Racial Indeterminacy and Afro-Latin American Art: The Case of Antonio Argudín Chon

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Antonio Argudín Chon was a Cuban painter and sculptor who regularly contributed to the visual arts scene of Havana during the 1940s-1960s. He exhibited in the most important art centers of the nation, and his pieces were selected as part of the most significant visual art events of this period, such as the Exposiciones Nacionales held by the Ministerio de Educación.[1] Despite his contributions, Argudín Chon's art has been largely forgotten.[2] The only institution that houses some of his paintings is located far away from his home country: The Bromer Art Collection in Switzerland. Bromer's curators found Argudín Chon's artworks accidentally in 2016 when they were visiting the art depot of Cuban art collector Roniel Fernández, whose father was a friend of Argudín Chon. Argudín Chon's canvases – nineteen of them – had been stored unnoticed for years in Fernández's depot.[3]

Argudín Chon created a unique visual language based on a combination of cubist and pointillist styles and the use of a wide colorful palette. He often combined bright reds, blues, greens, and yellows, and arranged them in circular or curved shapes that tended to create a sort of 'wave effect' around the figures that he represented, each repeated wave encapsulating a different contrasting color. This wave effect marked many of his imagery, infusing them with meaning and vitality. Thematically, his paintings reveal a deep concern with issues of race and nation. They involve representations of blackness, *mestizaje*, working class life, and issues of integration (which was the term most commonly used by the Afro-Cuban communities at the time to demand inclusion in the life of the nation) and racial equality.[4] Much of his output, I argue, could be organized as follows: 1) Paintings that engage in representations of blackness through recreations of people of color. 2) Paintings that articulate ideals of racial harmony, including notions of racial fraternity, the problematic ideology that underpinned Cuban political and social life since the late 19th Century, which argued that black and white Cubans are united as equal members of the nation.[5]

1 See catalogues of the IV Exposición Nacional de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado, and the VI Salón Nacional de Pintura y Escultura, Capitolio Nacional. Archive of the Cuban Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA) Catalogue boxes, years 1950, 1953

2 José Veiga mentions some of the exhibitions where Argudín Chon participated and the titles of some works (Veigas, 2004.) There is also a page in EcuRed that repeats the information given by Veigas. https://www.ecured.cu/Antonio_Argud%C3%ADn_Chon. Last accessed January 31, 2022.

3 I thank the Bromer Art Collection for their support for this research. All of Argudín Chon's images of paintings presented here are copies that the Bromer Art Collection provided me with.

4 See the Afro-Cuban press of the 1940s-1950s such as journals *Nuevos Rumbos, Amanecer,* and *Atenas*.

5 Scholars have explained how ideologies of racial harmony worked ambiguously, as they could be mobilized by different sectors of society to argue that racial equality had been achieved and thus to silence racism and to help perpetuate racial inequality. However, the ideal of racial harmony could be mobilized by African descendants and other antiracist groups to make demands on the state, denouncing racism in society that promised yet did not deliver racial equality. As scholars such as Alejandro de la Fuente, Paulina Alberto, and others have shown, these ideologies have played a key role in Afro-descendant antiracist activism across Latin America during the period of this study. See de la Fuente 2001; Alberto 2011.

His particular visual language provided the basis for many of his recreations of race-related issues. Take, for instance, his *Musician* (1951, fig. 1), where he presents a black *rumbero* playing conga drums. We can imagine the musician being at a *carnaval* or similar collective performance, as his ornamented cloths suggest that he is part of a staged show and not of a spontaneous community dance (see the adorned shirt with ruffle sleeves traditional of staged rumba performances, and the elegant high heel shoes). The musician looks attentively to his instrument, concentrating on his playing skills. His serious expression, presented through well-defined facial features, suggests that he took his job as a performer seriously. Argudín Chon gives particular attention to the drums, which were already at that time understood as central to the contributions of Afro-Cubans to the nation's culture. He situates the drums as the center of the piece, exalting them with colorful patters and circular adornments.

Fig. 1 *Musician*, 1951, oil on jute, 99 x 84 cm . Courtesy Bromer Art Collection, Switzerland

The artist appears to use the composition of the image to elevate black culture with a sense of splendor and bounty. He assembles a wide palette of bright colors to display a striking vitality both within as well as emanating from the performer and his drums. He brings his signature style, constructing the circular shapes arran-

ged this time as if they were waves of energy originating from the performer, creating an aura of colorful rainbow-like brightness radiating from him. The painting suggests black performance as a giving force that spreads out and inundates its surroundings, offering an alternative pictorial statement that brings beauty to what had been historically discriminated Afro-Cuban traditions.

While Argudín Chon's art is provocative on questions of race, the racial identification of the artist is much harder to determine. Little has been written about Argudín Chon's life – he is unknown to even some of the most prominent experts of Cuban art today –, and the archival record provides us with very little cues. Due to Argudín Chon's thematic concerns, it would be tempting to imagine that the artist was of African descent. Yet one ought not to assume black ancestry because of his interest in race and Afro-Cuban life: During his time, it was not uncommon for white Cuban artists to work on Afro-Cuban representation. Moreover, scholars have already pointed out the dangers in presuming the primacy of race as a category of analysis within back artistic production. They have argued for the need to question common expectations that certain racialized artists should produce particular kinds of art – what T. Carlis Roberts has called *body-culture determinism*.[6] In the words of contemporary Haitian artist Mildor Chevalier, "there is the limiting expectations that Afro-descendent and Caribbean artists work within certain specific themes."[7] Freedom for Afro-descendant artists should mean not having the creative process be contrived by any particular symbols or cultural codes. Hence the importance of aiming to understand artists in their own terms, without fitting them into prescribed categories of race and nation.

