Central to both faiths is a belief in the deep kinship between man and nature.

Bedia has not only returned to the Rosebud Reservation several times during the past decade, but has also taken part in events at the Rocky Boy Chippewa-Cree Reservation in Montana and the Stoneys in Alberta, Canada, with the Cora, Seri and Tarahumara in Mexico and with the Yaqui in Mexico and Arizona. Through the years, the artist has amassed an extensive personal collection of tribal artifacts and objects of ritual-among them masks, deity figures, pots, vessels, vestments, spears, shields and textiles-which line the walls and shelves of his Miami home, grouped according to type and region of origin.

There is a long and important history of so-called "primitivism" in 20th Century Art-of artists looking to African and later to Native American artifacts as sources of inspiration. The influence of tribal objects on art produced in the early years of the century was largely formal: artists, from Picasso and Matisse to Brancusi and Klee, appropriated the high degree of abstraction found in primitive objects in order to develop a new, "modern" language of forms. In the 1940s, members of the Abstract Expressionist generation evoked the idea of the primitive in their art to say something universal about the human condition in the face of World War II. Many artists in the 1970s again looked to tribal art, most of them taking, as Bedia did in his early work, an anthropological approach. These artists simulated the artifacts and earthworks of Native American populations in an effort to "return to nature" and oppose an aesthetic of urban, industrial forms.

Bedia's art stands apart from these earlier examples in his having made a life choice to embrace the religions and philosophies of ancient cultures as his own. At the same time, however, Bedia is no primitive. He is a well-read, highly self-conscious artist working at the close of the century who uses his art to convey cultural messages. The collision between cultures-ancient and modern, indigenous and imperialist, native and immigrant, colonialist and the transported and enslaved-is one of his primary themes.

Although Bedia's art is filled with references to tribal beliefs and practices, the work itself is made up of graphic forms of his own invention. This said, some of his drawings, particularly

those on amate paper-a handmade bark paper of pre-Columbian origin with a long history of use among Mexican and other Central and South American cultures-share the strong silhouettes and flat, unmodulated color of Native American sources. However, the hybrid and other forms that appear in these drawings are Bedia's own. In the large-scale painting *El Pascola/ The Easter Dancer* (1996), (page 1) the outlined form of a masked figure's back fills the entire frame. Upon his shoulder is the silhouette of a tiny male figure engaged in the Mexican Yaqui Easter ritual indicated in the work's title. The woven-looking quality of the painting's surface (formed by striations made with the artist's fingers) alludes to the mats upon which such ceremonies are performed. Another example of Bedia's translation of the tribal into his own language of forms is found in the painting *Alla en las Kimbambas/ Way Over Yonder* (1996), (page 9) a work whose title is a Cuban idiom (a mixture of Spanish and African) referring to a place very far away. Collaged on the painting's vast surface is a small photocopy of an African sculpture from Zaire, which may have served as the source of inspiration for the work. Other than having appropriated the device of the raised open fist and perhaps a certain ferocity of expression from the African figure, the stylized rendering of the painting's flattened forms belongs to the conventions of Bedia's art.

Bedia works in a Western method of paint on canvas and ink on paper, as well as in the post-Conceptual mode of installation art. His is primarily a graphic art (color playing but a minor role) characterized by a caricatured yet sophisticated use of line. The sleek, long-limbed figures that populate his works derive more from comic book superheroes (i.e., Spiderman) than from tribal sources. (At one time, Bedia had wanted to be a cartoonist.) One finds in his work a subtle balancing of asymmetrical compositions, a knowing use of perspective, and an adept layering of forms in space (this despite the frequent use of deliberate, jarring jumps in scale), his technical mastery perhaps owing to his years of academic training. In a departure from this training, however, and in keeping with his desire for directness of expression, Bedia paints with his hands. Although small figures and details are laid in with a brush, the tracks left by the movement of his fingers across the surfaces of his paintings are generally evident (as was seen in *El Pascola*), (cover plate) their stroking of the surface enhancing the works' sensuality and tactility while also serving as aspects of content.

In the predominantly blue mural-scale painting *Nganga Ngombo/ The Sorcerer* (1997), (page 9) the head and shoulders of a large male figure with crosses drawn upon his shoulders is seen from the back. The heads and necks of some thirty-odd creatures (men, birds, and what appear to be horses, dogs, cats, and deer) are set full-face and profile in rows before him. Lines and circles drawn with the artist's fingers connect the interior of one figure's head with the next, asserting the interconnectedness of all living things. The same theme is expressed in an extended series of sketchbook drawings of 1994-5 in which a special colored pencil was used-one that with a single stroke turned red, then blue, then yellow, then green. In drawing after drawing, multicolored pencil strokes were used to connect the mouths (representing perhaps the breath, the speech and song, the very being) of one creature to another.

