

Time of Fracture: Reencountering the Work of Florencio Gelabert

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It is rare privilege to reimmerge oneself in the work of an artist after a two-decade hiatus. In 1998, on the occasion of Florencio Gelabert's solo exhibition at Ambrosino Gallery in Miami, I wrote an essay titled "Between Nature and Culture: The Poetics of Materials and Objects."¹ This essay related Gelabert's work to apocalyptic environmental concerns tied to global warming and to the pervasive sense of an impending disaster, which came to the fore towards the end of the last millennium. The exhibition, which was titled "Sound of Forest," explored the affinity between nature and culture, the historical and the contemporary. It featured sculptures in which the dialectic interrelations between the object and the materials from which it was made, or between the material and the objects that could be made from it, shaped the tactic underlying the work as well as its poetic meaning.

A retrospective gaze cast from a distance of 20 years seems to reveal that Gelabert has refined his expressive means through a process of elimination. "Displacements," his current exhibition, reflects this process of distillation, restriction and reduction. The exhibition features eight geometric works — two free-standing sculptures and six reliefs — composed of white marble and black granite (constructed with steel bars). The arrangement of these works, which seem to have been cut out of square panels, initially calls to mind children's games involving folded paper forms or cutouts, which can be assembled and disassembled. A more careful gaze, however, reveals that the edges of these sculptures bear the traces of a "natural" fracture. The parts of each sculpture appear to have cracked accidentally. Breaking away from one another, they extend outwards or inwards with an elasticity that goes against the nature of marble, as if propelled by an invisible force operating from within. At first glance, these sculptures appear to be purely abstract works — as if Malevich's white or black square had been torn while

Displacement V

White marble,
steel structure
with rusted patina
and resin

43" x 41" x 6" · 2018

1. Tami Katz-Freiman, "Between Nature and Culture: Poetics of Materials and Objects – New Work by Florencio Gelabert," brochure text for a solo exhibition at Ambrosino Gallery, April 1998. See: www.katzfreiman.com



Displacement

Glass ceramic, scorched wood, aluminum structure

3' x 3' x 10" • 2015

Private Collection

Photo by Alejandro Taquechel

erupting into a three-dimensional, minimalist composition that manually replicates the effect of cracks and crevices in a stone surface. Yet an in-depth acquaintance with Gelabert's work will direct the gaze to the distilled image of the rupture itself, which has become the solitary protagonist carrying the work's entire narrative charge: a charge that builds on nostalgic images of Cuban ruins rooted in Gelabert's personal biography, while referencing a global ecological cataclysm in a world that is on the verge of collapse.

A retrospective examination of Gelabert's oeuvre will reveal that cracks, crevices, fractures and tears appeared early on in both his sculptures and his drawings, always showing up in the context of some kind of architectural disaster. They were inevitably accompanied by the organic or other element that had caused the shattering, yet the origin of the eruption remained unclear: the vegetation erupting out of the wall in *Birth* (2008), wooden logs pushing out of a wall in *The Leak* (2010), amorphous organic elements that shattered the tiles as they pushed through in *Meteor* (2015), or which could be glimpsed through cracks and crevices in the series of drawings *Crack* (2009). The fracture was always there, yet now it remains alone as both theme and object, with nothing emerging out of it. Gelabert seems to have done away with the weight of narrative, apparently returning to abstract formal values that resonate with classical modernism. Yet the question about the nature of the fracture — an earthquake, war, neglect, or self-destruction — continues to remain open.

The origins of this conclusive trajectory can be traced to works from recent years such as the crudely stuccoed brick wall rising on either side of a slab resembling concrete in *Ruin III* (2014). More than anything, however, it was *Displacement* (2015) — a glass ceramic tile leaning against a wall — that heralded the current exhibition and gave it its title. The glass ceramic plate was intentionally cracked by Gelabert. Its upper right part was severed from the support, while its lower quarter seemed to be suspended in midair, about to break off. This work was featured as part of a solo exhibition² concerned entirely with representations of material ruin, a much

more narrative context which facilitated one's understanding of the metaphor. By contrast, the works in the current exhibition are stripped of narrative crutches, and could easily be read as abstract objects devoid of content and concerned with pure form. The title of the exhibition, "Displacements," locates us in a poetic zone that conveys an authentic sense of crisis — a time of fracture.

