

TRANSCULTURAL

THREE DECADES OF WORK

PILGRIM

BY JOSÉ BEDIA

Selected Works for Teaching

In these materials are introductory exhibition texts and short narratives about ten works in the exhibition *Transcultural Pilgrim: Three Decades of work by José Bedia*, images of which are featured in the accompanying power point. The notes and questions may be helpful in structuring discussions with students either before or after a visit to the Fowler Museum, or as part of an independent study of the work of José Bedia. Underlying the artist's work are the following general concepts and questions for thought that may resonate with your students:

- What kinds of journeys make up our lives and why are they important?
- How might artists bridge connections between their artistic practice and notions of spirituality?
- How do formal and informal modes of learning enrich our lives over time?
- Whom do students valorize as heroes and why?
- Borders and crossings can be significant as markers of change. How and why are these times or moments of such importance to us?
- José Bedia draws upon secular and sacred life experiences and related art and material culture as inspiration for his own work. What experiences do students draw upon as inspiration for learning, for creativity?

Exhibition Introduction

An acclaimed member of Cuba's "Generation of the '80s," José Bedia is one of the most intriguing and prolific transnational artists working in the United States, his home since 1993. Early in his career he began to immerse himself in the aesthetic and religious worlds of Africa and the Americas, which would come to form the foundation of his art. A Hispanic-Cuban, his first "border-crossing" occurred within his homeland in the early 1980s. It was then that he became an initiated practitioner of the Cuban religion known as Palo Monte, which has its origins in Central Africa.

This exhibition characterizes Bedia as a "transcultural pilgrim" in an attempt to describe his over thirty-year exploration of and participation in diverse spiritual worlds and his

pursuit of cross-cultural, ongoing equivalences and broader philosophical knowledge. He has consistently sought out artistic and spiritual peers, whether in the Sonoran Desert of Mexico, the North American Great Plains, the Amazonian rain forest, the Dominican countryside, or the Central African savanna. Maintaining close working relationships with these healers and shamans, the artist regularly returns to witness annual festivals, and to participate in sacred rituals.

Bedia's direct experiences, combined with a keen interest in the arts and knowledge systems of diverse cultures, remain a potent, endlessly renewable source of meaning for him. In addition to his own works of art, this exhibition features objects drawn from his personal collection that have inspired his style and content. The works presented here—with their sacred and autobiographical references, strong graphic quality, and philosophical complexity—are the intertwined traces of José Bedia's artistic and spiritual journeys.

José Bedia: A Biography

José Bedia was born in Cuba in January, 1959, the same month and year that Fidel Castro marched into Bedia's hometown of Havana. He graduated from the Instituto Superior de Arte during a crucial moment in Cuban art history when artists of the first generation to be born after the Revolution were producing experimental work. He was included in the groundbreaking Havana Biennials of the 1980s, and his official entrée into the international art world followed when he was selected for the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, held at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1989. In 1991 Bedia moved to Mexico, and in 1993 he immigrated to the United States. He presently lives and works in Miami.

Bedia's major projects include an invitational installation concurrent with the São Paulo Biennial and a traveling retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, both in 1994; and exhibitions at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Monterrey, Mexico, and SITE Santa Fe in New Mexico in 1997. A major solo exhibition was held at the Museo de Badajoz, Spain, in 2004. Bedia was featured in the group exhibition of 2008 titled *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, held at the Menil Collection in Houston and at P.S. 1 in New York. In 2010 his work was included in *Without a Mask*, an exhibition of contemporary Cuban art at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. In spring 2011, the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno in Las Palmas, Canary Islands, mounted a retrospective exhibition of Bedia's installations. The artist has received a number of prizes and awards, including First Prize in Painting at the IV Beijing International Biennale in 2010, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1993, and a prize at the Second Havana Biennial in 1986.