The links between all living things are given even more potent form in Bedia's numerous, often ingeniously conceived hybrids: the turtle-man, deer-man, mountain-man, tree-man,

island-man and so on. The last is found in the stunning, nocturnal painting *Isla Sola/Sole Island* (1997), (shown on cover) whose left half is dominated by a land mass in the shape of a man's head. This form is filled with blue trees arranged in patterns of lines and concentric arcs. At the center of the resulting maze-like configuration is the silhouette of a deer-like creature with white, shining eyes, perhaps the animal counterpart of the tiny figure shown in the right-half of the painting, swimming away from a sinking ship (an image long employed in Bedia's art as a metaphor for disappointment and loss). Distributed over the surface of the work are numerous men's profiles, which are enclosed in white circles set against the night sky. These may serve as yet further examples of Bedia's hybrid forms: they seem at once to be stars and spirits who watch the swimming man's journey through life.

In the foreground of the recently completed painting *Munan Seke/Savanna* (1998) (page 10) is a tree with men's heads, a kind of spirit tree (it may be noted in this context that Palo Monte means "trees of the sacred forest.") A bird is perched on one of its branches while a large deer lies calmly across the road, which extends into the distance from near the tree's base. A man in a large car, yellow headlamps lighting his way, is heading directly for the deer. In this confrontation between man, who is cloaked in the trappings of civilization (as represented by the large car or Cadillac, a rather old-fashioned symbol of material wealth and power) and the giant deer, it is clearly man who is headed for disaster: nature will remain unscathed.

It is man pitted against his inner self and his god (or gods) that seems to be the primary subject of Bedia's room-scale installation specially designed for the exhibition. (pages 18-19) The installation consists of images loosely painted on the gallery walls, complete with drips and splatters, as well as of a collection of found and assembled objects. At first glance the installation might appear amusing, even funny: the viewer is startled by the life-sized form of a surrealistic figure wearing odd pants and shoes (the pants seem to be made of sailcloth while the shoes are apparently old-fashioned, weighted diver's shoes covered with copper plates) standing near the center of the space, the top half of the figure composed entirely of tree limbs and branches. Investigation, however, reveals that the work illustrates a cautionary tale that embraces a profound, potentially tragic content.

On the wall behind the standing figure is what appears to be a deity, a kind of earth-man image. Painted in black with cryptic white markings inscribed on his back and shoulders, the figure's arms stretch out and embrace the whole of the space, turning corners, extending almost to the ends of the far and adjoining walls. Small painted branches extend from his form, and a tiny male figure taking long strides and smoking a ritual pipe is perched upon one of his arms. One arm ends in a painted hand holding a long piece of burlap (which the artist collected from a raft or *balsa* that recently arrived in Miami from Cuba), while the other terminates in the head of a dog with large white eyes, its snout overlapped by a little decorative shelf upon which are set a snifter (pear-shaped liqueur glass) filled with water and a cigar. A rope extends from around the dog's neck to the ground, weighed down by six bottles of different brands of *aguardiente* (firewater.) Six additional bottles of firewater sit on a wooden stool directly below the dog's head.

Three pairs of over-scale bamboo crutches, which lean against the gallery walls, seem to attempt to prop up the extended arms of the deity. Set against the corner of the room where

his form is painted is a diminutive bentwood chair with an animal skin seat. Upon it rests an *iruke*, a ritual brush made up of reeds bound together with twine decorated with intricate beadwork and shells.

Entitled *Mi Coballende (My Saint Lazarus)*, (page 19) the installation is a homage to Saint Lazarus, the patron saint of illness, who is known as *San Lazaro* in Spanish Roman Catholicism and Babalú-ayé in the Afro-Cuban lore of Santeria. According to legend, Lazarus was a wealthy, virile, handsome prince who became a homeless leper after having broken a promise to his god. The standing tree-man image represents the physical form of Lazarus forced to wander through the woods on crutches, while the two-dimensional, painted figure is Lazarus in his spiritual form. Lazarus was accompanied in his wanderings by dogs that eased his loneliness and assisted in the healing of his wounds. In Cuba today, there continues a tradition whereby on December 17th, the day devoted to the saint, people seeking relief from illness (both their own and of loved ones) make promises to humble and sacrifice themselves to Lazarus. They bring the saint offerings (here represented by the water and cigar) and *aguardiente* is sprayed over them to make them holy. The saint's imposing presence and reminders of his own sad fate caution supplicants (and museum visitors) to honor the promises they make.

As we approach the close of the millennium, Bedia asks us to heed the lessons of tradition and past cultures. In an electronic, digitized, computer-driven world of materiality and virtual reality, Bedia argues for personal integrity, direct communication and for an appreciation of the earth and its wonders. At the same time, his art bears testimony to the prodigious powers of the human mind and imagination and to the ability of a creative intelligence to produce works of meaning, magic and beauty.

Roni Feinstein

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