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“Halfway between two shores . . . ”
Rolando Estévez’s *La silla*



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La silla, along with several one-of-a-kind assemblages in the collection at the University of Missouri’s Museum of Art and Archaeology, is a complex, carefully designed work of literary art that invites viewers to look, read, touch, open, and unfold (Fig. 1 and front cover). *La silla*, translated as The chair, was handmade in the city of Matanzas, Cuba, in 2008. When first encountering the assemblage, a viewer sees only a bag with the title of the artwork hand painted in black ink (Fig. 2). The bag is made of collaged craft paper decorated with blue, green, red, and yellow paint. Handles of knotted cloth are strung through the top edge of the bag, creating a form similar to a paper shopping bag. Inside the bag is a handcrafted wooden box, also bearing the title of the assemblage (Fig. 3). The lid of the box is embellished with paper and dried foliage. Lifting the lid reveals five loose-leaf pages, all water colored and bearing hand-written inscriptions detailing information about the artwork such as the title, materials used in creation of the work, and publication date (Fig. 4). Also inside the box is a long, accordion-style folded banner measuring approximately two meters in length (Fig. 5). The banner features a hand written poem on



Fig. 1. Rolando Estévez Jordán (Cuban, b. 1953). *La silla* (The chair), 2008, mixed media: paper, cloth, watercolors, ink, flowers, wood, and leaves. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.63a-i). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.



Fig. 2 Rolando Estévez Jordán (Cuban, b. 1953). *La silla* (The chair), detail, bag, 2008, paper and cloth, H. 16.2 cm, W. 25 cm, Th. 11.5 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.63a). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.



Fig. 3. Rolando Estévez Jordán (Cuban, b. 1953). *La silla* (The chair), detail, box, 2008, flowers, wood, L. 19.8 cm, W. 10.9 cm, H. 9.0 cm (with flowers). Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.63b and c). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.



Fig. 4. Rolando Estévez Jordán (Cuban, b. 1953). *La silla* (The chair), detail, loose-leaf pages, 2008, paper, 16.9–17.1 x. 7.9–8.1 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.63d and e, g–i). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

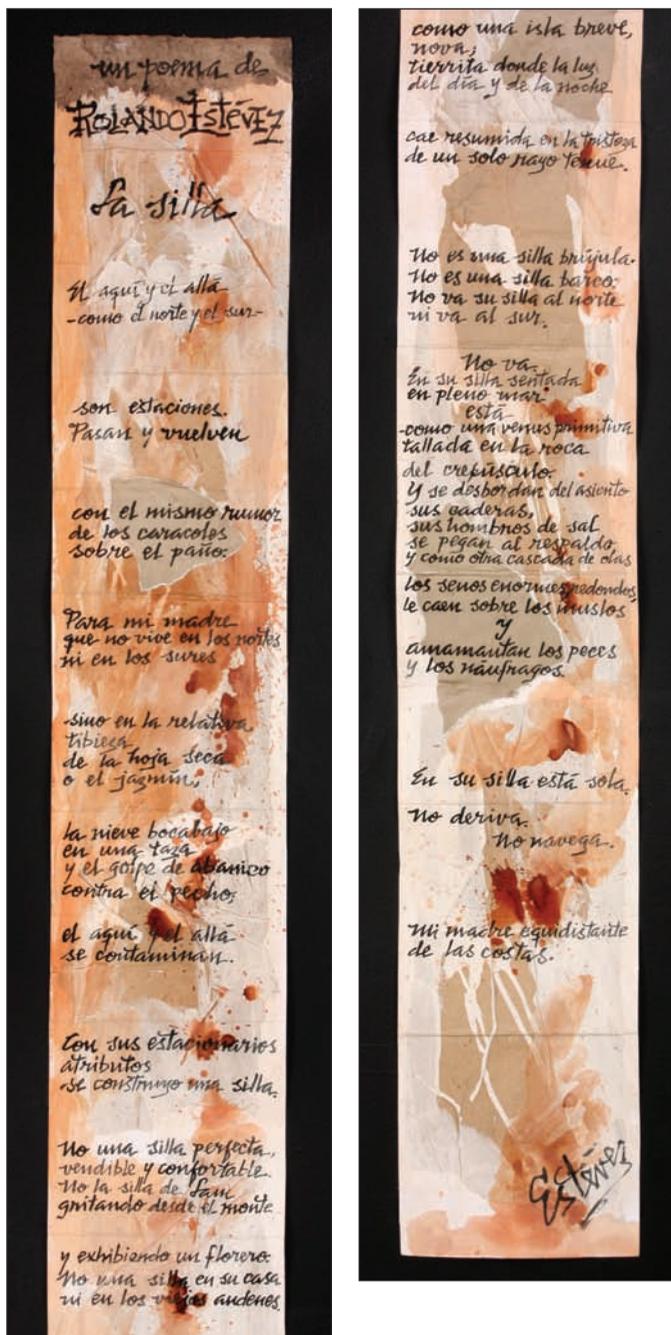


Fig. 5. Rolando Estévez Jordán (Cuban, b. 1953). *La silla* (The chair), detail, poem on banner, 2008, paper, watercolors, ink, 192.5 x 16.2 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.63f). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

one side and a series of paintings on the other. When seen together as a collection (Fig. 1), all eight components of *La silla* are a unique complement to each other.