Bedia's work is included in the following institutions in the United States: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Guggenheim Museum; and the Miami Art Museum, among others. Museums in Latin America and Europe with Bedia holdings include the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas, the Museo Nacional de

Bellas Artes in Havana, the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, and the Tate Gallery in London.

Section 1

Cuba and Palo Monte

While studying art in the early 1980s in Havana, José Bedia also pursued a different course of investigation, apprenticing with Tata Alberto Goicochea, a leader in the Afro-Cuban religion Palo Monte. Bedia was initiated in 1983 and immersed himself in his chosen religion's history and rituals.

Palo Monte derives from religious practices of Central Africa brought to Cuba by enslaved Africans starting in the sixteenth century. It draws upon a range of spiritual sources including organic materials, potent natural forces, and powerful ancestors. Like other syncretic religions in the Caribbean, Palo Monte has intermixed elements of Spanish Catholicism and African earth-based religions to create dynamic new spiritual paths.

Central to Palo Monte and its ritual activities is the *nganga* (also called an *nkisi*, *prenda*, *cazuela*, *fundamento*), a cauldron or pot. Often filled with dried branches, roots, bones, tools, and other objects, it symbolizes the powers that practitioners invoke. Among the Kongo peoples of Central Africa the word *nganga* refers to a religious title. At some time during the slave trade, however, the term became used to denote the sacred pot itself.

For Bedia the power of the *nganga* takes on iconic proportions and is a recurring motif in his work. The iconography and language of Palo Monte (based on Kongo beliefs and the Kikongo language of Central Africa) are often combined with Cuban idioms in his signature style of titling works. A number of paintings in this section portray the *nganga*—first shown empty and then on other canvases filled with the sacred objects that signify the artist's increasing knowledge and power attained through initiation and practice.

Image 1

Piango piango Ilega lejos (Step by Step You Can Go Far), 2000

Acrylic stain and oil pastel on canvas

Diam: 245.43 cm.

Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund L2010.22.1

Here the transcultural pilgrim has morphed into a turtle, though one with human limbs. According to the artist, "The Kongo phrase *piango, piango* means 'slowly, slowly,' or 'step by step'. It is something that an elder would say to a young person. Be patient. You will get there. That's why this guy has a turtle body." The slow, methodical turtle clears the path of danger and pollution in Palo Monte rituals.

Notes for discussion:

Notice the Palo Monte visual vocabulary inscribed on the underside of the turtle shell (including anvil, cauldron, and knife). The circular shape of the turtle body is intended to suggest the Palo Monte pot, as it fills up, “slowly, slowly” with items required for the rituals. Have students discuss the visual and verbal admonition to consider life’s choices with caution and care.

Image 2

Mama quiere menga, menga de su nkombo (Mama Wants Blood, Blood of His Bull), 1988

Acrylic on canvas

139.7 x 200 cm.

Collection of Diane and Robert Moss, Miami, Florida

L2010.18.1

The initiate, Bedia himself, holds an empty *nganga* pot ready to be filled with ingredients specific to him, yet typical to the initiation process. The title of the work, *Mama Wants Blood, Blood of His Bull*, elucidates the importance of animal blood as part of the sacrificial offerings in Palo Monte.

Notes for discussion:

In this work Bedia is commenting on the religious practices of Palo Monte that have placed him in two worlds—the traditional world of religious affiliation and the contemporary art world in which he works. Notice the painting is divided into a day side—a man is walking—and night side in which a car drives in the dark with headlights shining. Have students discuss the conflicts that might arise for the individual who straddles these two worlds. How does the empty *nganga* pot metaphorically represent the initiate who begins his religious training? What are the kinds of journeys that embody new beginnings and encourage insight and self-reflection? How would students visually represent those?

Image 3

Mundele quiere saber (White Man Wants to Know), 1995

Acrylic, tempera, charcoal, and collage on paper

96.5 x 127 cm.