The case of Argudín Chon's undetermined racial identity presents a common problem in studies of Afro-Latin American art; the field often researches artists on whom there is little information, art that is hard to trace, in efforts to recover the contributions of Afro-Latin Americans to the hemisphere's art histories.[8] The question of racial identification is particularly challenging within the regional context where racial identities can be deeply uncertain, malleable, and conjunctural, as several scholars have explained.[9] In the case of Argudín Chon, his art called my attention several years ago when I was researching for my dissertation on race and the arts in Cuba during the Second Republic (1940-1959), due to his attention to the question of race. I suspected the possibility of him having African ancestry because he shared the last name with a well-known Afro-Cuban painter, Pastor Argudín, with whom Antonio worked closely for many years at the Círculo de Bellas Artes, one of Cuba's most important visual art centers during the Republican period. Captivated by his creative output and rattled by the silence on his figure within Cuban art histories, I furthered my investigation on him and his art.

My research concluded that, on the question of Argudín Chon's racial identification, I could go only as far as describing it as ambiguous (fig. 2). The few records available suggest that Argudín Chon had Asian ancestry: Chon is a very common last-name of Asian origin, which most likely reached the island during the migra-

6 T. Roberts, 2016; Kobena Mercer, 2013; Stephanie Noah, Forthcoming, 2022.
7 Mildor Chevalier in Artists Talk 5: Conversaciones Sobre el Camino de Aprendizaje de los Artistas. https://darryl-chappellfoundation.org/artists-talk/ Accessed Nov. 16, 2021.
8 For an analysis on the emergence and objectives of the field of Afro-Latin American Arts, see Alejandro de la Fuente, 2018.
9 See Joanne Rappapport, 2014; Matthew Restall, 2013; Rachel O'Toole, 2012.

tion of Chinese laborers to Cuba during the 19th century. A document with his birth information also confirms that his grandparents were born in "Asia.". Regarding his possible African ancestry, a picture available suggests that he could have been identified as a light-skin *mulato*. In fact, people who knew him or knew of him also identified him as *mulato*, "darker than Nicolás Guillén" (renowned Afro-Cuban poet, famous for his writings on race and *mestizaje*), or as *mestizo* "like a Mexican".[10] However, it seems that Argudín Chon used the malleability of race within the Cuban context to identify at times as white: A health document from the Ministry of Sanitation and Social Assistance signed by the artist describes him with a "B", from the color *blanco*. Like many non-white Latin Americans who strove to climb the social ladder of their racist societies, Argudín Chon might have downplayed – sometimes completely hid – his possible African ancestry in an effort to access the social capital associated with whiteness.

Fig. 2 Antonio Argudín Chon, photographer unknown, n.d. Photo taken from a San Alejandro Course Registration Document, 1954. Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro's Archive, Registro de Graduados de Escultura, Folder 14

However, despite the indeterminate nature of Argudín Chon's racial background, this article asserts the value of his life and output to the field of Afro-Latin American arts for several reasons. First, whether the artist embraced his possible African roots or not, he still had to deal with racial inscription as non-white - *mulato/mestizo*. Second, Argudín Chon's apparent efforts at "passing", that is, playing with a racially ambiguous identity that could be labeled as white for particular social purposes, are a common experience within the region's racial dynamics.[11] The widespread occurrence of such experience indicates the importance of its study on the specific question of its relation to artistic production. The stakes of claiming non-white racially ambiguous artists like Argudín Chon as part the field of Afro-Latin American art are high; they make the field more open and attentive to an important dimension of race in the Americas – that is, dealing with racial indeterminacy itself.

Thinking methodologically about the problem of racial indeterminacy prompts meaningful yet difficult questions. One might interrogate how the experience of a racial ambiguous identity and/or "passing" might shape the life of the artists and

10 Conversations with artist Lesbia Vent Dumois, who knew Argudín Chon (interviewed February 20, 2022), with Jorge Luis Chirino, art collector who used to own photographs of the artist.
11 Degler, 1971; Telles, 2014.

of their art; what counts a racially ambiguous art, and how can we make that determination and interpret its social dimensions, especially when so often there are little archival materials available to work with. These queries lead to other questions that are at the core of the field of Afro-Latin American art: How to deal with archival silences, who/what is Afro-Latin American/art, and what counts as antiracist activism through art in the region.

This article zooms into the life and art of Argudín Chon to explore some of these questions, identifying a productive contradiction between his identification as white, him being identified by others as non-white, and his subtly antiracist creative output.[12] This could suggest an internal conflict within the artist over the impulse to gain the social capital associated with whiteness on the one hand, and his drive to advocate for racial inclusion through art on the other. His resorting to art as his way of dealing with his own concerns about race relations and inequality – concerns that might have been triggered by his own experience of racial inscription as non-white, while masking his racial background – confirm the importance of individual artistic expression for addressing problems of race. The contradictory dynamics between Argudín Chon's engagement with race issues and his racially ambiguous identity seems to have shaped his art production. For instance, several of Argudín Chon's paintings that engage with recreations of people of color oscillate between working with and transcending white stereotypes of Afro-Cubans. Indeed, some might interpret Argudín Chon's output as an echo of the production of white "folklorist" artists of the time, who often represented Afro-Cubans in exotic ways, usually as conga or *carnaval* dancers or musicians. Like many white painters, Argudín Chon played with these widespread folklorist tropes, given his recurrent representations of Afro-Cubans dancing and drumming. Perhaps this was one of the ways in which he, consciously or not, acted "white." However, as it will be further explained, his creations went far beyond and challenged the stereotype, subtly infusing Afro-Cuban performance with power, beauty, and inherent value.