La silla was designed and created by Cuban artist and poet Rolando Estévez Jordán. It is a product of Ediciones Vigía, an independent publishing house founded by Estévez and Cuban poet Alfredo Zaldivar in April 1985, approximately twenty years after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Since the foundation of the press, Estévez and a team of volunteer artisans have been working collaboratively to publish handmade works of literary art that feature the work of both Cuban authors and other internationally celebrated writers.¹ Within the Vigía canon are books featuring the poems of Emily Dickinson and Cuba’s poet laureate Nancy Morejón, stories from Gabriel García Marquez and Cuban children’s author René Fernández Santana, and various works about music, theater, cooking, philosophy, politics, history, and biography (Figs. 6–9). *La silla* differs from these books in that it features a poem written by Estévez himself. While Vigía publishes a wide variety of literature, one common thread found among most of the press’s publications are the

moments of interaction the books offer: scrolls that unravel, yarn strands that must be untied, fabric that lifts to reveal a poem or picture, and many other details that require physical engagement with the objects.



Fig. 6. Manuel Darío García. *Emily Dickinson (What mystery pervades a well!)* by Emily Dickinson, n.d., mixed media: photocopies on paper with watercolor accents, H. 24.2, W. 16.7 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.76). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.



Fig. 7. Arnely Cejas Herrera (Cuban, b. 1969). *Danilo y Dorotea otra historia de amor . . .* (Danilo and Dorotea, another love story. . .) by René Fernández Santana, 2005, mixed media: photocopies on paper with watercolor accents, H. 21.5 cm, W. 27 cm. (booklet). Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.38a–d). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

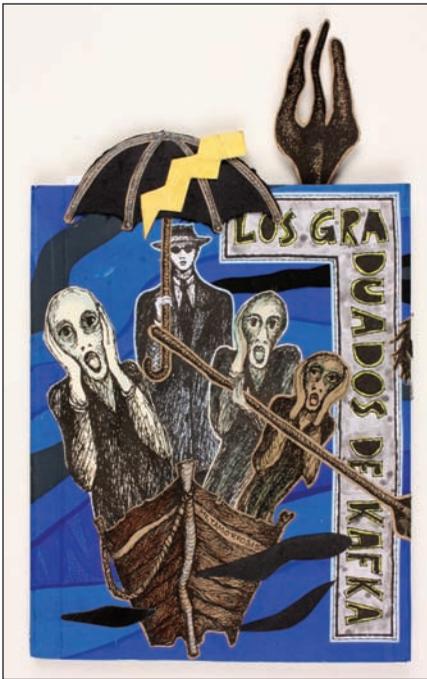


Fig. 8. Laura Ruiz Montes (Cuban, b. 1966). *Los graduados de Kafka* (Kafka's graduates) by Jorge Angel Hernández Pérez, 2008, mixed media: photocopies on paper with watercolor accents, cloth, and yarn, H. 27.7 cm, W. 19.9 cm. (booklet including projecting elements). Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.85a and b). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

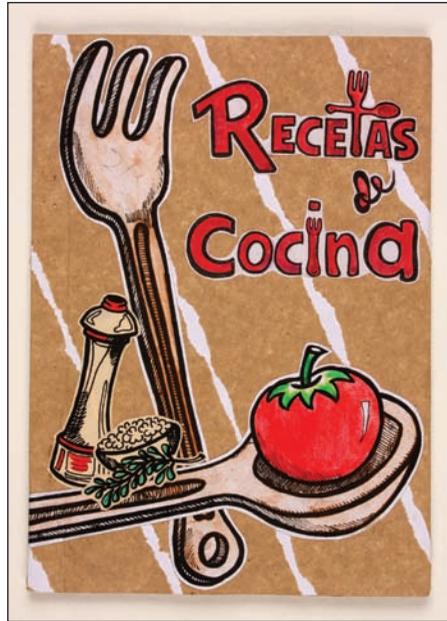


Fig. 9. H. M. Niusha, Olga Samper, Driaxned Paz, Agustina Ponce (Cuban). *Recetas de cocina*, (Cooking recipes) 2007, mixed media: photocopies on paper with watercolor accents, H. 21.3 cm, W. 15.4 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.41). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

