

Lilian Garcia-Roig
Cuba Lost and Found

In 2017, Lilian Garcia-Roig returned to her homeland of Cuba to enter the famed Cuban landscape tradition with her own modern interpretations of nature. Although not the only return visit, this year marked the first opportunity to work in the countryside in plein-air and bring her own unique techniques and vision to the spectacular valley of Viñales. Following in the footsteps of Cuban landscape painters for generations also inspired by its unique beauty, Garcia-Roig brought her own contemporary aesthetic and technical innovations to the valley. Like so many Cubans in the United States, hers is a complicated relationship and even the ability to receive the necessary paperwork, bring and/or acquire supplies, and engage with the land in a limited period of time, presented hurdles which she determined to overcome, and did. For this exhibition, works on paper mounted on wood and done on-site are complimented by large oil paintings that serve to reconstruct the original works on the grand scale that is most familiar to her work process, but impossible to do in Cuba. Throughout her renowned career as a painter of landscapes, in the dense forests of North Florida especially, Garcia-Roig has transformed the traditional romantic scene of nature imagined, into monumental expressions of nature the mighty. With a unique painterly construction of fleeting personal moments in the landscape, she re-interprets nature as both an abstraction with images reduced by her brush, and then magnified as something super-real. She works on-site in a cumulative wet-on-wet process to record her minute-to-minute experiences as color, shape, light, shadow and mood change. Less confined by conventional rules that dictated the landscape tradition of the past to create images that closely resemble reality, her technique is about the act of painting more than the subject. Using brushwork that ranges from the aggressive to the sensual, her approach draws upon the intensity of the engagement with the process. Every new view becomes denser, a more complex opportunity for painterly exploration reflected in the thickness of the paint that builds up on the surface, like its own topography. Working directly onto the canvas using pigments direct from the tube, brushes, her hands and fingers to scrape and carve into the thick impasto of the paint, she allows an image to emerge, rather than be

copied. Her large-scale installations of such non-contiguous works found in *Fluid Perceptions* and *Banyan as Metaphor* are impressive, and their intentional fragmentation may be seen as a reflection of her own sense of fragmented identity and attempts to mend her hyphenated life.

The Viñales Valley in the Sierra de los Organos near the western end of the island is an outstanding karst landscape defined by limestone extrusions and encircled by mountains. It features spectacular dome-like limestone outcrops (mogotes) that rise high above the verdant valley. It is an iconic landscape that offers artists a wide range of vistas that have become some of the most recognizable in Cuban art history. The environment has been approached as a romantic vision of timeless nature, splendid views of strange limestone formations ascending from the earth and covered with trees, and skies that change with every minute of the day. It is also agricultural, dotted with farms and small bungalows, and a national park attracting tourists who can get lost in its complex beauty. Garcia-Roig has long been fascinated by landscapes in remote places and exploring their very essence, from the earth to the sky, the trees to their smallest detail; then magnifying every leaf, branch, trunk, root. Building up layer after layer, she creates dense environments that lose the viewer, just as they had once lost her as she sat in their midst, contemplating and painting until she made a personal connection. The land would belong to her through her brush, found again after it was lost when she was forced to leave Cuba as a child. It is a reclaiming of sorts, a means of identity, that eluded her for many years. It is also a different experience from her usual forays into nature, where she would actually be in the middle of the woods, lost in the process of painting. In Viñales, she was surrounded by a landscape that afforded a close-up of rocks, caves, and fields to distant vistas of mountain contours against changing skies. Over the years, the outlines of the hills have been given names that seem to reflect their visual appearance: *Two Sisters Ridges*, *the Hill of Kings*, *Cow Hill*, *Grand Hill Range*, and *the Million Mogote Hill*. Palm trees climb up the slopes that are gentle to abrupt, tobacco farms nestle in the valley, and caves darken with mystery amidst the greens. She works rapidly to record her presence amidst an ever-changing perceptual experience, and she is always there, always moving through the passages in the hills and views from the overlooks. There are steep inclines and quickly ascending ridges, bare capstones, and wedges of rocks intersperse with greenery. The variations in color are almost too much for the

artist as she becomes so immersed in the beauty that surrounds her, only broad sweeps of color seem appropriate for both the works on paper and the large reconstructions.

A distant view of the *Grand Hill Range* begins on-site in a small acrylic work on paper as a soft and sensual scene, a quiet time in nature revealed in the serenity of a blue sky and hilltop described in layers of diluted color. When it is reconstructed in the studio, the same view captures bold cloud formations, deeper blues, and a more expansive skyline full of dense and detailed short-stroked brushwork reflecting a different mood – more energy and less tranquility. A similar re-interpretation from the on-site to the studio appears in *Edge of the Knife* reconstructed as *Grand Edge of the Knife Hill*. Both are dominated by the towering mogote, from slightly different vantage points. The up-close view of the reconstructed site reveals the virtuosity of the artist's brushwork with short hatches of color separated by graffiti-like marks and passages of gray that lure the eye back from the surface to build up a hillside in layers of rocks and vegetation, crisper than that of the original work, but both containing an energy that exposes the artist's personal and emotional interaction with the scene.

It is easy to picture Lilian Garcia-Roig situated in the dramatic vistas of the Valley of Viñales, attempting to take it all in and capture nature with her brush before she is forced to return home, then reimagining the experience for the large work. It is like a mental and physical puzzle that the artist must solve in remembrance of that time and place, as the many parts, many viewpoints, and many details converge to create something new, yet still with the evidence that it has proceeded from an original and specific source. The works may also be understood as memories of the past, once hidden, yet long-resident in the mind of an exile.

Carol Damian, Ph.D.