Most importantly, bringing attention to and trying to determine Argudín Chon's racial identification leads us to on one of the field's most difficult conundrums. As our scholarship inevitably participates in the making of categories of race and difference, a latent question that remains is: How to create a scholarship that is largely built on socially constructed racial distinction and the affirmation of racial differentiation without further embedding social rift; the recognition that while denying and silencing racism nurtures racial inequalities, upholding racial distinctions could maintain entrenched social division. The art of Argudín Chon addresses this tension, creating a discourse that celebrates diversity, promotes equality, and insists on our shared humanity. His art evokes the ideal – not the myth, but the ideal (to borrow from Alejandro de la Fuente) – that societies move forward on issues of race mainly through joint interracial action. His paintings celebrate interracial working-class labor, friendship, leisure, and the pursuit of freedom, while advocating for racial equality and the beauty of blackness. His art invites the viewer to imagine utopian moments of life where race is not a driver of social tension; it invites us to hold on to the ideal of social union.

12 I understand antiracism here broadly, defining it as discourses and practices that counter antiblack prejudice and that assert and disseminate principles of racial equality, in this case via visual arts.

Antonio Argudín Chon's Life and Work: What the Archives Provide

The silences in the archives make writing a history of the life and output of artists such as Argudín Chon elusive. To my knowledge, there are no collections dedicated to him in the archives of major Cuban art institutions (such as the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes), nor in foreign institutions that are dedicated to Cuban arts (such as Cernuda Arts or the Cuban Heritage Collection, both in Miami). Since little has been preserved of Argudín Chon's work, the labor of recovery becomes particularly challenging. The resources that are currently available on the artist are a series of collective exhibition catalogues, some of his paintings, and a few documents found in a small student file at the archive of the San Alejandro National Visual Arts School. This file includes course registrations, grades, a document resembling a birth certificate and two health documents required by the school registry.[13] With few personal documents, no personal writings, correspondence, or other similar sources, this article therefore reads Argudín Chon's paintings as a method for what cannot be found in such documents.

To deal with archival absences, historians have departed from traditional methodologies to fill the gaps in the archival evidence. Ximena Gómez and Kevin Coleman suggest "imagining" as a way to "restore the potentiality of the archive and the contingency of history"; imagining as a way to reveal the possible actions and strategies occurring within the confines of society's standards; actions that could have gone unperceived and unrecorded by the powers building the archives.[14] Other scholars such as Tamara Walker note the inadequacies of employing only one method or type of source, suggesting instead using the combination of different methods and materials for historical analyses of the visual.[15] I build from their suggestions, approaching these sources in an exercise of deduction to excavate information mainly from extrapolation – or what I like to call, reasoning from the silences. Within the discipline of history, I find microhistory's objective of making the silences in the sources a key part of the historical account very helpful.[16] This study therefore blends traditional art history methods such as formal and social analyses, with microhistory's goal of highlighting and integrating the doubts, hypotheses, and the difficulties in doing the research, as part of the historical narrative. It embraces the limitations of the archives as a way to deal with the uncertainties of writing the histories of racially ambiguous non-white artists like Argudín Chon.

The Catalogues

Within the boxes of catalogues from the years 1935-1967 found at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes's archive during the research performed in 2016, I found twenty-nine catalogues of collective exhibitions hosting Argudín Chon's art. (I have found no catalogues of individual exhibitions of the artist.) These sources include limited data such as the name and format of the piece, sometimes its

13 Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro's Archive, Registro de Graduados de Escultura, Folder 14.
14 Kevin Coleman, 2015: 119; Ximena. Gómez, 2019: 41.
15 Tamara Walker 2017: 5-6.
16 For recent scholarship on Afro-Latin America that uses microhistory: Scott, Rebecca and Jean Hébrard 2012.

photo. They offer no information on the racial identity of the artist. The omission of racial identifiers in institutional documentation at the time was not uncommon: In a country that was shaped by conflicting ideologies of racial harmony that were aspirational of racial transcendence – to the making of citizens that ought to be more than black, more than white, but Cuban – race was often downplayed in institutional communication, including that of art institutions.[17] Nevertheless, the catalogues, complemented with the documents found in San Alejandro, situate Argudín Chon's work among that of his contemporaries, helping understand the historical context within which the artist worked.[18]

One catalogue in particular offers a short biographical paragraph on the artist, which can be corroborated with the help of his birth certification document. Thus, we know that Antonio Tobias Cristobal Argudín Chon was born in Havana on November 2nd 1910, only eight years after Cuba had become a Republic under the shadow of US hegemony. We don't have data about the social conditions of his childhood, nor about his parents, Marco Felipe Argudín y Lombillo and Marcelina Isidora Chon y Cabarruiz. Yet we could imagine that he grew up in an environment that was appreciative of art-making and conducive to his artistic development. Argudín Chon studied visual arts at the National Visual Arts Academy San Alejandro between 1927-1931, and between 1952-1955, graduating as Professor of Drawing and Modeling in 1955. Like many of his contemporaries, he mobilized the knowledge that he gained there to explore international art currents, settling by the 1940s on a distinctive style influenced by pointillism and cubism (discussed below). Education was an important part of his professional life. He worked during the 1940s as an Elementary Education Teacher (Maestro de Instrucción Primaria) in rural schools, most likely around the province of Camaguey. There he helped build the main city's Rincón Martiano in celebration of José Martí, the nation's independence hero who forged Cuba's ideology of racial fraternity. The Cuban countryside was plagued by poverty and had the highest numbers of illiteracy in the island (McGillivray, 2009). Argudín Chon's vocation as an educator working in very humble regions seems congruent with the egalitarian ideals that his art reveals. Beside his visual art learnings, Argudín Chon might have pursued the highest level of academic achievement – by the late 1950s he was entering his name in the exhibition catalogues as Dr. Antonio Argudín Chon.[19] He could have embraced attitudes that valued education as key to the pursuit of racial equality and inclusion that were widespread within Afro-Cuban communities.