When I first viewed *La silla* and other Vigía books in the museum's collection, I was enamored by their interactivity and the challenge of discovering the objects' secrets. They are playful works of literary art. Upon translating some of the texts, however, I quickly came to realize that these books are not simply fun to explore. While the construction of these objects signals entertainment, the books and larger assemblages like *La silla* feature stories and poems that, when combined with the interactive nature of the objects, create intricate layers of meaning and iconography that reflect the complicated post-revolutionary social climate of Cuba in the 1980s and 1990s. The stories and poems published by the press are historical, religious, philosophical, and personal. They address subjects such as family, loss, loneliness, identity, and place. The writers question themselves and their worlds, they lament lost childhoods and broken dreams, and they celebrate family,

identity, and imagination. *La silla* offers a particularly unique view of the press and its place in the Cuban art and literary world since Estévez himself is writer, designer, and creator of the assemblage. *La silla* serves as a reflection of life in post-revolutionary Cuba on a both personal and national scale. With the text, image, and construction of *La silla*, Estévez offers viewers a deeper look into the challenges he and many others faced on the island following the Revolution of 1959. An in-depth analysis of *La silla* demonstrates how Estévez and the artisans at Vigía have grappled with the challenge of finding a personal and artistic identity within a country struggling to find its national identity.

Ediciones Vigía translates as Watchtower Editions and is named because of its location at the Plaza de la Vigía, or Watchtower Square, in the coastal city of Matanzas.² Estévez and Zaldívar initially founded the collective with the intention of providing Cuban writers and artists with a haven, a safe and supportive place in which to gather and discuss their work. Though not an overtly political press Vigía has, from its beginning, been greatly influenced by social and political events in the decades following the Revolution.³

Ediciones Vigía grew amid the challenging social and political circumstances of the 1980s and 1990s. The founders recognized that those local artists and writers in Matanzas who still believed in the value of art and literature needed a place to express themselves. Vigía’s first foray into the publishing world came in the form of posters advertising poetry readings and group meetings for writers and creators. As the collective grew, Estévez and Zaldívar began publishing the work of their members, other Cuban authors, and internationally recognized non-Cuban writers. Zaldívar explains in a 1994 interview:

Ediciones Vigía emerged out of the need of a group of artists of the city to see their work, which they valued as literature, in print. We did not have a preconceived idea about what the volumes would look like. Our resources were scarce: a mimeograph machine that someone from a press was able to lend us, and a typewriter—also borrowed—because we owned neither. These are the only two machines we have used in the history of Vigía. More than anything, we use our hands and our imagination.⁴

The press has since been given copy machines, which are used to produce much of the text and some imagery featured in the books.

Early Vigía books were more simply constructed and more traditional in their binding and layout than later editions, but since its inception Vigía artisans have found their artistic and publishing identity by creating books that do not conform to the typical twentieth-century definition of a professionally produced, printed, and circulated publication. Larger publishing houses can digitally print hundreds of copies of books on fresh new paper, while Vigía makes do with found materials, namely, repurposed items such as paper from the local butcher, yarn, fabric, leaves, and other items. The choice of materials is politically motivated as much as it is aesthetically motivated. Because Vigía publishes authors who address diverse and, in the eyes of the Cuban government, oftentimes controversial subjects (such as sexuality and revolution), Vigía has consistently been under the watchful eye of the Ministry of Culture (MINCULT). The MINCULT was established

in 1976 and functions as an umbrella institution that, according to its official website, “is responsible for directing, guiding, controlling and executing the implementation of the cultural politics of state and government.”⁵ In order to maintain their independence, Vigía does not rely on the MINCULT for materials and instead uses only donated and recycled materials. This practice grants Vigía a degree of artistic freedom since the government has no ownership over the materials used to create the books and, therefore, little influence over published content.⁶

As the first chief designer of the press,⁷ Estévez must carefully consider what materials are available before beginning a design. Once he has settled on the overall look and construction of a book, he creates one copy. Volunteer artisans at the press then use Estévez’s original as a model to craft a limited number of volumes, a maximum of 200 issues, for each book.⁸ Because of their unique production method, the text and form of the issues are identical, but each object shows the hand of the individual maker. One book may feature yellow colored pencil while the next features red. If the artisans run out of one material, they substitute another. A book bound with yarn in Estévez’s original design may be bound with twine for the last dozen copies. This creative ingenuity reflects the Cuban penchant for reclaiming and reusing.⁹

The work examined here, *La silla*, differs dramatically from the serialized Vigía books in that only one artist, Estévez, created it, and only one copy exists. In keeping with the principles of the press, however, Estévez used only found and repurposed materials in the construction of his assemblage. Text on the fourth loose-leaf sheet of paper (Fig. 10) translates as “In its construction, the artist has used a cedar box, craft paper, bristol cardboard, bark paper, hand-painted pages, left-over printer paper, croton leaves, sunflower petals, evergreens, the memory of his distant mother and the magic of this Matanzas house.” The recycled nature of Vigía objects and *La silla* is a challenge welcomed for the sake of a greater degree of publishing freedom, but Estévez also insists that “Vigía’s editorial aesthetic was not chosen in 1985 out of material need or because there existed no other possibilities. . . . Vigía emerges out of aesthetic necessities”¹⁰—the desire to create works that not only preserve the stories, histories, and poems of Cuban writers but are also beautiful.

