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ON RENÉ PEÑA

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The Black Sublime

I

There are no black angels depicted in the history of Western art.¹ With *Untitled* (archangel) (2018), René Peña inserts a monumental black angel into the void of art history (fig. 1). The work represents a male figure (the artist himself) as a black black-winged angel.² Here, set against an impenetrable black abyss, the figure levitates with his back to the viewer in a triple representation of blackness. He is naked. His body is shown from the upper buttocks to the brows of his face. The torso twists counterclockwise in space to position the head in profile, as if the angel has just become aware of the viewer's presence behind him. His limbs slowly emerge from the darkness, a visual deferment of form that serves to emphasize the glossy pair of black wings anchored to the figure's back, ready to rustle and, if necessary, take flight. The wings cup the angel's upper back, encircling mysterious scars that interrupt his smooth skin surface, archiving violence and the extended life of a body that has seen and experienced *things* that will always remain



Figure 1. René Peña, *Untitled*, 2018; photograph.

unknown. The artist's technical control of light through a subdued tonal range also suggests narrative intent. In places where the black feathers completely reflect light, they *appear* white, pointing to the illusion of whiteness and, through formal inversion, the signifying capacity of blackness.

Untitled (archangel) inserts itself into the totalizing narrative of Western art history and unsettles the claims this history makes through historic black absence. This image objectifies and then disassembles this void by formally asserting the sublime qualities of blackness within a transcendent form. It conceptually disavows any reading of black skin, black surfaces, and blackness itself as signs of moral darkness notably seen in Edmund Burke's eighteenth-century enlightenment story that



Figure 2. Peña creating the Archangel, 2018. Photographs by the artist.

revealed the moral roots of racial determinism embedded in contemporary frames of looking, famously recounted in Paul Gilroy's seminal text *The Black Atlantic*.³ Peña's oeuvre exhibits a profound understanding of the historical stakes of looking for black people and *at* black people. His practice troubles the presumed objectivity and spatial and temporal authority of the colonial eye and imperial art histories to reveal the ways power shapes how one sees (see fig. 2).

This work folds time to examine the historical *presentness* of blackness in Cuba, the greater Caribbean, and the Americas by forcibly fracturing temporally bound, Western frames of looking. Like the absented black bodies in Western art history, in these spaces, far from transcendent, black ontology is experienced as a social affliction, a moral failing in societies such as Cuba's, where social, economic, and political access has been historically overdetermined by one's position in hierarchies of color despite the rhetoric of revolution. *Untitled* (archangel) holds in its image, form, and signification the horror *and* transcendent capacity of black skin, black ontology, black being, or what I describe conceptually as *the black sublime*. Drawing on the work of Immanuel Kant, I argue that in a global Caribbean context *the work* enacts epistemic sovereignty through its assertion of blackness as a sublime condition. I will trace an interwoven epistemological thread that links Kant's notion of the sublime to European imaginings of blackness, Cuba, slavery, pseudoscience, art, and criminality in order to position how blackness historically enters Peña's work and is then critically repositioned beyond the dreams of a once aspirational raceless society to speak to matters of race more broadly.

II

In one of the most studied treatises to emerge from the European Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant described the sublime as something possessing the capacity to overwhelm us, an infinite thing or event that pushes one's mind beyond its ability to interpret, comprehend, or contain it.⁴ The sublime describes the quality of immeasurability—God, beauty, and nature; death and evil—things that exist beyond man's control that occupy a physical or conceptual space where the descriptive capacity of language fails. For Peña, this is where blackness lives.

The art historian Paul Neill notes that Kant was an important Enlightenment figure in Cuba.⁵ His ideas helped shaped theories of race during a period when Cubans, basking in the wealth of a burgeoning slave-based plantation economy in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, sought a new moral excuse for the continuation of slavery. Despite revolutions, abolitions, and emancipations happening in territories that encircled the island, to maintain its economy, Cuba kept true to the racial hierarchies that organized slave societies. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the island's census indicated that there were far more black and mixed-race persons on the island than those of European descent, Cuba's leaders, fearing a repeat of Haiti and determined to protect its plantation economy, implemented the *blanqueamiento* program. This was a far-reaching policy intended to literally whiten the Cuban population by alleviating asymmetries in population numbers and easing the racial fears of the economic and political minority of European descent that governed the island.⁶

