

# Havana to Berlin

Sharon Zhu's gallery in the German capital brings groundbreaking Cuban artists to a wider audience. Report by Claire Wrathall

Photograph by Thomas Meyer

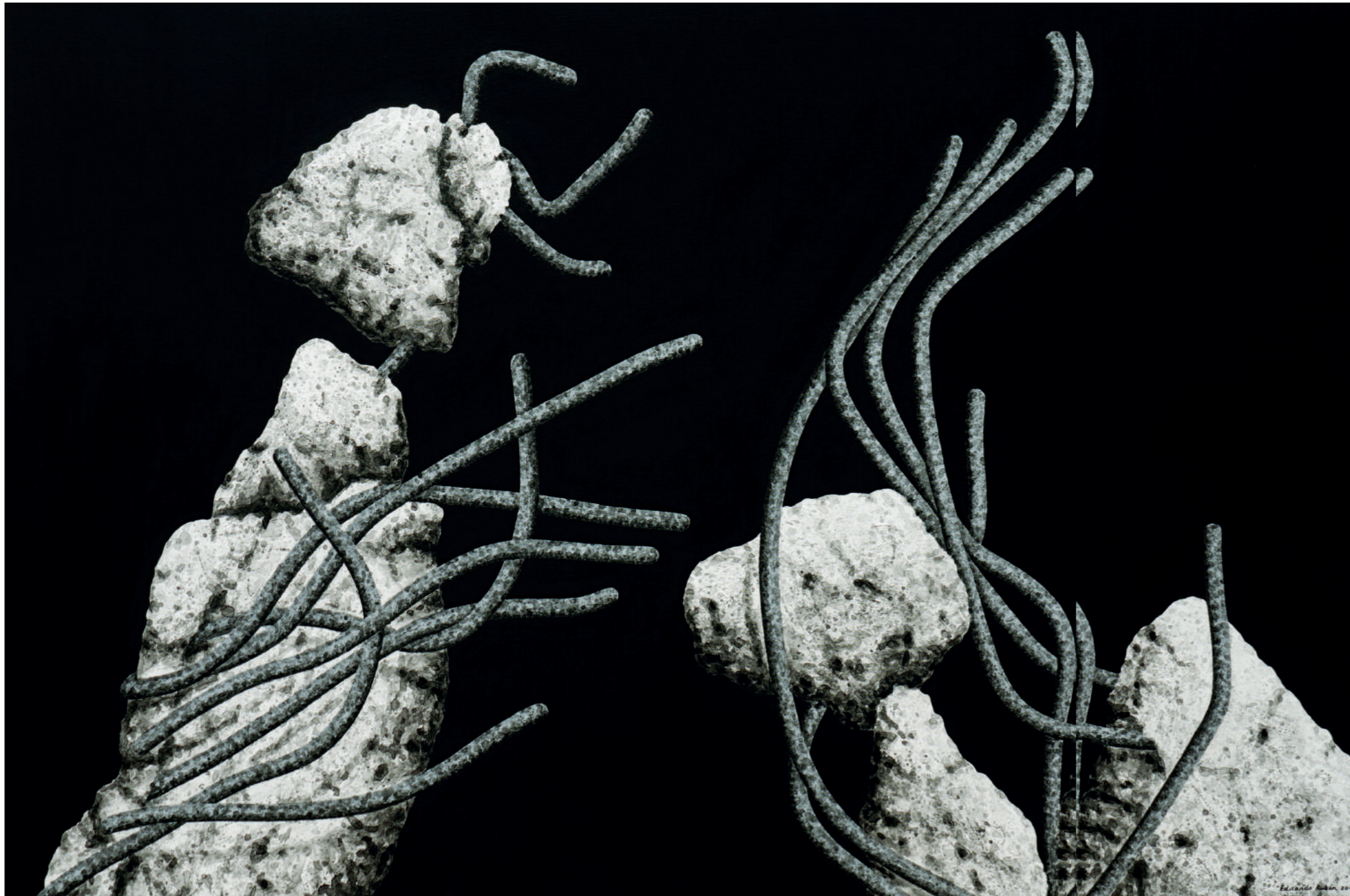
Sharon Zhu at her Berlin gallery, House of Egorn

In 2009, Shanghai-born London resident Sharon Zhu and her husband, an investment banker, went on holiday to Cuba. After four days in Havana, they hired a car and toured the island for a couple of weeks, returning to the capital to find their flight home was delayed by almost a day. So they explored the city some more, happening on an area of crumbling mansions occupied by artists. The quality of work was a revelation. There were so many artists deserving of representation, not just established stars such as Carmen Herrera (represented by London's Lisson Gallery) or Los Carpinteros (with Sean Kelly in New York). The whole experience was something of an epiphany.