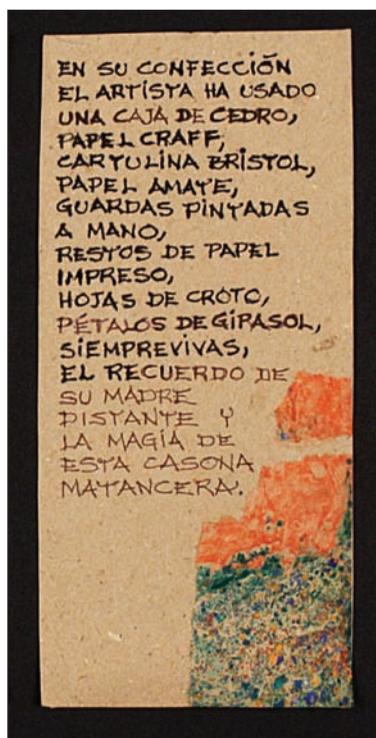


Fig. 10. Rolando Estévez Jordán (Cuban, b. 1953). *La silla* (The chair), detail, loose-leaf page, 2008, paper, ink, 16.9 x 8.0 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.63h). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

La silla is an ideal example of Vigía’s goals as expressed in both Estévez’s and Zaldívar’s comments on the foundation of the press. First, the assemblage represents Vigía’s desire to publish Cuban authors, in this case Estévez. Second, it displays the need for and value of artistic community. Estévez is named as the sole author and artist of *La silla* on multiple pieces of the assemblage, but it is not a work he claims for himself. He includes the community of Vigía by inscribing “Ediciones Vigía” and the “magic of this Matanzas house” prominently in various places, connecting *La silla* back to the press and his artistic community. Finally, as a large and complicated object that took considerable time and materials, *La silla* reflects Vigía’s desire to elevate the work of Cuban authors to “literature,” in Zaldívar’s words, and not just as poems and stories written in private notebooks and tucked away.

The late 80s and early 90s were not an easy time to found an artistic organization in Cuba, especially one that centered on the goals that Estévez and Zaldívar had for Vigía. In the midst of paper shortages, political instability, and mass exile, the writers and authors of Vigía emerged with a passion to show the world that Cuban culture will prevail and flourish, regardless of the island’s political, social, or economic circumstances. With their books, Vigía affirms that there is value in individual expression and communal collaboration, and that the work of Cuban authors and poets belongs next to the work of international writers who, in their own times of joy or trouble, have addressed many of the same subjects and expressed many of the same sentiments as the Cuban writers published by Vigía.

As an iconographic nod to the unyielding artistic spirit of the press, Estévez places a signature symbol, an oil lamp, on each object produced. The fifth loose-leaf page in *La silla* displays this decisive lamp accompanied by the inscription “Ediciones Vigía” and the publication date, “April of 2008” (Fig. 11). Text on the back of the page translates as “This oil lamp is part of the sole copy of the poem ‘*La silla*’ by Rolando Estévez.” Peggy Sue Dunigan states that the oil lamp “signifies its [Vigía’s] mission to ignite creativity even when threatened by extreme circumstances . . . [and] reminds all cultures that artistic expression and individual creativity can too easily be extinguished.”¹¹ This remains a fitting message from a



Fig. 11. Rolando Estévez Jordán (Cuban, b. 1953). *La silla* (The chair), detail, loose-leaf page, 2008, paper, watercolors, ink, 17.1 x 8.1 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.63i). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

publishing house that preserves and makes public the work of many Cuban authors and artists who would otherwise remain relatively unknown outside the island.

With a contextual understanding of the history of the press, a closer look at *La silla* can give greater insight into the personal life of Estévez and many Cubans who chose to stay on their island following the Revolution. Once viewers open the paper bag and the wooden box, and after they read the publication and construction information on the loose-leaf pages discussed above, they arrive at the heart of the assemblage: the poem. The English translation of the poem *La silla*, composed in Spanish, reads:

Here and there,
like north and south,
are two seasons.
Coming and going
with the rumbling
of snails across the curtains.

For my mother,
who doesn't live in norths or souths
but in the relative lukewarm of fallen leaves and jasmine,
snowcones upturned into a cup,
and the tapping of a fan against her breast,
here and there contaminate each other.

She's taken their seasonal attributes
and built a chair.

Not a perfect, marketable, comfortable chair.
Not Lam's chair, screaming from the *monte*
and displaying a flower vase.
Not a chair from her house, or from an old railroad platform.
Not in the middle of some constellating crowd.

Not a chair sitting all by itself,
 But rather
a chair in the sea halfway between two shores,
like a miniscule newborn isle,
a tiny land where the light of day and the light of night
fall together in the sadness of one feeble ray.