Kant's racial theorization was useful in this context because as a *religious* text it affirmed the prognostications of pseudosciences that equated embodiment and skin color with moral capacity and criminal depravity. The darker the body, the more prone to immorality and criminal behavior one was seen to be. Though these racial theories were later debunked, we grapple with their afterlives and the interdependent and interdisciplinary knot of racial formation to this day. The scientific methods introduced by and fine-tuned in nineteenth-century phrenology to measure and record the physiognomy of races and assign meaning, for example, became foundational to teaching life drawing classes in art academies the world over and continue to do so to this day. Phrenology also laid the groundwork for Western criminology, which depended on the "scientific" assessment of physical traits to determine criminality. This was most famously observed in a suite of commissioned portraits of "criminals" and "mental patients" by the French artist Théodore Géricault in the early nineteenth century. Rather than by the sitter's name, each portrait was labeled according to his or her criminal proclivity, such as *The Kleptomaniac* (1822) or *Woman with a Gambling Mania* (1822).

With the advent of photography, the belief that one's moral failings could be determined by physical traits was transferred to this new media, and the "mug shot" then became the principal *scientific* instrument to determine physical signs of criminality. This is of particular importance in the context of Cuba because, as Kris Juncker has shown, the early work of the renown Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz was heavily dependent on similar methods of *scientific assessment*, and it was this work that helped shape public policies aimed at Afro-Cubans' religious practices, resulting in growing restrictions placed on this population by the state, whether individuals practiced or not. The signification of blackness on the island, as elsewhere, was being driven by factors completely external to black being. While this is an attenuated summary of a deeply complex and interwoven process, it is known that Ortiz completed his studies at the University of Madrid in the area of criminal ethnography, which Juncker describes as "a late Victorian field of study that attempted to predict the criminal dispositions of individuals by means of their race and culture."⁷⁷ While the book based on his thesis, *Los negros brujos (The Black Sorcerers)*, focused on Afro-Cuban religious practices, it also sought "to determine the visual characteristics of Afro-Cuban criminality."⁷⁸ His typology of the Afro-Cuban sorcerer as criminal was adopted by Cuban police and politicians to support policies aimed at this population. In other words, the state's curtailing of Afro-Cuban religious practices based on Ortiz's research became a surrogate for policing blackness in the twentieth century.⁹

The assignment of morality to race in Cuba deeply rooted in Enlightenment thought was not eradicated by the 1959 revolution. Instead, its historical life demonstrates the degree to which inequality resulting from perceptions of race remain embedded in contemporary Cuban society. Though several hard-won gains have been made on the island, the rhetoric of social and political equality through revolution has served to hide the reality of racial inequality. Uncovering this ideological drag has centered the work of scholars and cultural workers such as Pedro Sarduy, Ann Helg, Jafari Allen, Alejandro de la Fuente, and others notably working in a range of disciplines that points to the epistemic complexity of racial constructions. Their scholarship has illuminated how access to better paying jobs in the tourism industry, better health care, and education are still largely determined by one's visible distance from ontological blackness.¹⁰ More fundamentally, the work of these scholars redress the ways value systems shaped by racialization have impacted national memory by the way historical narratives, particularly those of the visual and performing arts, as well as gender, sexual, and political histories, have been written.¹¹ This is the social and cultural milieu from which Peña's art emerges. *Untitled (archangel)* conceptually examines how access to resources and opportunities is marshaled on the island and how social inequalities emerge from, and become consolidated by, this access.¹² Within the Kafkaesque space of Cuba, black ontology becomes marked as a social affliction through the limiting effects of black skin. Peña's oeuvre interrogates what it means to be raced and gendered, what it means to have ones being framed within a system of reductive signification mapped onto the body one occupies. It explores the possibilities of transcendence within sociopolitical spaces but also art history.