Representations of fracture are related, in Western culture, to images of ruins and archaeological vestiges imbued with a Romantic quality. This discourse reached its apogee in the 18th and 19th centuries as part of an enchantment with mysterious, dark, ancient and chaotic elements. Images of ruins and the construction of artificial ruins were considered the height of good taste during these two centuries. Following Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of the ruin and the image of the ruin employed by Jacques Derrida, this discourse was revived some 200 years later, when allegorical and metaphorical ruins were related to the destruction wrought by war or to the shock waves of capitalism and progress. Since the turn of the current millennium, the ruin has been examined from a postcolonial perspective. In her article "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," Ann Stoler wrote of ruins as manifestations of concealed and exposed destruction etched into the landscape under colonial rule. Stoler called to strip the colonial ruin of its Romantic, idealized aura, pointing to the forces that had produced and preserved it in the name of political, national, and economic interests.³

This argument may be bolstered by the fact that Gelabert's period of artistic incubation took place in Havana during the 1980s (he left Cuba in 1990 as part of the massive artist exodus). Like many other Cuban artists, he related in his work to urban decline, while casting an ironic gaze at the West's Romantic enchantment with the dilapidated buildings and debris filling the neglected city. As he writes in his artist's statement, "For over three decades, I have constantly tried to alter the language of sculpture by creating pieces that explore the architecture of ruins, history and nostalgia. In these pieces I tackle themes that are recurring in my work, such as the loss of identity, loneliness, violence and displacement. **I try to**

2. "Journeys: A Dialogue with Time," Museum of Art + Design, The Freedom Tower (MoAD), Miami, 2015.

3. A.L. Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (2008), pp. 191–219.

recreate imaginary sites in ruins. Their destruction could have been intentionally brought on by man, or caused by a natural disaster.”

The choice of Italian Carrara marble, a classical material associated with traditional sculpture that belongs to the realm of the past, in order to attend to melancholic themes pertaining to the present, positions Gelabert as an artist specializing in the manipulation of materials. Marble or granite are affiliated, in his work, with the sphere of architecture (walls, flooring), rather than with the historical sphere of sculpture. In this series of sculptures, he does not carve an image out of marble as did the classical sculptors, but rather invests much effort in meticulously crafting the edges of the broken stones. As a result, their fracture lines appear to have been randomly created — like a kind of sculptural *trompe l’oeil*. The tension between the creation of a fracture and its healing, construction and deconstruction, beauty and destruction, formality and disorientation, imbues the works with a faltering, fragmented quality. These variations on fracturing externalize the process of breakdown as an inability or an unwillingness to make a decisive, complete statement.

Gelabert’s sculptural charisma resides in between modernism — above all American Minimalism and *arte povera* — and a postmodern pastiche of different languages and materials. As Elizabeth Cerejido has astutely remarked, the uniqueness of Gelabert’s minimalism lies in its emphasis on “the psycho-emotional dimensions with which objects (and materials) are potentially imbued. In that sense Gelabert sharply diverges from the ‘rational’ and ‘cold’ tenets of American Minimalism.”⁴ In the text I wrote in 1998, I also attended to the manner in which minimalism became, for Gelabert, a lyrical and expressive means. Although this essay was written 20 years ago, the following observation seems to point to a distilled essence that has now become fully manifest: “Such an original combination allowed Gelabert to open a new channel of ‘expressive minimalism’ — a channel of expression charged with poetic values, which seem to have been condensed into a capsule concealing the entire possible range of symbolic and metaphoric potential embodied in materials.”

4. Elizabeth Cerejido, “Between Materiality and Metaphor: Florencio Gelabert’s Sculptural Journeys,” *ART Oncuba*, September 2015, pp. 66–69.

Artist Statement

For over three decades, I have constantly tried to alter the language of sculpture by creating pieces that explore the architecture of ruins, history and nostalgia.

Since my beginnings as an artist in Cuba, I’ve always been interested in expressing myself through works marked by chaos and a constant search, within my own individual practice, to find new relationships between spectators, my ideas and the world around us. My initial works consisted of architectural remains, at times found in the street and, at other times, created by me and displayed on the ground.

“Displacements” is a series of sculptures conceived entirely between 2017 and 2018 and are fashioned out of marble, granite, bars and steel plates. Tackling recurring themes, such as the loss of identity, loneliness and violence, this series is an attempt to recreate memories that have impacted my own art, paying tribute to remembrances from my childhood, during which my father encouraged me and my brother to experiment in his studio, using cardboard and scissors to create geometric shapes—cubes, triangles, rectangles and circles — and vacillating between the real and the imaginary.

My journey in altering the language of sculpture and in my interaction with architecture and nature has been a constant dialogue with spectators which I will continue to explore in my work.