Her chair is not a compass.
Her chair is not a boat.
Her chair does not go north, does not go south.
 It does not go.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Figs. 12–14. Rolando Estévez Jordán (Cuban, b. 1953). *La silla* (The chair), detail, painting on banner, 2008, paper, watercolors, ink, 192.5 x 16.2 cm. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.63f). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

body is incomplete and hidden behind two fish suckling at her breasts as described in the poem. She has reconciled herself to this place, becoming one with her environment as her body provides nourishment to the creatures of the sea. Transitioning to the bottom figure is a trail of fish that seem to be swimming upward (Fig. 13). In the bottom image, the chair is less crucial to the composition (Fig. 14). The woman is the central focus, her body clearer and more complete. She sits with her arms curved above her head, her hair flowing up and away, in a mermaid-like position.¹⁴ She breastfeeds two individuals described in the poem as “shipwrecked sailors.”

The two women present the story of Estévez’s mother—and many Cuban mothers—who took to the sea and fled their island in the hopes of providing a better life elsewhere for their families. Leaving the island meant leaving loved ones, leaving home, and not knowing when they would return. The woman featured in *La silla* is alone, torn between two shores. Instead of choosing one or the other, she builds a chair, both here and there, and settles in the space between. She settles in the sea.

In addition to the figures in this painting, Estévez includes various symbols that reflect Vigía’s penchant for creating complex and layered iconographies. This is a characteristic design trait found in most Vigía publications, and it invites various interpretations of the artwork and literature that viewers might uncover on their own based on their own knowledge or backgrounds. For example, Estévez added to his paintings of his mother the crescent moon shape at the top edge of the banner. This moon appears in many Vigía publications, and it could be an indicator of the lunar cycle, or it could lead viewers to a more symbolic conclusion. According to Patricia E. González, the moon is associated with the Santería orisha Yemayá. Orishas play a major role in Santería, a syncretic Afro-Cuban religion. As deities associated with the natural world, orishas rule the natural elements and phenomena in the areas where they live. The orisha Yemayá is “the symbol of maternity and womanhood,” and she rules the sea, showing “tranquility but also mighty force.”¹⁵ Perhaps Estévez is including the Santería symbol for Yemayá as a way of reinforcing his mother’s Cuban roots.

Another complicating image in Estévez’s painting is the chair. In his poem, Estévez states his mother’s chair is “Not Lam’s chair, screaming from the *monte* and displaying a flower vase.” Lam, or Wifredo Lam, is the most recognized modern artist from Cuba. He was born in 1902 in Sagua la Grande, a city that, like Matanzas, sits on the north central coast of Cuba. After completing studies at the Academy of San Alejandro, Lam traveled abroad extensively, living and working in both Europe and on occasion in his homeland.¹⁶ Because of his itinerant lifestyle, Lam has been described as a “cultural outsider” who blurs the line between being simultaneously Cuban and not-Cuban, both geographically and ideologically. Lam placed physical and emotional distance between himself and his homeland, and as a result his relationships with other Cuban artists were sometimes troubled.¹⁷ Edward Lucie-Smith argues in his essay “Wifredo Lam and the Caribbean” that he would place Lam more within the international narrative of Surrealism and American Abstract Expressionism than within the narrative of Cuban or Latin American art, a statement that

reflects Lam's international, displaced persona.¹⁸ Regardless of the controversy surrounding the "Cuban-ness" of Lam, he is above all a native of Cuba, and upon returning to the island after more than twenty years' absence, he began to address native themes in his work, most notably Afro-Cuban themes and Santería.¹⁹

In 1943 Lam painted a work also titled *La silla* (Fig. 15). Stylistically, the painting displays the confluence of European cubism and Cuban iconography. In the center of Lam's composition is a chair enveloped by a dense landscape of leaves and plants in shades of muted greens, tans, reds, and greys. Lam's stylization of the foliage and the chair and his consistent color palette make the chair appear less out of place amid the thick vegetation. The same is true for Estévez's scroll painting with its consistent black line work and cohesive color palette. Juan Martínez offers an interpretation of Lam's painting that places the artwork within an Afro-Cuban context. Sitting on the chair is a vase with leaves or flowers. Martínez explains this somewhat out-of-place object by stating that the vase "evokes an offering to a deity or nature spirit," an orisha.²⁰ Orishas, as mentioned above, are deities associated with the natural world, in this case, the forest. Lam's placement of the offering on a chair is particularly significant. In Yoruba tradition (the African culture that many Afro-Cubans hold ties to), the chair symbolizes the belief that altars are the "seats of the gods."²¹

