

*Exile as Transformation*

The Body in Abstraction:  
Cárdenas, Fernández and Soriano



## *A Note from LnS*

*Exile in Transformation* brings together the work of Rafael Soriano, Agustín Cárdenas, and Agustín Fernández—three artists who, while formally distinct, share a defining characteristic: exile as a catalyst for reinvention.

Rather than approaching abstraction as a purely formal exercise, each artist uses the style as a means to process and transform lived experience. In their hands, abstraction becomes a language of resilience; one that moves beyond representation toward a new becoming.

Soriano's luminous compositions dissolve form into light and atmosphere, offering a vision of transcendence and quiet spiritual force. Cárdenas interprets the human body into organic, enduring forms—sculptures that feel at once ancient and timeless. Fernández, in contrast, constructs a world of material intimidation or protection depending on the read, where the body is fragmented, encoded, and reimagined through a lens of desire and control.

Together, their works articulate three distinct responses to displacement: transcendence, endurance, and protection. What unites them is not style, but a shared pursuit—to reconstruct meaning through form.

This exhibition invites the audience to engage with works that are not only visually compelling, but historically and intellectually significant. At a moment of renewed global attention on Cuban modernism, these artists stand as essential voices; each contributing to a broader discussion of visual abstraction as both personal and universal, where words fall short.



## **AGUSTIN CÁRDENAS**

b. 1927, Matanzas, Cuba – d. 2001, Havana, Cuba

### *Cuarto Famba* *The Sacred Room*

1973

bronze, edition 2 of 3

48 x 17 ½ x 16 inches

121.9 x 44.5 x 40.6 cm.

Signed and editioned on bottom.

### **EXHIBITIONS**

Version included in: Le monde légendaire de Cárdenas, Château de Biron: le Manoir d'Eyrignac, Dordogne, France, June – September, 2012 [illustrated in accompanying exhibition catalogue].



**AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ**

b. 1928, Havana, Cuba – d. 2006, New York, NY

*Untitled*

1982

oil on canvas

22 ¾ x 21 ¾ inches

57.75 x 55.25 cm.



## **RAFAEL SORIANO**

b. 1920 Matanzas, Cuba - d. 2015, Miami, Florida

### *En busca del silencio* *In Search of Silence*

1987  
oil on canvas  
24 x 30 inches  
61 x 76.2 cm.

Signed 'SORIANO' bottom right.

#### **EXHIBITIONS**

*Rafael Soriano | Entre lo místico y lo espiritual*, Miami Dade College, West Campus Gallery, Doral, Florida, November 22, 2008.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Rafael Soriano and the Poetics of Light*, essay by Pau-Llosa, Ricardo eCoral Gables: Sierra Marketing and Publishing Company/Ediciones Habana Vieja, 1998. Monograph, p. 89 (ill).

*Rafael Soriano: Entre lo místico y lo espiritual*, essay by Orta, Gustavo, Doral: Miami Dade Community College, West Campus Gallery, November 22, 2008. Exhibition catalogue.

*Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.*

Edward Said, Reflections on Exile, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 173.

The three artists gathered here through the curatorial eye of LnS share a geography of birth, roughly belong to the same generation (born in the 1920s),<sup>1</sup> and studied at the San Alejandro Academy in Havana. All three became exiles at different times and for different reasons. All three practiced forms of abstraction rooted in the human body and had direct or indirect connections with surrealism.<sup>2</sup>

Agustín Cárdenas (1927-2001) left Cuba in 1955 in part due to the Batista dictatorship, but paradoxically with a travel scholarship to Paris, from the regime he was fleeing. Agustín Fernández (1928-2006) left for Paris in 1959 to expand his artistic horizons; as the Cuban Revolution shifted to totalitarianism and a Soviet ally by April 1961, it was clear he would not be returning.

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<sup>1</sup> All three belong to what is generally acknowledged as “la tercera Vanguardia” – the third generation of modern artists in Cuba. Other members of this generation are the sculptors Roberto Estopiñán (1921-2015), Rolando López Dirube (1928-1997), and painters Roberto Diago (1920-1955), Servando Cabrera Moreno (1923-1981), Hugo Consuegra (1929-2003) and Guido Llinás (1923-2005). Diago died young in tragic circumstances in Madrid; Cabrera Moreno remained in Cuba, while the rest became exiles.

<sup>2</sup> Cárdenas met Breton in Paris and joined the by then third or fourth wave of the movement. Fernández also met Breton in Paris and was on the periphery of the group. Soriano had his own innate sensitivity that connected with elements of surrealism, such as mysticism and interest in dreams.

Rafael Soriano (1920-2015) had committed his life to painting and art education in his native Matanzas; he was one of the founders of the school of fine arts there, which flourished under the democratic Auténtico governments of presidents Grau and Prio (1944-1952). He protected the school and its students during the difficult Batista years (1952-58) and welcomed a revolution in January 1959 that promised to restore democracy and reactivate the 1940 constitution. Those promises were not realized, and by 1962 Soriano was an exile living in Miami.

