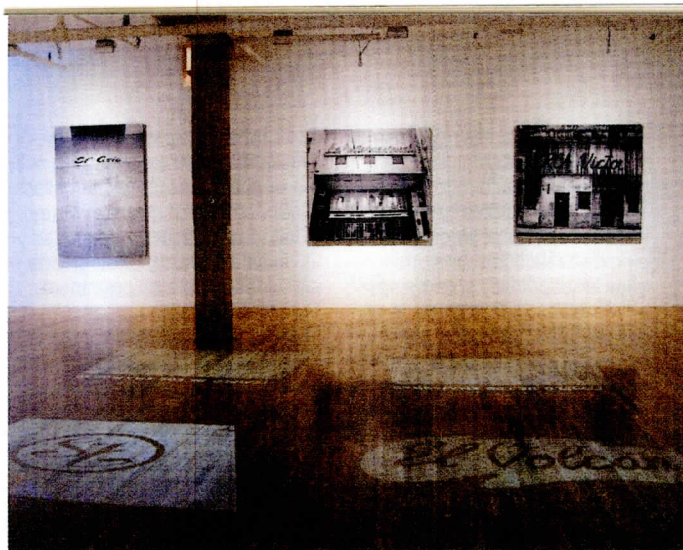


Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS



View of Carlos Garaicoa's exhibition "The drawing, the writing, the abstraction," 2006; at Lombard-Freid.

Carlos Garaicoa at Lombard-Freid

There have now been two generations of Cuban artists actively probing the lyric tragedy of their island country's recent history. Carlos Garaicoa, romantic poet of urban architecture and decay, has emerged as one of the most eminent. His sometimes enigmatic projects have used photographs and installations to explore implicit meanings in Havana's crumbling statuary, and have also included models of utopian cities. Compared with the symphonic sweep of these previous ruminations, his recent exhibition, "The drawing, the writing, the abstraction," seemed more a chamber piece, albeit full of texture and melancholy. Eight largish (59 3/4-by-48-inch), black-and-white, appealingly grainy photographs, all from 2006, are mounted on Formica. Half depict decrepit early '60s commercial facades; the rest are of vintage sidewalk entryways with inlaid logos. All the names have heroic or emotional resonance: "La Epocha," "La Republica," "Konfort," etc. On each, Garaicoa has superimposed letters formed by thread stretched between straight pins stuck into the photographs; the lettering casts shadows in such a way that it partially overwrites—or, to the viewer, standing above or below, "completes"—the message conveyed by the signage. In the process, it forges a commentary on Cuba's failed dreams.

A photograph of the dismal entry to what seems a long-closed nightclub features a door's battered metal kick plate, in front of which the name Rose-land is set into terrazzo paving.

Threaded letters beneath it read (in Spanish) "This Land of Roses." The mournful haiku continues (in English) "Roses in the land," followed by (in Spanish) "Over/A temple of Death." Similarly, above an aging storefront sporting an old RCA Victor sign, thread-writing interacts with the title itself to create a new phrase: "PueRCA VICTORiA" (Filthy Victory). Cursive thread-script below intones (in translation) "that honors us/UNSPEAKABLE life/the one that we honor." This mock-heroic language, of course, pays homage to Fidel Castro with all the mixed feelings the venerable dictator engenders. It is infused with the biting irony that animates all these works.

In-another room, four slidelike video projections featured more pavement logos, the names heavy with mixed meanings (Washington, Sin Rival, El Volcan). Now part of the international art festival set, Garaicoa has begun transferring his insights about Havana as locus of tragic aspiration to other cities, including New York.

But his touchstone remains the Cuban capital, a metropolis that, as those who have visited it know, remains frozen in 1961. Traveling its streets, one is invited to imagine how things were, could have been and might be in the future. Garaicoa's postmodern rendering of the "city as text," which focuses on names like "La Gran Via" and (with a sidelong reference to the Communist anthem) "La Internacional," wittily reminds us of urban commerce's pretensions. But it also acknowledges, through the artist's pin-stabbed overwriting, that we constantly project our own desires, memories and frustrations on the demanding, failing world around us.

-Carey Lovelace