'I made up my mind on the flight home that I was going to represent them,' says Zhu. Arriving back in London, she quit her job as a music publisher, enrolled on an intensive Spanish course (achieving near fluency within a year), started travelling to Cuba annually to scout artists, and set up a gallery in Berlin where she spends 20 per cent of her time. Right by Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie in Potse (the up-and-coming art district in the hitherto drab part of West Berlin around Potsdamer Strasse), House of Egorn mounts its third solo exhibition of Cuban work this month, this time focusing on Aimée García.

In many ways, says Zhu, Cuba today reminds her of the China of her childhood, a nation that 'went from famine to Slimfast in one and a half generations', as she puts it. 'Because everyone was equally poor, there was no internet and we were sequestered from the rest of the world, there was a sort of faith in art,' she recalls. This translated into an escalating demand for Chinese art. Zhu sees the same happening in Cuba, where getting your children into the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana is something to which many parents aspire, because becoming an artist is seen as a way out. 'Artists,' says Zhu, 'are treated very well. They had internet access and social media accounts [which remain forbidden to much of the population] long before they were available in the hotels.' »





Left, Eduardo Rubén, *Enfrentamiento Dialéctico #2*, 2013. Below, a work from the *Combatientes* series, shown at the Havana Biennial in 2012. Bottom, the artist in his studio



## Eduardo Rubén

In the colonnaded courtyard of Havana's grand old Hotel Telégrafo is a ceramic mural covering 180 square metres of wall space. It was created in 2000 by Eduardo Rubén, who was born in Havana and trained as an architect, then switched to painting and, latterly, photography. As a student he had begun to paint what he called 'impossible architecture' – hyperrealistic depictions of imagined buildings he knew he would never build. In 1994, he was awarded the National Medal for the Arts, and the following year he represented Cuba at the Venice Biennale. He also started to attract commissions for large-scale sculptures and friezes, such as that at the Hotel Santiago de Cuba in Santiago.

Architecture and building materials remain recurrent themes in his work, much of which is

geometrically driven abstraction – studies of shape and form and space that may call something real to mind. But the work for which he is best known is essentially figurative in that it uses architectural features and building materials: slabs of stone and concrete bound by lengths of rebar.

His *Combatientes* series, which he showed at the Havana Biennial in 2012, consists of exquisitely painted, almost photorealistic columns of blocks suggestive of ruins against stark black or sky-blue grounds. Are these structures collapsing due to the erosion of time or the fragmentation of society? No prizes for discerning the subtext there, although Rubén insists he is not a political artist. In some, the blocks take on an almost human form, suggesting people secretly in dialogue with one another.

Photographs courtesy House of Egorn. © Eduardo Rubén.  
Portrait: Lisandra Isabel. Previous pages: *Comedy* (darkwood), ink, acrylic, oil on aluminum, 2m x 1m, 2016. © Travis Jeppesen





Photographs courtesy House of Egorn. © Aimée García

Opposite, Aimée García,  
*Cuentagotas*, 2013.  
Right, *Un Minuto de  
Silencio*, 2002

## Aimée García

Trained at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, where she still lives, Aimée García is a painter, photographer and video maker, although her works may also incorporate old aluminium cooking pots or laminated sheets of newsprint, and, increasingly, embroidery.

She was born in Matanzas, on the north-west coast of Cuba, in 1972 and was taught by her mother to knit, crochet, weave and sew. This had a 'big influence' on her, she says, although art was 'only ever a hobby' for her mother, and García claims to be 'totally ignorant of any formal embroidery techniques', preferring to improvise and use the needle 'like a painter's brush'.

For García, such crafts have a quiet if overt political agenda. Take *Discurso Suprematista* (*Suprematist Speech*), her 2015 series of collages of articles from Cuba's state-run newspapers, *Granma* (the Communist Party paper), *Juventud Rebelde* (the paper of the Union of Young Communists) and *Trabajadores* (published by the Central Union of Cuban Workers). These were laminated and embroidered to redact words, phrases, even whole articles, and hung in symmetrically arranged groups to suggest an entire edition with a subverted narrative.

