

# “Theater of Operations’: Maneuvers by Arnaldo Simón”

BY PATRICIA SICRE

In the 1980s, during his frequent visits to Havana, American trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie remarked to his colleagues that despite the ongoing diaspora affecting the island, each year new talents emerged—bearers of original ideas, rhythms, songs, and genuine sounds—pioneers of a new form of fusion: Cuban jazz.

And while music often takes center stage in our cultural expressions, a similar phenomenon occurs in the visual arts.

The production of visual arts in Cuba has relied (or once relied) on a system whose structure begins with arts education, grows with government support, and is sustained through international exposure via galleries, foundations, and visitors drawn to the photogenic allure of the post-revolutionary era.

Only those artists censored by institutions—those who chose, or were left with no choice but to leave, to escape—have broken away from this system to create, share, and defend their work outside the Island.

How does one compete with such a structure? That’s where the artist’s gestures of resistance come into play—acts of survival to preserve their work through every geographic, economic, emotional, and social upheaval.

In exile, I have discovered Cuban artists with diverse styles and concepts—names I never once heard in Cuban media, schools, or institutions. Carmen Herrera, Félix González-Torres, Luis Cruz Azaceta, and even Ana Mendieta are artists whose names are not part of the accepted, labeled, and commercialized idea of “Cuban art” as defined and exported from the Island.

Leaving Cuba and visiting galleries, private collections, museums, and artist studios reveals new modes of universalization and reinterpretation of the essential traits of national identity.

According to Jacques Derrida, Western philosophy is obsessed with presence and absence, yet we must recognize that absence is also a form of presence. It is within that “presence” that Arnaldo Simón’s work resides—a presence with a different imagology, one that transcends the notions of being or not being “Cuban,” of “what comes from Cuba,” of “what is allowed through to the other side.”

Under a top light, Arnaldo Simón’s work illuminates and focuses on unique architectural planes and patterns—morphologies of a highly personal poetics, handcrafted like silver and steel filigree.

His pieces, resonant and solid, merge into a cultural palimpsest, drawn from the precision of an artist with architectural lineage.

Simón’s hand transitions from virtuosic drawing to a borderless ideo-aesthetic conceptualization rarely seen in our cultural landscape. His themes address syndromes born of closed societies, totalitarian regimes, and dictatorial minds, voices, and gestures.

Zapata Gallery, a dynamic space in Miami, is dedicated to promoting the best of contemporary Cuban art.

Its new exhibition — T.O. (Theater of Operations) — presents Arnaldo Simón’s recent work and will open to the public on

Saturday, February 15, 2025. Curated by Rodolfo de Athayde, the show functions as a timeless pendulum traversing pivotal moments in human history, where destruction and violence spill like gunpowder across entrenched territories.

T.O. (Theater of Operations) happens everywhere, at all times. It will continue unfolding, building and deconstructing itself, as long as conflict zones emerge and expand.

As a purist of structure, Arnaldo Simón has created a body of work with the theatricality required to form a stage shaped like a closed circuit.

By enclosing us within his concept, he exposes us to the interplay between history, destruction, and reconstruction—guiding us through the architectural body, using us as witnesses and judges, implicating us in historical processes in which we were, are, and will be secondary actors—who, thanks to Simón’s work, are now elevated to the role of protagonists.