The catalogues also give us a glimpse of the career development of Argudín Chon. The first exhibition that he is known to participate was the 1933 Salón Annual of the Círculo de Bellas Artes (CBA), when he was twenty-three years old. He exhibited frequently in the CBA's Salones Anuales,[20] as well as in the government-led National

17 For instance, none of Argudín Chon's registration documents found at the San Alejandro archive include data on race. As mentioned earlier, the only document that included data on race found in the San Alejandro file was a health document.

18 Archive MNBA, Catalogue Boxes Fondo Cuba Years 1934-1968.

19 Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro's Archive, Registro de Graduados de Escultura, Folder #14. Catalogue, III Exposición Nacional de Pintura y Escultura Capitolio Nacional, Dirección de Cultura, 1946; Catalogue Exposición de Pintura Tercer Salón de Otoño, Círculo De Bellas Artes, Noviembre 1959; Catalogue 40 Salón de Bellas Artes, Círculo de Bellas Artes, 1959. Catalogue Box 1946; 1959 Archive of Cuba's MNBA. Catalogue.

20 Círculo de Bellas Artes de la Habana Salones Anuales: 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1940, 1941, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1956, 1958, 1959, 1965; Circulo de Bellas Artes de la Habana Salones de Otoño: 1957, 1959. See note 14, and Veigas 2004.

Exhibitions organized by the General Directorate on Culture (DGC).[21] Through the catalogues we can also map the wide institutional network that Argudín Chon built: His works were selected by the Instituto Cultural Cubano Español to participate in the Exposición Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte (Madrid 1951, Havana 1954, Barcelona 1956). He was also connected to nationwide visual art centers such as the Colegio Municipal de Profesores de Dibujo y Pintura y Dibujo y Modelado de Santiago de Cuba (1956), and the Patronato de las Artes Plásticas of the Gran Templo Nacional Masónico (1960). He was member of the Grupo de Afirmación y Divulgación del Arte Cubano between 1953-54. If the period from 1941-1946 seems be a low phase in the artist's production, the 1950s were his most active years, in term of quantity of works created and exhibited, and also in terms of conceptual development – it was then when he matured into what became his signature pictorial style. After the 1959 Revolution, Argudín Chon joined the Taller Experimental de la Gráfica (TEG). Formed in 1962, the TEG aimed to promote forms of art such as lithography, which had a long popular tradition and that were considered to be more democratic by cultural policymakers. His involvement in the Taller, as well as in events such as the 1968 Salón Provincial Guerrillero Heróico at Galería La Rampa in honor of Ernesto Guevara point to Argudín Chon's possible support for the Revolution. His support would align with that of the Cuban black communities: The revolutionary regime had its strongest backing among the Afro-Cuban population, which constituted a large part of the working-class sectors and benefited the most by the Revolution's egalitarian policies.[22]

While Argudín Chon was involved within different art organizations, the institution that he was closest to was the CBA. He continued exhibiting there throughout the 1960s: The latest CBA Salón Annual where he appears is that of 1965; the institution closed its doors in 1968. Argudín Chon also contributed to the CBA administrative functions, starting as a "socio en activoe" (active member) in 1947. By 1950, he was part of the CBA Board of Governance as vice-librarian, and between 1951-1953 as main librarian. The CBA community held his work in high regard: Not only he was awarded Honorary Mentions in the Salones Anuales of 1946 and 1947, but his pieces were also often selected to be part of the catalogues' imagery that represented the best of the CBA exhibitions.[23]

Argudín Chon's dynamic association with the CBA is peculiar, however. Even though some vanguardist artists exhibited with the institution particularly before the mid-1940s, the CBA was viewed as the foremost conservative stronghold, aligned with the Academy and its 19th Century European realist or impressionistic aesthetics. Thus, Argudín Chon's pictorial style, which was closer to 20th century vanguardist currents, appears as out of place among the displays of the CBA catalogues. It is not clear why the artist gravitated to the academic environment instead of that of the vanguardist circles. It is also intriguing that the artist never joined the abstractionist turn that took over the Cuban avant-gardes during the 1950s. While we don't know how Argudín Chon identified racially or was racially identified by others within the space of the CBA, we do know that the so-called conservative

21 National Exhibitions organized by the Ministry of Education General Directorate on Culture: 1935, 1946, 1950, 1951, 1953, 1956. Ibid.

22 By 1962, 70 % of workers supported the revolution; 80% of black workers supported it (de la Fuente, 2001: 276, note 18).

23 The CBA catalogues include photos of Argudín Chon's pieces in the Salones Anuales of 1940, 1941, 1947, 1948, 1950, 1951, 1953, 1956. See note 18.

CBA was a multiracial site that housed the majority of the Afro-Cuban artists of the period. Most of them, like Argudín Chon, remained working within a strong figurative tradition that might have been perceived as dated at the time.[24] Afro-Cuban Academicists such as Ramón Loy, Florencio Gelabert, Emilio Rivero Merlín, Pastor Argudín, and Nicasio Aguirre had their institutional home at the CBA. The center was also the institutional base of Afro-Cuban artist Teodoro Ramos Blanco, who was often associated with the Vanguardia. So was Uver Solís, who was supported by the CBA in the 1950s. Therefore, it is possible that Argudín Chon's close alliance with the CBA might have been in part related to the somewhat multiracially inclusive environment of the institution.