Martínez's interpretation reveals Santería iconography within Lam's painting, and if the art historian's conclusions are applied to Estévez's scroll painting, we see similar references. By placing his mother on a chair, the seat of the gods, Estévez likens her to Lam's vase of leaves—an offering to an orisha. Estévez's offering, however, is not to the orisha of the forest but to the orisha of the sea. By depicting his mother in this way, perhaps Estévez is suggesting that in leaving behind her son and her homeland, his mother is sacrificing herself to the sea for what she believes is the good of her family. This comparison of Lam's painting with Estévez's painting builds upon the idea discussed above concerning Estévez's use of the crescent moon symbol. Estévez, like Lam, infuses his art with Afro-Cuban iconography. Lam draws upon his European cubist aesthetic with *La silla*, while Estévez draws upon his personal story and life experiences for his *La silla*. Both, however, hold fast to their Cuban roots. In titling his assemblage *La silla* and citing Lam in his

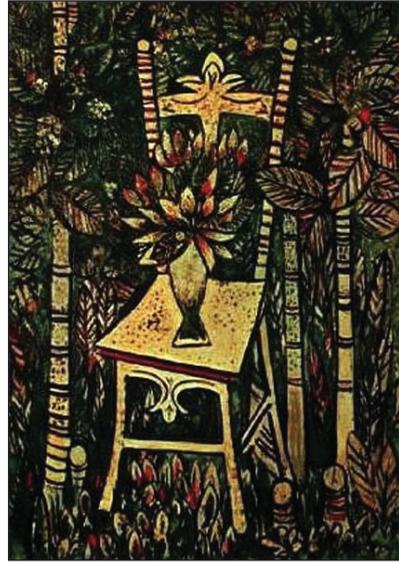


Fig. 15. Wifredo Lam (Cuban, 1902–1982). *La silla* (The chair), 1943, oil on panel, 111.6 x 81.5 cm. Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana. Gift of Lilia Esteban and Alejo Carpentier, 1976, Inv. 07.296. <https://theartstack.com/artist/wifredo-lam/la-silla-1943>

poem, Estévez is aligning his work with that of the internationally recognized modernist. Estévez’s assemblage transcends his own time as a work that comments not only on his personal history but also on the history and culture of the island, integrating references to Cuba’s deep-seeded African roots, the state of the island following 1959, and the accomplishments of a mid-twentieth century Cuban artist. Estévez merges all of these influences, these many facets of Cuban history and culture, into one artwork that reflects the complex, tangled history of the island. This layering of iconography and historical references is a key trait of Vigía publications, and it helps the press place itself within a larger artistic and cultural narrative that extends far beyond the boundaries of Matanzas.

After viewing all parts of Estévez’s assemblage and looking more closely at the poem and painting that sit at the heart of *La silla*, a viewer comes to understand that engaging with this object is not about reaching a final destination, the poem. Rather, engaging with this object requires an appreciation for the journey of unpacking each piece of this assemblage, an experience that leads to the question: what does the object as a whole say? While the pieces that make up this object beg to be opened and touched, the design of the artwork is carefully and thoughtfully controlled. The bag, box, and folded banner all create a physical and visual struggle for a viewer. Physically, the banner is so long that as a viewer begins to lift the accordion folds, they spring open as the banner tumbles down to the floor. Visually, the fluid text, watercolor paintings, and free-form organic nature of the various collaged designs are in stark contrast to the rectangular, pointed, and sharp edges of the bag, box, and pages, which convey a sense of rigidity and stiffness. Finally, Estévez plays with a juxtaposition of warm and cool colors, grounding his work in earth tone shades of brown, green, and orange, but adding blue, green, and grey to the painting side of the banner as a contrasting element to other pieces of the assemblage. Estévez instills in his assemblage a tone of tension and fluidity, harmony and discord. With the design of this assemblage, Estévez complements the feelings of inbetweenness expressed in his poems.

Adding to the tone of liminality in this assemblage is the idea that all the components that make up this artwork can pack neatly into a bag which, if needed or desired, could easily be toted around or carried away. The poem and painting in *La silla* can be viewed as a scrapbook or tangible memory of Estévez’s childhood, and the portability of the assemblage echoes that when he was a young teenager Estévez’s entire life was picked up, packed away, and placed elsewhere. The themes of portability and movement can be found throughout the work of twentieth-century Cuban artists, and *La silla* is not the only Vigía work to address the subject. Another large assemblage created by Estévez, his 2008 work *Fui llevado a un cine de barrio mientras mi madre hacia su maleta* (I was taken to a neighborhood cinema while my mother packed her suitcase) reflects the artist’s memories of the day his family left (Fig. 16).

Ruth Behar writes in her book *The Portable Island: Cubans at Home in the World* that in the decades following the Revolution, thousands of Cubans left the island, but in 1978 and 1979, 125,000 Cubans were brought back to Cuba under a family reunification program to visit relatives. She goes on to clarify,



Fig. 16. Rolando Estévez Jordán (Cuban, b. 1953). *Fui llevado a un cine de barrio mientras mi madre hacia su maleta* (I was taken to a neighborhood cinema while my mother packed her suitcase), 2008, mixed media: leather, metal, textile, wood, paper, paint, ceramic, lipstick, raffia, plastic, hemp rope, dried flowers, and straw, H. 55 cm (suitcase); L. 376 cm (scroll unrolled). Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.4). Photo: Jeffrey Wilcox.