Berezdivin Collection, San Juan, Puerto Rico

L2010.20.1

Bedia is acutely aware of the force of colonial history. The small, collaged reproduction of a photograph of the colonial administrator Emil Torday interviewing a Kuba elder in the former Belgian Congo is a reminder of past inequities. It serves to underscore

Bedia's own reflection on African colonial history and perhaps his uneasiness as he places himself in the role of the white man "who wants to know."

Notes for discussion:

What does this image tell us about the artist's concerns about his educational journey? How does his drawing comment on the nature of the interview with the Kuba elder, as portrayed in the small photograph at the lower left? Can we overstep boundaries as we seek to gain knowledge?

Image 4

Figura que define su propio horizonte (Figure Who Defines His own Horizon Line)

Mixed media

Fowler Museum at UCLA; Purchased with Funds Provided by the Fay Bettye Green Fund to Commission New Work

X2011.12.1a-d

In the course of commenting on this newly commissioned work, Bedia has given us some clues for understanding its complexities. Against the backdrop of a large head—representing Cuba, or as Bedia notes, "any country, the profile of a people"—stands a small bronze figure sporting horns and smoking a cigar. For Bedia this is a trickster, a special type of Cuban forest sprite known as a *güije*. Although he is held back, the figure attempts to control his own future, to determine his next step, to move forward. The curving ocean waves he draws on the horizon give him the ability to jump or to be carried from place to place. As suggested by the arrows and airplane, the trickster is faced with conflicts between nature and technology. Death, too, is an ominous presence as the cloths of different colors allude to the female spirit Centella Ndoki who guards the cemetery. The trickster faces the forces that threaten his own self-determination. As long as he can continue to draw, he will have the strength to continue.

Notes for discussion:

How might we be held back from success, from moving forward? What will students do to overcome the obstacles in their futures? Just as the figure depends on drawing to give him strength, what are the ideas or circumstances that give students confidence and assurance?

Section 2

The Americas

For more than twenty-five years, José Bedia has traveled throughout northwestern Mexico to attend Semana Santa (Holy Week) ceremonies. During the same period, he has studied with Lakota and other indigenous practitioners on the Great Plains, participating in the rituals of the sweat lodge—a place for prayer, spiritual cleansing, renewal, healing, and other religious practices. He is also a member of the Native American Church—a pan-Indian religion that combines Christian references with indigenous spiritual beliefs. Since moving to Miami in 1993, he has continued his

transcultural pilgrimages within the Americas, including visits to shamans in the Peruvian Amazon.

Bedia finds fundamental philosophical equivalences among Palo Monte and the indigenous religions of North, Central, and South America. In the Native American Church, in the practices of some of the peoples Bedia has visited in West Mexico, and in Peruvian shamanism, the use of psychotropic plant substances is one of the ways that the spiritual pilgrim seeks access to the divine. In each of these systems, powerful medicines drawn from the world of plants and animals are manipulated by the practitioner. The works by Bedia in this section of the exhibition chronicle and comment upon his pilgrimages throughout the Americas.

The Great Plains

Bedia first visited the Rosebud Sioux reservation in South Dakota in 1985 while he was in the United States to participate in an exhibition at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury, Long Island. At Rosebud, he met medicine man Leonard Crow Dog and intensified his explorations of Native North American religions, which he had begun to investigate while still a student in Havana. Eventually, he was initiated into the Native American Church, a pan-Indian religion. Bedia found his Native North American colleagues as fascinated as he was in the equivalences between their respective beliefs and sacred objects and those of other religious systems. The prominent use of wrapped herbs and tied medicine bundles underscores for Bedia the spiritual parallels between the nature-based religions of the Great Plains and Palo Monte.

Image 5

Pájaro que busca otro horizonte (The Bird Who Seeks Another Land), 1998

Acrylic on canvas

226.1 x 406.4 cm.