III

Known for his moody black-and-white photographs of ordinary Cuban domestic interiors, René Peña began turning his camera on himself around 1992. In these early photographs, he purposefully reduces the personal space between a nude, black male subject and the audience (see fig. 3). The images lie close to the picture plane to fully dominate the composition, becoming irreducible. Though focused on Peña's body, the images disavow assumptions of autobiography. His manipulation of light and surface allow for a degree of ambiguity that decouples the body from racial and sexual binaries and the social and political associations embedded therein. The intentional directness of these images is in stark contrast to the quietude of his earlier photographic interiors, which were often presented from oblique, unexpected angles (see fig. 4). The photographs provide an unfamiliar visual path into the private spaces of everyday Cubans, in ways akin to Berenice Abbott's engagement of New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Peña, the Cuban home is no less sublime a space than the vastness of Abbott's New York; each frame envisions a world from an unconsidered point of view, its tonal range precisely heightened. In Peña's series, the blacks are blacker, and the whites are grays appear brighter because of their contrasting relationship to the blacks. These tonal relations are both technically and conceptually imagined. In *Untitled (Madonnas)*, from the *Hacia Adentro* series (1989–93), the viewer is in intimate association with a female figure whose back is turned toward the picture plane (fig. 5). Her body is rendered in a flat, almost undifferentiated shade of black. It absorbs light like a shadow. Dressed only in a white bra, with

her hair pulled back in a loose bun, the woman appears to be in mid-motion, leaning out of the right side of the compositional frame, the axis of her body echoing that of the metal bar securing the exterior door. Compositionally and conceptually, her body is in direct opposition to the picture of the Madonna hanging on a nail in the groove of a window or door frame that appears perma-



Figure 3. René Peña, *Untitled*, de la serie *Ritos*, 1992; photograph.



Figure 4. René Peña, *Untitled*, de la serie *Hacia Adentro*, 1989–93; photograph.



Figure 5. René Peña, *Untitled*, de la serie *Hacia Adentro*, 1989–93; photograph.

nently shuttered. The emphatic realness of this intimate encounter is juxtaposed against the unknowability of the figure beyond the rubrics of race and gender and the ambiguity of the moment captured, adding greater signification to its heightened tonal range.

Unlike the interiors, the figurative works are immeasurable, with no known markers to ground the viewer. They deny the passive possession afforded the gaze and instead demand contemplation through a crucially limited distance that denies access to the haptic elements of the image; one can look but one cannot touch. These works appear less subtle, more intentional, orchestrated and visually signified as opposed to knowable. However, by the end of the 1990s, Peña's works started to further disassociate elements in his pictures from indexical readings tied to their symbolic life in society. They began to put the constructed aspects of vision, the culturally informed lens through which we see in sharper relief. In the language of light, Peña's images now defamiliarize and unsettle rote readings. During this period, Peña's work pushed against the limits of stereotypical significations of the black body. Works such as *Untitled* (knife; 1994–98) are distilled and direct but address mythologies around black male sexuality-violence and death as well as associations between toxic masculinity and blackness (fig. 6). *Untitled* (lace; 2009) lingers at the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality, to disturb easy readings of the performance of singular and discreet identities (fig. 7).



Figure 6. René Peña, *Untitled*, 1994–98; photograph.



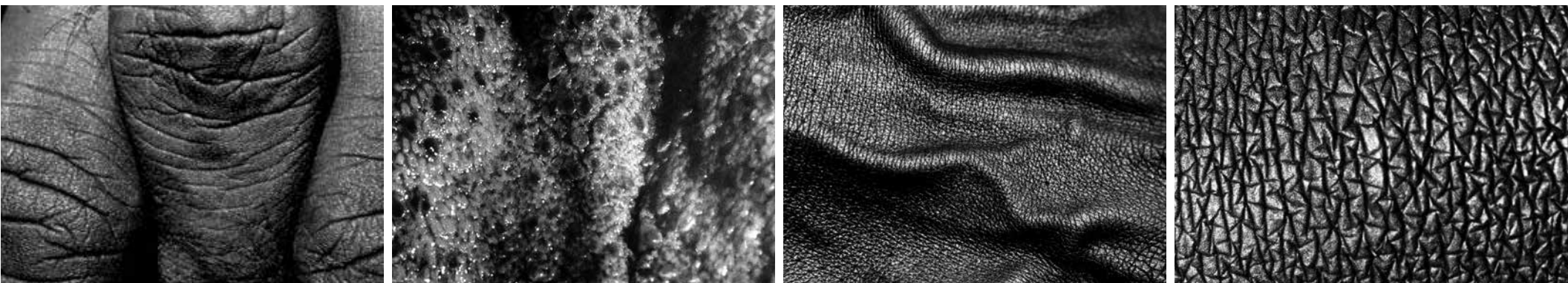
Figure 7. René Peña, *Untitled*, Lace Mantilla, 2009; photograph.