Beside some personal, professional, and institutional information, the catalogues offer limited evidence on the political worldviews of the artist. Nevertheless, one can find hints in the titles of the pieces recorded. While several titles appear to be descriptive, such as *A la luz de la luna* (c. 1935), *Marina* (óleo, c. 1947), *Paisaje Camagüeyano* (acuarela, c. 1952), other titles suggest Argudín Chon's engagement with social issues of class: *Trabajo* (óleo c. 1947), E*l fundamento social* (oleo c. 1951); issues of race and nation-making: *Los inmortales del machete* (óleo 1951), *Euritmia Cubensis* (oleo 1948); and an interest in Afro-Cuban cultural expression: *Rumbeando* (oleo c. 1951), *Carnaval* (c. 1957). These socio-political concerns cut through the pictorial content of the imagery available, to which the next section is dedicated.

The Paintings

Unlike other visual artists of his time, such as Afro-Cubans Teodoro Ramos Blanco and Ramón Loy, Argudín Chon was not outspoken about his art. To our knowledge, he did not write for contemporary publications about the meanings of his paintings and how they fit within the hemisphere's artistic production and Cuban society at large. Consequently, it is difficult to grasp with certainty the motivations behind Argudín Chon's creativity. His remaining artworks are the most illuminating sources available to access the possible worldviews that drove his output as he contributed to his community. Currently, I have found images of twenty-eight of Argudín Chon's pieces (twenty-five paintings and three sculptures). Given the predominance of paintings over the sculptures available, the analysis here focuses only on the paintings. These are mostly oil paintings, for which the artist often used a blend of European-influenced pointillist and cubist styles.

As mentioned in the introduction, Argudín Chon's artworks reveal a deep concern with issues of race and nation. Many of his works could be organized in two groups: paintings that involve representations of blackness through recreations of people of color, and paintings that articulate ideals of racial harmony, particularly racial fraternity. The available works that recreate Afro-Cuban life were mainly produced prior to 1959. While it is possible that Argudín Chon might have continued to paint artworks engaged with representations of blackness after this date, it is not incongruous that he was more prolific on this theme prior to the 1959 Revolution. As

24 The main exceptions being Guido Llinás, Agustín Cárdenas, Wifredo Lam, and Roberto Diago.

scholars of race and the Cuban revolution have explained, the threats to the young revolutionary government from inside and outside the island demanded a strong sense of national unity, and from the early years, discourse on race began to be perceived as divisive. In late 1960, after the implementation of a top-down antiracism campaign that addressed structural racism, Fidel Castro prematurely declared Cuba a territory free of racism. After that, debates about racial inequality were increasingly associated with counterrevolution, and after 1962 debates about race and inequality were largely silenced. This might have disincentivized Argudín Chon to construct what could have been perceived as dangerous notions of black autonomy. (Black clubs were closed in the early 1960s and the Afro-Cuban intellectuals that demanded black power, such as Walterio Carbonell and Carlos Moore, were repressed or driven into exile.)[25]

As mentioned before, Argudín Chon's presentations of Afro-Cubans reproduce in some ways recurrent pictorial tropes of the period produced by several white artists who usually imagined Afro-Latin Americans in exoticizing ways predominantly connected to music and dance. This problematic imagery often depicts people of color as sensual, in tranced states as they danced to drums in primitivist fashion, negatively associating their cultural practices to over-sexuality, debauchery, and/or atavism.[26] To illustrate, two examples of many by two recognized painters of the time, Mario Carreño and Concha Ferrant.[27] Mario Carreño's *Cuba Libre* (1945, fig. 3) recreates a group of Afro-Cubans gathered in the woods playing drums, guitar, maracas, singing into the night. They are presented as bushmen, removed from notions of civilization. Their salvage-like appearance is fabricated through the depiction of half-naked distorted bodies covered barely by loincloths; instead of adornments their seemingly translucent bodies expose lines resembling bones and/or scars. Undefined facial features suggest the men in animalesque fashion; some howl to the moon while forming a circle around a rooster that appears in the center of the image, as if dancing with the men. There is no subtlety nor detail in their portrayal – the Picasso-influenced lines appear brusque and contorted. The nocturnal nature of the event and its seemingly isolated setting suggests its secreted nature and its inappropriateness for public 'modern' life. In turn, Concha Ferrant's *Rumba Caliente* (c. 1945, fig. 4) presents a woman of color dancing as if in trance. It was common at the time to represent African-descendant women naked or partly naked, often exposing their breast. Ferrant's image follows that trend, alluding to the availability of the dark female body. The lack of cloths, compounded with the disorderly hair and the painted face in primitivist style separates the woman from contemporary ideas of civilization and rational behavior. While exposed, the female body does not seem necessarily celebrated nor represented as beautiful: The contorted pose and the fussiness of the composition gives a sense of uncontrollability and instability to the image.

25 De la Fuente, 2001; Devyn Benson, 2016.

26 For Cuba, see Martínez, 1994: 75-90; García Yero, 2020: Chapter 3. For Latin America in general, see artworks by Enrique Grau (*Mulata Cartagenera*) in Colombia, Pedro Figari's representations of Candomble in Uruguay, Emiliano di Cavalganti's representations of Samba in Brasil, Jaime Colson's Merengue in the Dominican Republic, the work of Eduardo Abela and Jaime Walls in Cuba, among others. For more examples, for Argentina, see Alberto 2022; for Mexico, see Walker 2021; Ades 2010; de la Fuente, 2018, 381.