Cárdenas was born in Matanzas to an Afro-Cuban family of very modest means. At San Alejandro, he was a scholarship student who received his training in sculpture from Juan José Sicre, Teodoro Ramos Blanco, and Florencio Gelabert, Sr. He exhibited with the abstract group of artists *Los once* (1953-55) and shared a two-person show with Rafael Soriano at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in December 1955, shortly before his departure for Europe. In time Cárdenas became an expatriate that followed the Wifredo Lam model of living and working outside Cuba. He never broke formally with the Castro regime and returned for a major exhibition in Havana in 1993. Cárdenas was resettled in Cuba by his last wife in 1994. He died in Havana in 2001; he had been suffering from Alzheimer disease for the last eight years of his life. Yet his break from his place of birth was real and permanent, from 1955 until his final return in 1994, when he was no longer able to make sculptures.

Fernández was born in Havana to an upper-class family that had both wealth and pedigree. He attended a Jesuit school (which made him anti-clerical for the rest of his life); the San Alejandro Academy as well as the University of Havana where he studied philosophy but did not finish the degree. After graduating from the academy of fine arts (1944-49), he spent a year in New York City, where he

studied with painters Yasuo Kuniyoshi and George Grosz. By 1953, he was settled in Madrid, where he studied painting techniques with greater depth at the San Fernando Academy, as well as the work of Velázquez at the Prado. Back in Havana he was friendly with painters associated with both *Los once* and the *concretos* groups, while painting in a very colorful semi-figural style that referenced still-life and landscape. After deciding not to return to Cuba, Fernández continued to live in Paris, then Puerto Rico, finally settling in New York. He married a second time in 1961 and had three children. Fernández died in New York City at age 78 and never returned to Cuba.<sup>3</sup>

The longest lived of these three artists is painter Rafael Soriano. Like Cárdenas, he came from a modest family and attended San Alejandro on a scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Soriano received degrees in both sculpture and painting, studying with Juan José Sicre, Leopoldo Romañach and Armando Menocal.<sup>5</sup> As a student he befriended bohemian avant-garde painters Víctor Manuel and Fidelio Ponce, who offered alternative role models which did not follow convention. Unlike Cárdenas and Fernández, Soriano did not go off to Europe, but stayed home in the late 1940s and 1950s, contributing to the civic growth of the nation not just through his art, but through art education. Visits to Mexico and New York City in 1947 exposed him to the work of Tamayo and Siqueiros, as well as the emerging Abstract Expressionists. By the early 1950s Soriano painted in a hard-edge concrete style,

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<sup>3</sup> Fernández' first wife was a Cuban from the same social class (Maria Elena Molinet). His second wife was Lia Epelboim, a Romanian Jew who had escaped from Europe during World War II. Their children are Clodio, Clea and Sebastian. Lia was a cousin of the *concreto* painter Sandu Darie. Lia pre-deceased Agustín by a few weeks in December 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Born in Cidra, Matanzas, Soriano grew up in the city of Matanzas proper, where his father was a barber and his mother a homemaker. Although he came from a large family, his parents supported his early interest in art.

<sup>5</sup> Soriano was part of a group of working-class students who received scholarships at the behest of painter and former academy director Armando Menocal. These included Soriano, Roberto Diago, Roberto Estopiñán, and a few others. They were known as "los muchachos del viejo Menocal."

and was an active member of the *pintores concretos*. Happily married, he had a stable, content life, filled with art and community in his native Matanzas. All of this came crashing down when the new regime solidified its control over the everyday life of its citizens, including art education and art making. Exile became inevitable for Soriano.<sup>6</sup> He returned to Cuba once in 1979 to see his ailing mother shortly before her death.<sup>7</sup> Exile was deeply and even brutally transformative for these three artists. Their earlier styles were abruptly altered by leaving their places of birth, families and communities.

Cárdenas' early style with its dependence on Arp and Brancusi, gave way in Paris to a more totemic monumentality. Cuba is Africa, both lost yet reconstructed through evocation, be it in the bronzes *Pillar of Fire*, 1961, or *The Sacred Room*, 1973. The body appears in forms that resemble a hip or shoulder, or biomorphic elements that inhabit space with the rootedness of ancient trees. When carving marble, he can suggest the body by its very absence, as in *Window in the Garden*, where nature gives us the emptiness of the view. The Carrara marble *Initial Boundary* with its minimal yet sensual form is open ended in its interpretive possibilities: a body stretching and bending; an arm, a tongue. Pain nor joy are communicated by Cárdenas' pieces. Rather it is an endurance that comes across through the beauty of the form itself and projecting a stoic presence.

Fernández paintings in the 1950s were explosions of color and painterly agitation. With exile the palette became one of browns, ochres, grays and silvers, with pale slivers of purple or pink camouflaged in monochromatic orchestrations.

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<sup>6</sup> Soriano arrived in Miami first in April 1962, followed by his wife Milagros and baby daughter Hortensia in May.

<sup>7</sup> Soriano traveled with his daughter Hortensia, so she could see her paternal grandmother, and meet her aunts, uncles and cousins.