In the series *Man Made Materials* (1998/2001), the artist reaches a level of nuance and play that prefigures the sublime qualities of *Untitled* (archangel). Peña comes in even closer to the surface of his body, abstracting the parts from the whole and disassociating what viewers see from their prior perceptions of the black body (see figs. 8, 9, 10a, and 10b). These works asks viewers to contemplate the critical capacity of the black skin surface in postmodern Cuban society and global Caribbean imaginaries and are purposefully disorienting. The composition and discursive intentions of works such as *Untitled* (fingers), *Untitled* (tongue), and *Untitled* (skin), and later *Untitled* (archangel), turn the implications of Kant's racial theories inside out, unmasking them as chimeras. What was once thought theoretically impossible to achieve through black being, through signifying opacity, now overwhelms us to reveal the persistence of a black imaginary separate from its ontology. Peña has expressed a level of bemusement by the way his work has been seen within labyrinthine constructions of race, not just on the island but beyond its borders. He recounted to me a story from an exhibition in which this series of photographs was first shown.¹³ A white woman came up to him, insisting that *Untitled* (Skin) was an incred-

ible image of an *elefante*. For Peña, who was bemused by the observation, the woman's unquestionable faith in her misrecognition and the ease with which she projected her knowledge onto the artist standing before her, whose skin had been misread as that of an elephant, affirmed the conceptual dimensions of the project.

Untitled (archangel) takes this work a step further. It makes a claim for blackness as a sublime condition rather than a sign of darkness, or of unknowability, by disaggregating the ideology of black skin from the humanity of black being through form. The withdrawal of light and the evocation of darkness emerge as compositional characters in the work, serving to heighten its narrative potential by subduing formal contrasts, thus inverting the affective potential of light and dark in a zero-sum game. Like the ekphrastic image embedded in the memory of Cuban author Antonio Benítez-Rojo—two black women leisurely walking and talking on a late summer day during the Cuban missile crisis when the island was under threat of nuclear annihilation—at this point the descriptive will of language fails, and in “a certain kind of way,” black being enters the sublime.¹⁴

In the years leading up to *Untitled* (archangel), Peña created a series of photographic images using his body, that reinterpreted canonical artworks from Western art history. The series is in conversation with works by a number of black diasporic artists—such as Kerry James Marshall, Mickelene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley, Omar Victor Diop, and Awol



Figures 8a through 8d. René Peña, *Untitled*, from the series *Man Made Materials*, 1998–2001; photograph.

Erizku—interested in disassembling the mythologies of art histories and the intentionality of black absence in it while making a claim to these histories. Peña's interventions are clearly situated in personalized environments or symbolic conditions, as seen in *Marat Negro (after David)* (2009), the artist's take on Jacques David's *Death of Marat* (1796) (see figs. 11a and 11b), or in the figure emerging from blackness in *Samurai (after Donatello)* (2006), a redux of Donatello's *David* (1430–40). By taking on the subject of the ultimate heavenly creature in black in *Untitled (archangel)*, Peña brings together the conceptual threads from his oeuvre to form a new discursive plateau and generate a discourse that enunciates fully in the social and political contexts in which the work was conceived as well as in the history and traditions of art making to which he lays claim to, even as he reimagines them. Here, unmoored from the strictures of symbolic regimes of race, the work demands a new accounting. Scarred, yet beautiful and rising, *Untitled (archangel)* lays claim to everlasting life in the face of contemporary challenges to living—in Cuba, in the Caribbean, in the Americas, and in the world—while black.



Figure 11a. Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, 1796 detail; oil on canvas, 65 x 50 in.