They weren't allowed to stay with their families and were forced to stay in hotels. Then, by a strange coincidence, the same number of Cubans who returned as visitors was matched by the exodus of 125,000 Cubans from the port of Mariel in 1980, which the island viewed as a purging of the "scum" of its revolution. Again the gap widened, making the ninety miles of ocean border between Cuba and the Florida coast the longest ninety miles in the world.²²

This back-and-forth movement of Cubans and the confusion and heartache it caused would certainly have affected those who remained in Cuba, including Estévez, and served as a reminder of the instability of life and the portable nature of family, memories, and home. This sentiment is reflected in the construction of *La silla* and *Fui llevado a un cine de barrio mientras mi madre hacia su maleta* as both assemblages are built upon a portable foundation, a bag and a suitcase respectively.

The conscious decision to use a bag and a suitcase in the design of these two pieces evokes connotations associated with the word "baggage." While many people deal with painful memories and difficult experiences internally, Estévez manifests his externally in an artistic and physical form. The memories, preserved forever in his poems and drawings, will always remain a part of Estévez no matter what happens to his artworks. *La silla*, however, differs from *Fui llevado a un cine . . .* in that the first is constructed completely of organic materials. There is no metal fixture holding *La silla's* box together, no wire

fastening the flowers to the box or the handle to the bag, and no plastic parts. As a physical object, *La silla* will not last. The paper will tear, the flowers petals will crumble, and the box will fall to pieces, but for now we are given a glimpse into Estévez’s memory and the stories and struggles that have shaped his life and his country. Neither *La silla* nor *Fui llevada a un cine . . .* was created for a commercial market or to make a bold political or cultural statement, but rather, they were created with the simple message that life is fleeting, painful, confusing, uncertain, and beautiful.

Estévez communicates this idea and sets the tone for viewers of *La silla* by using a strict order of organization. Each component of this artwork has a specific place. First, the bag. Then, the box. A wooden lid. Inside the lid, two thin sheets of paper that must be unfolded in order to get to the stack of papers. Then comes separating the sheets of paper and the banner, arranged in a specific order. The whole process of viewing this object is one of uncovering layers. Once all of the pieces are unpacked, the order in which to view them can become unclear—the arrangement can become jumbled. A viewer who first sees the object with everything unpacked as seen in Figure 1 might wonder: Which side of the banner should I look at first? Is the bag part of the artwork or simply a means of transportation for all the pieces? This poses many difficulties for the museum in terms of displaying the assemblage since it raises the question: How can viewers see the entire piece while still experiencing and understanding the physical nature and unpacking process inherently crucial to the work’s composition? When Figure 1 (the artwork unpacked) is viewed next to Figure 2 (the artwork with pieces stowed away), it is clear the assemblage can be either confusing or systematic, an artwork that allows viewers freedom to decipher meaning and order on their own or an artwork that is contained and methodical. The possible unending cycle of packing and repacking the pieces, of folding and unfolding the banner, of stacking and unstacking the papers, can be overwhelming.

This cyclical style of construction is a defining characteristic of Estévez’s designs for Vigía, and it is a style informed by his work as a theatrical scenic designer. Theater is a passion for Estévez, who claims, “I consider myself a man of theater . . . [and] a man who tries to write poetry.”²³ He continues in the same interview, saying:

I cannot stop being a man of the theater because I think life has awarded me with the knowledge, understanding, and affection for people who are so complex and yet so simple. People who walk with a shell on their back, they sacrifice a lot, that they deliver to the public, leaving on the stage the best pieces of their heart. That is theater. When the function ends and you see the empty orchestra you have the conviction that at least one spectator left changed, and you cross the stage and touch the scenery placed there, alive, awake, even in its material sense, which a few minutes before had been awake in its magical sense.²⁴

This cycle of coming alive, of feeling and sensing magic and being nudged back to reality, is evident in Estévez’s work at Vigía. At the theater, the scenery comes alive once the actors take their places and the audience arrives. At Vigía, the literature comes alive

in the writing, designing, creating, and reading of the books and assemblages. The objects do not rely on the laughter or applause of the audience, but on the life Estévez and his team of volunteer artisans put into them. *La silla* becomes a stage that presents viewers with poetry and art in the privacy of their own homes, not surrounded by other members of an audience. Viewers have the freedom to engage with Vigía works on their own time, ruminate on the literature, see paintings and drawings from different viewpoints, pack and unpack the pieces, and find meaning that speaks to them individually. In this way, Vigía has found a place within Cuba's post-revolutionary culture as a medium that preserves history and stories for writers and recalls memories of an island facing many challenges. Perhaps the personal experiences, interpretations, and discoveries found by those engaging with the objects is the "magic of this Matanzas house" that Estévez names in his list of materials used to create *La silla*.