27 Images taken from Fernández Torna, 2012 : 154 ; Concha Ferrant, *Rumba Caliente*, Sociedad Nacional de Bellas Artes, Salón de Primavera, 1945. Arquive MNBA, box 1945.

Fig. 3 Mario Carreño, *Cuba Libre*, 1945, gouache on paper, 21 3⁄4 x 20 in. (55.2 x 50.7 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum

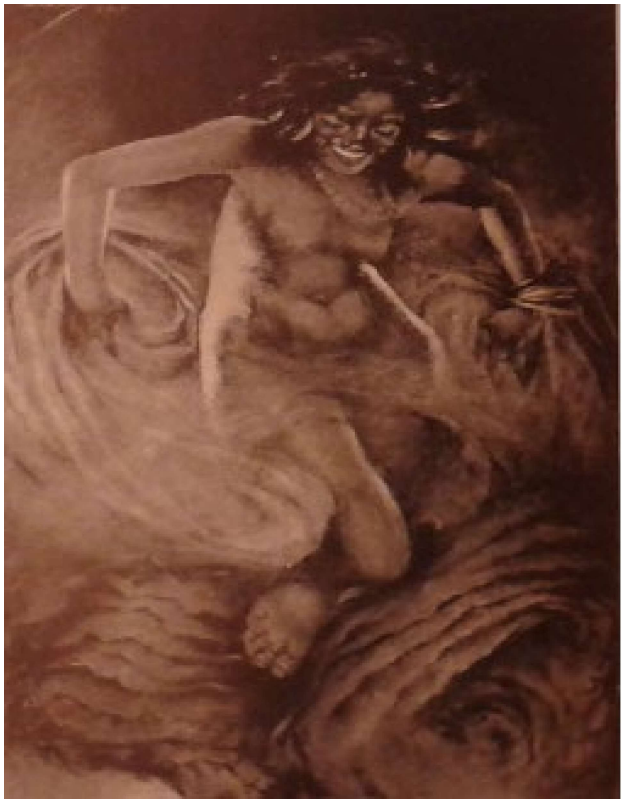

Fig. 4. Concha Ferrant, (c. 1945) *Rumba Caliente*. Catalogue Salón de Primavera, 1945, Sociedad Nacional de Bellas Artes, Archive MNBA, Box 1945. Author's photo.

Several of Argudín Chon's paintings, such as *Musician* (1951), described in the introduction), *Musicians* (1957), *Music Fest* (1956, fig. 5) *Dancers* (1957), among others, echo white folklorist patterns of recreating black people involved in music and dancing. Yet while Argudín Chon enters in conversation with these forms of representations, he does it in subtly different ways, creating alternative visions

to the widespread stereotype of the black hedonist exotic drummer/dancer. As the description of *Musician* (1951) shows in the introduction, his subjects are elegantly dressed and in control, as opposed to naked or dressed in rags. Their poses express assertiveness, not atavistic and irrational behavior. His signature wave effect and his colorful patterns infuse grandeur and force to Afro-Cuban cultural practices. Presented as beautiful and valuable, instead of as savage-like and dangerous, the imagery could work as pictorial statements in support of the cultural relevance of Afro-Cubans to national life.

Fig. 5 *Music Fest*, 1956, oil on canvas, 74 x 102 cm. Credit: Courtesy Bromer Art Collection, Switzerland

Argudín Chon's paintings of black musical practices also express anxieties about racial otherness. Take *Music Fest* (1956), which presents Afro-Cuban life by recreating a group of African-descendants participating in what seems to be a *comparsa*, given the use of the *farolas*[28] and the attire of the group members. They dress stylishly in lively tones; the women wear beautiful dresses and have their hairs elegantly arranged. Some of the men carry the *farolas*, while others play the conga drums and the trumpet, instruments that are widely used by *comparsa* groups. Like with *Musician*, Argudín Chon presents the fashionable ensemble using a bright combination of tints: The accents of the yellows in the background and as part of the sartorial composition brings luminosity to the image. These, combined with the reds, greens, and blue that predominate, infuse the black performance with energy and a perceived sense of strength.

However, what may appear at first sight to be a joyful occasion might have underneath different connotations. *Carnaval* performances usually involved smi-

28 *Comparsa*: carnival troupe; *farolas*: carnival lanterns.

ling, laughing, singing, transmitting the festive spirit of the *comparsas*. Yet none of the participants fulfil this performative expectation. Argudín Chon creates a line of eyes where the performers look around or at each other, exchanging uncomfortable gazes as if suspicious, wary of being observed by the spectators. Instead of presenting them in trace or lost in performance, as white representations of Afro-Cubans usually did, Argudín Chon's performers seem to transmit a feeling of concern, standing closely together as if separated or disconnected from the surrounding festivity. The eyes and poses suggest a sense of alienation. During the 1940s-1950s there were intense debates published in the Afro-Cuban press about the meanings of the *comparsas* within the Afro-Cuban community. While some members thought that the *comparsas* were an important symbol of Afro-Cuban culture, others viewed them as uncivilized practices that held the community back.[29] Argudín Chon might have engaged with these debates, reflecting on the community's – and his own – concerns about being othered, their cultural practices judged, their belonging questioned. His recreations of Afro-Cuban cultural contributions are based on the tension that, while the imagery only represented African descendants, the activities that involved them usually implicated multiracial interaction in reality. *Comparsas* and Rumbas, especially during *Carnaval*, were multiracial events attended by different sectors of Cuban society. Nevertheless, the black performers are recreated in isolation, separated from the national mix-racial community that they supposedly belonged to. The art could therefore speak about larger anxieties over Afro-Cuban inclusion within Cuban society.

