

Chris von Christiernson's Decade-Long Afro-Cuban Art Odyssey

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | SEPTEMBER 12, 2017

“Without Masks” at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA) in Havana, Cuba is an exhibition celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Without Masks: Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art collection. Founded in 2007 by London-based South African collector and businessman Chris von Christiernson in collaboration with Cuban curator Orlando Hernández and the Watch Hill Foundation, the collection consists of more than 450 works by 41 artists.

Curated by Orlando Hernández and showcasing 149 works by 40 artists from the last 30 years, the “Without Masks” exhibition at MNBA features works in a range of media spanning paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, and more by artists such as [Wifredo Lam](#), Bernardo Sarría Almogoea, Belkis Ayón Manso, [Manuel Mendive Hoyo](#), José Bedia Valdés, Juan Carlos Alom, Elio Rodríguez, Roberto Diago Durruthy, Andres Montalván, and Douglas Pérez Castro.

Commenting on the Without Masks collection, Hernández said: “What distinguishes the collection and renders it exceptional is that it assembles for the first time such a numerous and varied group of Cuban artists and works devoted to exploring two great themes that hitherto have been regarded separately, namely cultural and religious traditions of Africa in Cuba, and the multiple problems and conflicts related to race.”

To find out more about the “Without Masks” collection and the exhibition at MNBA, which is on show until October 2, BLOUIN ARTINFO’s Nicholas Forrest got in touch with Chris von Christiernson asked him some questions

When did you start collecting art and why?

It all started in 2007 when my wife Marina took me to Cuba for my birthday – a country I had always wanted to visit. By chance, we were introduced to Orlando Hernandez, a former curator at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana, and his wife Lucha. In addition to his work in curating, Orlando has also worked as an art critic, writer, anthropologist, and a practitioner of African religions. They invited us to their home where we encountered for the first time an evocative display of Afro-Cuban art which entirely populated their wall space.

Being Africans by birth, we immediately recognized the strong themes this work portrayed, not to mention its artistic skillfulness. Orlando soon convinced me, a novice collector, to collaborate with him to assemble an important representative collection of contemporary Afro-Cuban art - something that hitherto had not been done. By the end of that week, we had a hand-shake agreement that with Orlando's expertise and knowledge and with my enthusiasm and support we would assemble an important collection of this specific art. Thus began this fascinating and enjoyable journey, which, ten years later, has culminated in this "Without Masks" exhibition at the National Museum in Havana - the first of its kind to be staged in Cuba.

What is the mission and objective of the von Christierson Collection?

Our mission is to educate viewers on the deep and long-standing influences of Africa on Cuban society and to expose and unmask important truths around religion and race. Despite Christian colonial rule and the Cuban Revolution, African religions brought by slaves to the New World centuries ago still constitute the majority of religious practice in Cuba today.

The Collection also covers Cuba's presence in Africa through its recent involvement in the Angolan War. By exposing viewers to these powerful themes and eclectic, skillful artistic expressions, the Collection promotes a deeper understanding of the strong historical ties between Africa and the Americas, and by so doing it aspires to enhance cultural and political tolerance.

Could you tell us a bit about the The Watch Hill Foundation and its primary aims, goals, and activities?

The Watch Hill Foundation is a UK registered charitable organization established to pursue my family's charitable causes, mainly associated with Africa. To this day, it has focused primarily on educational and ecological causes, as well as on the promotion of the art and culture of the African Diaspora.

What was the inspiration and motivation for the "Without Masks" exhibition?

I am sure I have been influenced by my own African upbringing as a white in both colonial and Apartheid South Africa, followed by a significant period of adult life abroad. I was inspired by the discovery of Africa's cultural richness, alive and yet far removed from the continent itself, and of course by the unique circumstances that gave rise to this art. As someone who is an "explorer" by nature, I could not resist the motivation of starting something that had not yet been done before!

What are your main motivations and interests when it comes to collecting art?

What's most important to me is that I need to like the art and be interested in the subject matter. For me, art is more than pretty pictures, but rather the stories each piece tells and the message it conveys - the more profound the better.

Who are your favourite artists and which artists do you think are the most important to promote and acquire at the moment?

There are several artists I think are important to promote such as Jay Matamorros, Belkis Ayón, Pedro Alvarez, and Gibelto de la Nuez, all of whom have died yet leave behind significant legacies. These artists are represented in permanent museum collections within Cuba and abroad and remain relevant.

Important living artists include José Bedia Valdés, Manuel Mendive, Alexandre Arrechea, Carlos Garaicoa Manso, and Roberto Diago, all of whom are well-known and established in the international art world. In addition, there are exceptional photographic artists such as Juan Carlos Alom, Marta María Pérez and Rene Peña. And finally, there are the African religious artists such as Santiago Olazábal and Julián González Pérez, as well some other extremely talented artists such as Douglas Pérez, Elio Rodríguez, Alexis Esquivel and Andrés Montalván.

However, please note that these artists I have mentioned comprise less than half of those in the Collection. All those not mentioned are extremely talented in their own rights, any of whom, I believe, could become internationally important in the future.

How did your childhood and your experiences growing up influence and effect your love of art and the way you view and perceive art?

My mother was an artist which gave me an appreciation from an early age. Having spent my formative years in South Africa, I have always been attracted to the art of Africa and I have childhood memories exploring caves in the Drakensberg Mountains for Bushman rock paintings. I am fascinated by the recent archaeological discovery of the oldest known human art at Blombos Cave on the southern Cape coast of South Africa. My wife has a great appreciation and eye for art and she certainly influenced me to embark upon this journey, and our daughter is artistically talented and an anthropological documentary maker. All these influences must have influenced me to take on this unexpected yet fascinating project.

What has been your most memorable experience as an art collector and why?

My most memorable experience has been this culmination of a decade of collecting in the opening of our Without Masks exhibition at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana, where it all began. Some 500 persons attended. To have had so many of our artists present, to welcome leading scholars on Afro-Cuban art, and to witness the huge expression of interest of the Cuban public, has been hugely satisfying.

For me, the most touching moment was to witness the tearful emotion of an elderly Cuban actor who told me “We have been waiting so long for an exhibition like this to be staged in Cuba - it is almost too late, but not quite!”

Link:

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