Berezdivin Collection, San Juan, Puerto Rico

L2010.20.2

This semicircular canvas refers simultaneously to the *nganga* pot of a Palo Monte initiate and the painted tipi of a Plains Indian. On it, Bedia has mapped multiple, overlapping images that ultimately speak to the trials of the immigrant. This is a mysterious night scene; blurry points of light illuminate the red bird in the center, which has an ocean liner and automobile painted on its wings. The bird is under scrutiny: a human points a movie camera toward it and an arm aims a rifle, while yet another hand points a finger. Emigration/immigration is not easy.

Notes for discussion:

Encourage students to examine the iconography of this painting carefully. What is portrayed on the tips of the red bird's wings? Why might the artist have created a semicircular canvas (*to evoke the Palo Monte pot and the Kiowa tipi*)? Have students

consider how issues around immigration/emigration are evoked in the title and imagery?

Image 6

Manúnj (Eloping), 1997

Mixed media on paper

96.5 x 127 cm.

Collection of the Artist

L2010.25.1

This work with its Lakota title pays tribute to Plains Indian artists' convention of depicting sequential narratives in one image and to their use of the image as the basis for oral history. The separate stages of elopement are conflated onto the singular frame, with single and paired figures arriving and departing from both sides of the canvas. The same photo used in *Tewahila* is collaged into the center of this image—the meeting of the man and woman, the imaginative starting point for this work.

Notes for discussion:

How would students describe Bedia's process in creating this work? Have students look carefully at the small, collaged photograph (center) and then identify how the artist has activated this image in the separate parts of the painting? How might students animate a story in several stages within a single composition?

Holy Week in West Mexico

For more than twenty-five years, Bedia has traveled to villages in western and northwestern Mexico and to Latino communities in Arizona to experience the ceremonies of *Semana Santa*, or Holy Week, that lead up to Easter. Since photography is forbidden in certain locales, Bedia recalls from memory his own experiences at Holy Week public ceremonies and private rituals. As he says of the imagery in his painting *Tras las huellas del Señor*, "this is not any Catholic church like you know; here the bloody footprints of Jesus are flowers, and also deer." The mixture of Amerindian, colonial Hispanic, and contemporary religious pageantry resonates deeply for him as it mirrors the complexities of Palo Monte.

Image 7

Guardian de Semana Santa (Guardian of Holy Week), 1999

Acrylic on *amate* paper

116.8 x 234.9 cm.

Collection of Randall and Shari Morris

L2010.28.1

Here, a sacred clown, or *chapayeka*, dances in a Sonoran Holy Week ceremony. These figures do not speak, but instead pantomime while brandishing weapons. They protect sacred customs and also burlesque them, providing comic relief on solemn occasions.

Wearing a mask with giant horn-like ears, anklets formed from moth cocoons, and a leather belt strung with deer hooves, the *chapyeka* brings together Christian and indigenous traditions.

Notes for discussion:

In creating this work Bedia drew upon his experiences attending Holy Week ceremonies in West Mexico. He gives us clues in the imagery as to the sounds the dancer's costuming would have made—what would those have been? If appropriate, students might discuss their own participation in Holy Week rituals.

Section 3

Caribbean Popular Heroes and Revolutionaries

Bedia reveres several Caribbean historical figures who combined their religious beliefs with a strong sense of activism and social justice, and he pays homage to them in his work. Quintín Banderas (1837–1906) was a follower of Palo Monte and an Afro-Cuban general in the Liberation Army, when Cuba struggled for independence from Spain. Andrés Petit (c. 1830–1878) founded socially and racially integrated houses or branches of Afro-Cuban based religions, while simultaneously acknowledging the role of Catholicism in Cuban religious history. In the Dominican Republic, Olivorio Mateo (1878–1922) was a clairvoyant, healer, and social outlaw who resisted occupation by the United States army and fought against sociopolitical inequities. Also known as Papá Liborio, Mateo founded a spiritual center that has developed into a regional religious movement.

Image 8

Papá Liborio no está muerto ná (Papa Liborio Is Not Dead, No), 2008

Acrylic on canvas

98 x 391.2 cm.