Argudín Chon's apparent concerns about issues of othering and discrimination of Afro-Cuban culture are also insinuated through another recurrent detail that characterized his works. In *Musician*, Music Fest, and other of his paintings Argudín Chon plays with his signature style, constructing a circular shape surrounding the black performers' heads, simulating Afro-Cubans wearing halos. The shapes could be hats, but they also create a resemblance between the performers and widespread pictorial representations of Catholic saints, giving them an aura of religious sanctity. In doing so, the art builds an association between Afro-Cuba and Catholicism at a time when the latter was considered the moral foundation and pillar of civilization in Cuban hegemonic society. Conversely, Afro-Cuban religions had been historically associated with criminality and barbarism. It is possible that Argudín Chon aimed to challenge these notions connecting Afro-Cuban practices to Catholic symbolism and thus to notions of purity and blessedness. The pieces could expose Argudín Chon's seeming tension between his inclination towards whiteness – in this case its Catholic culture – and his efforts to valorize black life via the arts.

While several of Argudín Chon's paintings recreate black musical and dance practices, his painting *Interior Scene* (1957, fig. 6) considers a moment of black domestic life, an uncommon motif in Cuban art of the time. During this period, scholars such as Juan Martínez have pointed out a shift within the Cuban visual arts community when white Vanguardia painters turned to the recreation of idealized white middle- and upper-class domestic spaces (Martínez 2000). These were usually represented through Hispanic colonial architectu-

29 Garcia Yero, 2020: Chapter 3. See also Bronfman, 2004: Chapter 7.

ral heritage, wealth, female propriety, and assumed upper-class elegance (think of René Portocarrero's series *Interiores del Cerro* (circa 1940s), or Amelia Pelaez's *Dos Hermanas* (1946), Mario Carreño's *Patio Colonial* (circa 1940s), among others (ibid). Black domestic life, by contrast, was hardly a subject of artmaking, making us wonder if Argudín Chon's *Escena Interior* was the artist's response to the recurrent attention given to the white elite domestic space by some of his contemporaries.

Fig. 6. *Interior Scene*, 1957, oil on canvas, 57 x 73,5 cm. Credit: Courtesy Bromer Art Collection, Switzerland

Argudín Chon's *interior scene* differs substantially from the period's representations of white elite domesticity, whoever. Rather than presenting upper-class living, Argudín Chon captures what seems to be a working-class black couple – perhaps lower middle-class – spending time in their home. They seem to live in the countryside rather than in the urban areas of Portocarrero's Cerro mansions, for instance, as we can tell by a window that opens to a rural scenery (even though this could also be a painting hanging on the wall). Differently from the baroque environments of the paintings by Portocarrero, Pelaez, and others, which were filled with expensive furniture and overelaborate adornment, Argudín Chon presents a simple, humble interior space, as perceived by the basic furniture, containing merely a modest dining table with chairs, a shelf, and a side table. The contrast that emerges between contemporary paintings of the white domestic space and *Interior Scene* might be Argudín Chon's subtle way to mark through the visual the intersection of race and class inequality that divided Cuban society.

Nevertheless, though humble, *Interior Scene* presents black life as pleasant and colorful. The combination of different tones arranged in the background gives the home a cheerful and warm quality. There are flowers and a candle adorning the place, and the couple sits peacefully while sharing a drink. The man is barefoot, as if comfortable in his own home, while the woman dresses simply but tastefully wearing a green dress and high heels. They face each other, the man looking down as if in agreement, extending his hand towards the woman, while she looks as if explaining something to him. There seems to be a flow of communication connecting the couple; there is a sense of unity, black intimate life countering the primitivist, animalesque portrayals of blackness that Afro-Cubans often had to endure in the contemporary media. Noticeably, Argudín Chon's presentation of the woman's manners and outfit follow traditional Western notions of femininity, playing with white expectations of propriety, expectations that he might have supported as part of his experience of "passing.". Nevertheless, in presenting black intimate familial living as thoughtful and harmonious, Argudín Chon could celebrate it while claiming its equitable place within a society that had promised to be racially inclusive.

The question of inclusion therefore appears to be a recurrent one for Argudín Chon. Several of his imagery materialize Cuba's complex ideology racial fraternity, key to Afro-Cuban mobilization at the time, to demand racial justice and to denounce the existing racism that shaped a society that was supposed to be egalitarian. His vision would differ from more recent mobilizations in the region, where activists since the last decades have questioned the values of older generations of Afro-Latin Americans and their embrace of integrationist approaches grounded on problematic and ambiguous ideologies of racial harmony. At a time when many antiracist activists are privileging political mobilization as black, instead of mobilization while black (to borrow from Tianna Paschel); when activism is more grounded on racial identity and less on mobilization against multiracial inequities, it might be easy to dismiss the art of Argudín Chon as a relic of a recent past.[30]

As part of larger processes of race-making, however, the emphasis on social union that is found in Argudín Chon's art stands as a meaningful assertion of the centrality of joint interracial collaboration for the advancement of racial equality. His paintings *Los inmortales del machete* (circa 1950, fig. 7), *En el puerto* (1965), *Escenario edificante* (c. 1956), *The Flower Seller* (1958), among others construct José Martí's vision of a racially fraternal nation where both black and white Cubans coexist as equal members of the state. His construction of racial fraternity echo those of many in the Afro-Cuban community, where fraternity is the ideal of a desired multiracial egalitarian society, not the fallacy of an achieved reality.[31] These artworks portray black and white Cubans united either in the pursue of freedom, joint labor, or enjoying leisure time together. *Los inmortales del machete*, for instance, represent the *mambises* (the independence warriors who fought Spanish colonialism) riding on horses together to free

30 As Paulina Alberto and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof note, the terms racial harmony and its incarnations of racial democracy, racial fraternity, etc have become "politically toxic" (Alberto and Hoffnung-Garskof, 2018: 296-7). For a concise history and historiography of black mobilization in Latin America, see Paschel 2018, and Paschel 2016.