Figure 11b. René Peña, *Marat Negro (after David)*, 2009; photograph.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This statement is based on the known archive. By “Western art,” I mean the historical development and designation of art history as a discipline in Europe and the United States, in concert with what has been described as the project of the West. This established the arts of Europe and later America as the central fulcrum of modernity, the standard bearer in which all other art practices were regarded as being peripheral to. In this history that extends from a non-African Egypt through Greece to Rome, on to Constantinople, into medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and modern Europe, and across the Atlantic to postwar America, there is no record of an angel in the heavenly realm of Christianity taking the form of anything other than a white person. There are examples of black angels in Ethiopian art and early Christian art in West Africa, which in the Ethiopian case predates European Christianity, but not in the art history René Peña was trained in.
- 2 As I discuss later in this essay, Peña is engaged in an ongoing conversation with canonical images from the history of Western art.
- 3 In Gilroy’s recounting, Edmund Burke conveys how the mere sight of an unnamed black woman, with her dark, black skin, produced feelings of terror in a boy whose sight had recently been restored. In the story, Burke views black skin—black ontology—as equivalent to conceptual darkness; darkness (understood explicitly as the absence of light and implicitly as the absence of morality) is not just signified by but embedded in the skin of a black woman. He surmises that for the boy, freed from the darkness of blindness, to look upon dark “things” such as a black rock, or in this case, a dark-skinned black person, initially translated psychologically as a return to the horror of blindness, where the black body performed the blinding effect of light, becoming a type of sublime force. The sublime embodies both beauty and horror, a capacity on full display in, for example, Arthur Jafa’s 2016 film *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 9–10; and Arthur Jafa, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, digital color video with sound, 7:30, 2016.
- 4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 45–232.
- 5 Paul Niell, *Urban Space as Heritage in Late Colonial Cuba: Classicism and Dissonance on the Plaza de Armas of Havana, 1754–1828* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 216.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 205, 209–11. Niell discusses the practice of whitening by the Havana society and the philosophy of “social improvement” that couched the fear of a dominant black and mixed-race population that drove it. Europeans were encouraged to migrate to Cuba in response to the promise of free land, no taxes, and the chance of social and economic advancement. Entirely white towns were planned to accommodate the arrivants.
- 7 Kristine Juncker, *Afro-Cuban Religious Arts Popular Expressions of Cultural Inheritance in Espiritismo and Santería* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 13.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 12–40.
- 9 As Miguel Arnedo posits, for all the recognition accorded Ortiz, his work betrays not only an acceptance of the racial hierarchies that placed those of African descent and their seminal contributions to an understanding of modern Cuba at the bottom, but also that how this view undergirded his theoretical position meant that his concept of transculturation worked best when African culture was seen to disappear into what was understood as European culture or whiteness. What Ortiz proposed could be described, one hundred years after the practice was first introduced on the island, as cultural *blanqueamiento*. See Miguel Arnedo, “Arte blanco con motivos negros: Fernando Ortiz’s Concept of Cuban National Culture and Identity,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 20, no. 1 (2001): 88–101.

- 10 Pedro Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).
- 11 In art history, the contributions of black Cuban artists, particularly those drawing on African-derived religious and social practices, were in large part written out of Cuban art history in an concerted effort to align the Cuban story with Western modernism. Art history projects like *Queloides: Race and Racism in Cuban Contemporary Art* (Havana and Pittsburgh, 2010–11) have played a key role in this recovery work, and works such as Sarduy and Stubbs's 2000 *Afro-Cuban Voices* and Jafari Allen's 2011 *¡Venceremos?* are examples of this type of scholarship coming from various disciplines over time. Alejandro de la Fuente, ed., *Queloides: Race and Racism in Cuban Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); Sarduy and Stubbs, *Afro-Cuban Voices*; and Jafari S. Allen, *¡Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 12 René Peña, email communication with the author, 9 July 2018.
- 13 René Peña, in conversation with the author, 2 May 2018, Miami, Florida.
- 14 Benítez-Rojo's story recounts an event from his childhood in Cuba during the October 1962 crisis. Faced with the threat of nuclear annihilation, everyone heeded the government's call to clear the streets and remain inside, windows and doors shut. As one can imagine, there came a point when the boy, feeling trapped and hot, just *had* to open a window to look outside and feel a fresh breeze. As he did this, Rojo recalls seeing two black women on the street below, walking and talking to each other in what he describes as "a certain kind of way." He says that when he saw the women walking in this *certain kind of way*, while the rest of the islanders were holed up in their homes, he instantly knew that there would be no nuclear holocaust. It wasn't that the women had conjured away the apocalypse, but that the language of knowing and peace they performed through their black bodies illuminated a truth he could not articulate in words but fully understood. In an experience that was beyond verbal language, through these black women, in opposition to Burke's horror, Benítez-Rojo encountered the transcendent quality of the black sublime. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James E. Maraniss, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 10.