Eduardo León Jimenes Foundation: ELJ Collection of Visual Arts at Centro León.

Santiago, Dominican Republic

L2010.34.1

Here Bedia pays homage to the slain Dominican leader Olivorio Mateo Ledesma, known also as Papá Liborio or Dios Olivorio. He is regarded by some as a revolutionary hero and by others as a “social bandit.” He was killed in 1922 by U.S. Marines, occupiers of the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924. It is said that Papá Liborio still communicates with his followers through dreams and séances.

Notes for discussion:

What does the title of the work tell us about the continuing importance of Ledesma to many Cubans? How would students interpret the rays of shimmering gold that emanate from the body (*as if on fire or lit from within by some otherworldly radiance*)? Ledesma was hero to many for his strong sense of activism and social justice. Can students

identify certain individuals who stand for the rights of the downtrodden, the poor, and other disenfranchised members of society? How would they advocate for justice?

Image 9

Dicen que Liborio ha muerto (They Say Liborio Has Died), 2002

Mixed media on canvas

254 x 181 cm.

Private Collection, Courtesy Galeria Ramis Barquet

L2010.26.4

*Dicen que Liborio ha muerto
Liborio no ha muerto ná
Liborio está en la Maguana
Comiendo vaca salá*

They say that Liborio is dead
Liborio never died
Liborio is in Maguana
Eating salted beef

Bedia eulogizes the revolutionary leader Papá Liborio, adding a Dominican *décima* (or poem) to his work. In the poem, Liborio is said to still live in his hometown of San Juan de Maguana. To underscore the veracity of his continued presence, the *décima* describes the hero as eating salted beef, a popular creole food.

After his murder in 1922, and in order to prove that he was actually dead, Liborio's body was tied to a litter and brought to San Juan de Maguana for public display. The bamboo framework, laced with ropes, is a reference to this historical event.

Notes for discussion:

The teacher might discuss with students Bedia's portrayal of the slain hero Ledesma with the many images in European painting of the body of Christ laid out before burial. Why would Bedia utilize such an artistic canon? Students might also use the structure of the *décima*—the particularly Caribbean form of vernacular poetry (with its repetition of ten syllables)—to eulogize or praise a hero or leader.

Section 4

Back to Africa

In the summer of 1985, Bedia was drafted into the Cuban army and sent to Angola as part of Cuba's support for the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola during that country's civil war. His decision to emigrate from Cuba was in part influenced by the horror of his wartime experience. Bedia's quest for knowledge about Africa, his dedication to Palo Monte, and his curiosity about its Central African roots persisted during this time.

Although the artist traveled to Egypt and Kenya in 2000, Central Africa has continued to intrigue him since his army days. In 2004 Bedia was invited to accompany his friend and colleague Manuel Jordán, then curator of African art at the Birmingham Museum of Art, on trips to Central Africa, and in 2006 they traveled again to Zambia as well as Botswana and South Africa. The paintings in this section reflect Bedia's long-standing interest in African art, as well as the pilgrimages he made to Zambia in order to work with diviners and view masquerades.

Image 10

Lango lango mucho lango Nsambi nkuenda malungo arriba Kalunga (Water, Water, Too Much Water...), 2000

Mixed media on canvas

177.8 x 403.9 cm.

Collection of Jerome O'Neil

L2010.35.1

In a work of art whose title resists easy translation into English, Bedia explains that *Lango* means "water" in the Kikongo language and is thus also a reference to Kalunga, the spirit who resides in the water. Bedia commented that with the assistance of the supreme deity Nsambi, "One must go as far as possible toward a goal, gliding slowly across the top of the water."

Notes for discussion:

How does the artist communicate the notion of "gliding across the water toward a goal?" Why is this important for the artist? How is the painted image of the masqueraders different from the collaged photograph? The masquerade performer in Africa inverts reality, by being someone or something else. How does the artist play with this idea in this painting?