31 See note 4.

the nation. Based on their resemblance, Argudín Chon seems to highlight three of the most important anticolonial army revolutionary leaders: Afro-Cuban Antonio Maceo and Hispanic descendants Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and Máximo Gómez, as they lead their troops and crush the rows of Spanish soldiers. Unlike other contemporary paintings of the wars of independence that present Afro-Cubans participating in the conflict as subaltern to white officers, Argudín Chon includes them as leaders and equals to their white counterparts.[32] The multiracial *mambises* are depicted in equivalent terms, fighting together as one people. Argudín Chon uses his distinctive compositional style to emphasize equality within the multiracial army. In this case, he mobilizes his recurrent wave effect to present horses and men moving in unison, as if they are extensions of each other, synchronized in strength and purpose.

Fig. 7, *Los inmortales del machete*, ca. 1950, oil on jute, 84 x 97 cm. Credit: Courtesy Bromer Art Collection, Switzerland

Yet perhaps the most interesting of Argudín Chon's recreations of the ideal of racial harmony is his Flower Seller (1958, fig. 8), where the painter visualizes two women, one blond, one of color, buying flowers from a black seller. Unlike other images representing racial fraternity that recreated mainly black and white men engaged as equals in joint enterprises of nation-making, Flower Seller focuses on the multiracial union of women. As if questioning the strong exclusionary gender dimensions of the ideology that omitted women from the

32 See for instance, Juan Emilio Hernández Giró, Máximo Gómez Cruzando la Trocha, in Exposición de Arte Moderno y Clásico, La Pintura y la Escultura Contemporánea en Cuba, 1941-2. MNBA Box 1941. See García Yero, 2020.

national imaginary, Flower Seller is about racial sorority. Here, the painter presents the two women enjoying themselves going out shopping together – notice the shopping bag carried by the *mulata* woman on the right corner of the image. The viewer knows that they should be close friends because the *mulata* woman rests her arm casually and trustingly on the shoulder of the blond woman, standing comfortably close to each other waiting to purchase flowers. They are presented as equals, both dressed fashionably, with similar hair styles and make-up. *The flower seller* bows to them deferentially as he prepares the flowers; both women deserving of the same courtesy and respect.

Fig. 8, *Flower Seller*, 1958, oil on canvas, 56 x 74 cm. Credit: Courtesy Bromer Art Collection, Switzerland

The representation of racial sorority between white and mulato women in Cuban society through popular culture at the time was a rarity. In literature and popular music such as Zarzuelas, white and mulato women were historically presented as irreconcilable rivals, clashing enemies competing for the love of white men. They were usually constructed as opposites – the former the virginal and pure wife; the latter the sensual temptress, as the lover for whom men betrayed their spouses and became corrupt. As the wives, white women had the legal and economic power of her status, whereas *mulata* women faced the vulnerabilities of their position as mistresses, judged by society as immoral and illegitimate.[33] Thus, Argudín Chon's representation of racial sorority, of a blond and a *mulata* woman bonding together as equal contested gender and sexual assumptions of the period. Flower Seller suggests the possibility that Afro-Cuban and white-Cuban women, like men, could and should build friendship and networks of support, and appreciate each other.

33 Kutzinski, 1993; Thomas, 2008.

Conclusion

This article has brought attention to the widespread problem of racial indeterminacy in Latin America and its relation to artistic production within the particularities of the field of Afro-Latin American Art. Conjunctionally, the article illuminates on the remarkable yet thus far unrecognized work of Antonio Argudín Chon. How were Argudín Chon's artworks interpreted by the viewers who attended the exhibitions that he was part of during the 1940s-1960s? Did the spectators just see a folklorist rendition of Afro-Cubans drumming, or could they read the subtle details that moved the image beyond the stereotype? Did they just see two women buying flowers or did they perceive a message of social union and a claim for equality embedded in the imagery? What other interpretations did the viewers make that differ from the analysis presented in this article? These questions are indeed puzzling and pertinent, yet close to impossible to answer. This improbability should not deter from inquiry, however. Surely, as we find meaning in art, we inevitably bring our own projections to the artworks. Nevertheless, while the approaches explored here leave us with less certain, more speculative arguments, they are surely a preferable alternative to the continued disregard for – and thus further erasure of – the contributions of marginalized non-white artists, as Ximena Gómez and Tamara Walker have so insightfully concluded.[34]

Using the tools at his disposal to move up the social ladder, Argudín Chon might have played with the malleability of race to seek inclusion "passing" as white, as the artist necessarily worked within a system of white hegemony. However, in a country where it has been historically difficult to talk about racism, Argudín Chon resorted to the subtlety of art, mobilizing his particular pictorial style to address this problem – one that likely affected him deeply. Neither 'folklorist' nor dated, his art questioned assumptions about the black domestic space, complicated the gender dimensions of the ideology of racial fraternity, opposed black stereotypation, social othering, and valorized Afro-Cuban culture through a unique pictorial imagination. His art invokes the ideal of racial equality while recognizing our shared humanity and the significance of joint interracial engagement. The case of Antonio Argudín Chon highlights the importance for the emerging field of Afro-Latin American art to be attentive to the work of artists who are difficult to label, and whose art might seem passé or easily dismissible. Their works summon our attention, broadening our perspectives on the relationship between race, identity, art, and activism.

34 Gómez 2019: 207; Walker: 2017: 10.

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