The construction, form, and content of *La silla* represent a tension in tone, one of imbalance and liminality, reflective of an unstable island and the hope of a better future kept alive by the unwavering artistic community of Vigía. While other Cuban publishing companies struggled with material shortages, government censorship, and broken spirits, Estévez insists that Vigía not only survived the late 80s and early 90s. It flourished "because independence has always been a priority. We always knew we wanted to do something that depended solely on us. We saw in self-management the spirit of artisanry, the spirit of art itself."²⁵ Similarly, Estévez's personal system of independence and self-management, created out of private struggles as much as government constraints, has allowed the artist to survive and to find his place in the whirlwind known as post-revolutionary Cuba. When he designs for the theater, Estévez hopes at least one viewer leaves the show changed. Perhaps, though, with *La silla*, the person who leaves most changed is the artist himself.

NOTES

1. Peggy Sue Dunigan, "Latino Arts Inc. Shines Light on 'Cuban Artists' Books and Prints," *ExpressMilwaukee.com*, December 8, 2009, accessed June 27, 2016, <http://www.expressmilwaukee.com/article-9118-latino-arts-inc-shines-light-on-lscuban-artistsrs-books-and-print-srs.html>.
2. "Ediciones Vigía," British Library, accessed September 28, 2010, <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelp/lang/spanish/hispcoll/hispexhibl/edicionesvigoia/edex.html>.
3. For more information regarding the social and political history surrounding the foundation of the Vigía press, see Kim Nochi, "The Birth of Vigía, Artist Books of Cuba's Ediciones Vigía." University of Missouri, Museum of Art and Archaeology, accessed July 17, 2016, <http://vigia.missouri.edu/intro-essays/birth.shtml>.
4. María Eugenia Alegría, Rolando Estévez, and Alfredo Zaldívar, "Vigía: The Endless Publications of Matanzas," in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Ruth Behar and Juan Leon, eds., vol. 33, no. 4 (Fall, 1994) p. 830.
5. Ministerio de Cultura de la República de Cuba, *El Ministerio*, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://www.min.cult.cu/>.
6. Linda S. Howe, *Cuban Artists' Books and Prints / Libros y grabados de Artistas Cubanos: 1985–2008* (Winston-Salem, N.C., Wake Forest University, 2009) p. 39.

7. Estévez has left Ediciones Vigía and established his own press in Havana, Cuba, Ediciones El Fortín. The Museum of Art and Archaeology currently has one work produced by this publishing house, a booklet, *N.M.-R.B.: Dos mujeres, una isla* (N.M.-R.B.: Two women, one island), a bilingual anthology of poetry by Ruth Behar and Nancy Morejón, edition and introduction by Juanamaria Cordones-Cook (2014.195), gift of Professor Juanamaria Cordones-Cook.
8. Richard Goodman, "Postcards from Havana: A Show of Cuban Artist Books Is No Message in a Bottle." *Fine Books & Collections*, July 2009. Accessed June 27, 2016. <http://www.finebooks-magazine.com/issue/200907/cuban-1.phtml>.
9. While Vigía's creation methods are more uncommon today, they recall the handcrafted nature of medieval manuscripts and collaborative production techniques of Renaissance printmakers, a subject addressed in my master's thesis. See Kim Nochi, "Ediciones Vigía: Books in Art and Cultural History," M.A. thesis, University of Missouri, Columbia, 2012.
10. Alegría, Estévez, and Zaldivar, "Vigía: The Endless Publications of Matanzas," p. 831.
11. Dunigan, "Latino Arts Inc."
12. Translated by David Frye and published in Ruth Behar and Lucía M Suárez's book *The Portable Island: Cubans at Home in the World* (New York, 2008).
13. Nathalie Bondil, "Regarding Cuban Art," in *Cuba: Art and History from 1868 to Today* (New York, 2009) p. 18.
14. The mermaid is a common motif in works produced by Vigía
15. Patricia E. González, "Yoruba Vestiges in Nancy Morejón's Poetry," *Callaloo*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Autumn, 2005) p. 957.
16. "Biographical Notes," in *Cuba Art and History from 1868 to Today*, Nathalie Bondil, ed. (New York, 2009) p. 376; Edward Lucie-Smith, "Wifredo Lam and the Caribbean," in *Wifredo Lam in North America*, Paula Schulze, ed. (Milwaukee, Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 2008), p. 64.
17. Curtis L. Carter, "Wifredo Lam: Cultural Globalizer," in Lucie-Smith, *Wifredo Lam in North America*, p. 18.
18. Lucie-Smith, "Wifredo Lam and the Caribbean," p. 67.
19. Juan A. Martínez, *Cuban Art and National Identity: The Vanguardia Painters, 1927-1950* (Gainesville, 1994) p. 91.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Behar, *Portable Island*, p. 4.
23. Marilyn Garbey, "Entrevista a Rolando Estévez," November 27, 2008. <http://www.atenas.cult.cu/?q=node/5276>. Accessed October 4, 2010, but no longer available.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.

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