'Our generation began producing controversial art in a more insidious way,' she says. 'We started to use appropriations and, I think, a softened visual, so that the confrontation with the institution was not so straightforward. Today, very strong messages pass censorship and reach galleries if the artist is good at the game between art and institution. Artists [have] learned to convey their messages in a less direct manner.' This may explain why *Discurso Suprematista* was shown at the Havana Biennial in 2015 and why García has work in the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Cuba.

In her series *Sabor del Silencio* (*The Flavour of Silence*), 2002, García started with a pair of old saucepans, drilled holes in their bases and used these to conjure patterns in coloured thread – a commentary, she has said, on 'the silent burdens in women's lives'. (There is a lot of trash-based work in Cuba, says Zhu; no one ever throws anything out in case it might come in useful.)

In an oil self-portrait, meanwhile, some of the round red embroidered motifs that decorate



the neckline of the artist's jumper appear to have untethered themselves and are floating into the distance like dandelion clocks. And in another self-portrait, she holds her hands in what could be interpreted as an attitude of prayer if the red embroidery that covers them didn't suggest a different meaning: one of bondage rather than faith.

Perplexingly, or perhaps just contrarily, García insists her work has little to do with feminism. 'The gender issue is implicit in my work,' she says, 'but it's not a priority. It is linked to my essence as a woman and an observer of the surrounding world. My work has a great deal of self-reference.' In untitled paintings made in the 1990s, she depicts herself in apparently Renaissance scenes: a naked Venus at her toilet, a seated saint with a book. But her interest in crafts and in unexpected interventions is evident, too, in the way she binds the frame of one with ribbons and has inserted little pieces of mirror into another.

If any living Cuban artist can be judged to have assumed the feminist mantle of Ana Mendieta – the Havana-born performance artist, painter and sculptor who went to the USA as a 12-year-old refugee in 1961, grew up in Iowa and settled in New York, where she married Carl Andre – it is, arguably, García. *A solo show of Aimée García's work is at House of Egorn, 18 March–20 April. www.houseofegorn.com*



## Glauber Ballestero

Within the huge if faint constellation known as Cetus (The Whale) is a quasar, a mysterious phenomenon first identified in 1963, that emits radio waves from what is believed to be an extremely bright disc of matter swirling around a black hole at the centre of a distant galaxy. From the earth, it looks like a star.

This was the starting point for Glauber Ballestero's recent show *Cetus Quasar*, an essentially conceptual work that nevertheless consists of exquisitely detailed oil paintings reminiscent of ancient maps, charts and manuscripts, as well as an installation, a wax

relief and a video, all describing an imaginary new constellation. In it are multiple references to Greek mythology, Taoism, Luis Buñuel's film *The Milky Way*, Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*, Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, and the number eight, a figure that resonates throughout Ballestero's work as a symbol of infinity (and no bad thing given the significance of the number to Chinese collectors). In short, Ballestero's art is not just beautiful, but intriguing, too: a conversation piece with infinite potential for discussion.

Born in Cuba in 1977, Ballestero studied at the Instituto Superior de Arte under Tania Bruguera,

Photographs courtesy House of Egnor. © Glauber Ballestero

[ ARTISTS IN FOCUS ]



Left, Glauber Ballestero. Below, installation view of the 2016 *Cetus Quasar* exhibition. Opposite, *Amava Linaje*, 2013

the Cuban installation and performance artist who announced in October that she would run for president of Cuba in 2018. Ballestero subsequently moved to Madrid, where he is now based. Using oils, photography, printing, drawing, sculpture and film, as well as painting from photographs in a style reminiscent of Gerhard Richter, he produces images that are both original and firmly rooted in centuries of artistic tradition.

In the words of the London-based, Argentinian-born curator Gabriela Salgado, 'Ballestero is careful to observe a few artistic creeds: minimalism and its cult of the beauty of repetition, and the suprematist will to reduce visual information to a colour field. To such influences he adds a unique alchemic touch, as in the series of monochrome paintings made of pigment blended with powdered celluloid film to explore the politics of race in an ambiguous manner. Nowhere is more densely populated than these empty white surfaces.' ♦