The landscape and still-life were replaced by armors, seals, tattoos, etc., where leather and metal blend in and out, contain, and imprison breasts, torsos, phalluses and buttocks. All are painted with a Velázquez-like elegance which stresses the tension between agonizing image and beautiful execution. An untitled graphite drawing of 1966 breaks into a surface with erotic violence – its impeccable technique is a wonder of trompe-l’oeil illusion. The 1982 untitled oil on canvas presents a square armor, bent and broken. We see the perforations, the heads of nails or screws around a form that could be a breast or the head of a penis. Mystery and pain transfigure the body into a site of terrifying pleasure.

As a *concreto* painter Soriano constructed a series of canvases where order possessed an organic fluidity, and the geometric was sustained through a richly coloristic painterly approach. As I have written previously, exile was a profoundly traumatic experience for Soriano.<sup>8</sup> He was not able to paint for some time. Once he returned to his easel, the earlier geometric language gave way to a more complex visuality. The shapes shifted to more organic forms, and the color palette became richer. A flat space that evoked the third dimension, expanded to one of vast openness. Working through all these pictorial issues throughout the 1960s, by 1973-74 Soriano had achieved the “*plenos poderes*” of his mature style. This is evident in the seven oil paintings, and two pastel drawings that represent him in this exhibition. From the 1981 oil *Entrance at Dawn* to *The Silence of the Sunset*, of 1995, these oils manifest a world where forms embrace, enter and exit each other as manifestations of communion and liberation.

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<sup>8</sup> Alejandro Anreus, “Rafael Soriano and His Generation: Exile and Transcendence,” in Rafael Soriano. The Artist as Mystic, exh. cat. (Chestnut Hill: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2017), pp. 75-80.

Canvases such as *Levitating Towards the South* and *Hidden Harmony* are symphonies of browns, ochres and crimsons where subtle appearances of blues and purples define an intricate space that both pushes and pulls away from the viewer. The female figures possess the habit of being – fearlessly they levitate and accept the enigma of the universe. If Cárdenas’ forms reflect the transformation of exile as stoic presence, and Fernández’ through erotic agony, Soriano’s pictorial discernment of exile is surrendering through a sensual mysticism. The journey through loss is redemption.

These two painters and one sculptor expand and enrich our understanding of abstraction beyond the tired formal formulas. “The crippling sorrow of estrangement” is transformed.

Alejandro Anreus, PhD

Alejandro Anreus is a visiting lecturer in art history, Rutgers Newark. He is the author of *Modern Art in 1940s Cuba. Havana’s Artists, Critics and Exhibitions* (University of Florida Press, 2025). He is a co-curator of the upcoming Juan Sánchez survey exhibition (The Phillips Collection/Whitney Museum of American Art/ Museo de Arte, Puerto Rico, 2027-28).



## **AGUSTIN CÁRDENAS**

b. 1927, Matanzas, Cuba – d. 2001, Havana, Cuba

### *La familia* *The Family*

1989

bronze, edition 5 of 7

29 x 21 ½ x 17 ½ inches

73.7 x 54.6 x 44.5 cm.

Signed and editioned lower verso.

### **EXHIBITIONS**

*Agustín Cárdenas: marble, woods, bronzes*, August-September 1990, Galerie Durbán:  
Caracas, Venezuela, 1990.



## **AGUSTIN CÁRDENAS**

b. 1927, Matanzas, Cuba – d. 2001, Havana, Cuba

### *Ventana en el Jardín* *Window in the Garden*

1971

Pentelic marble sculpture

31 ¾ x 23 ¼ x 9 ½ inches

80.65 x 59.06 x 24.12 cm.

### **EXHIBITIONS**

Cárdenas, November 1971, Galleria Lorenzelli, Bergamo: Lombardy, Italy [illustrated in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, page 40, ill. No. 22, black and white (listed as *Fenêtre au jardin*)].



**AGUSTIN CÁRDENAS**

b. 1927, Matanzas, Cuba - d. 2001, Havana, Cuba

*Columna de fuego*  
*Pillar of Fire*

1961 - 1988

bronze

88 ¼ x 18 ⅞ x 15 ⅝ inches

224 x 48 x 39 cm.

Signed and editioned 'AP 2' on base.



## **AGUSTIN CÁRDENAS**

b. 1927, Matanzas, Cuba – d. 2001, Havana, Cuba

### *Límite inicial* *Initial Boundary*

1989  
carrara marble  
19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 31 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
50 x 80 x 50 cm.



**AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ**

b. 1928, Havana, Cuba – d. 2006, New York, NY

*Warrior Armour*  
*Armadura de Guerrero*

1975  
oil on canvas  
48 x 34 inches  
121.92 x 86.36 cm.

**EXHIBITIONS**

Agustín Fernández, Gimpel and Weitzenhoffer Gallery, New York, NY, February 21 - March 13, 1976.



**AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ**

b. 1928, Havana, Cuba - d. 2006, New York, NY

*L'Origen*  
*The Origin*

1964

oil on canvas

55 by 50 ½ in.

139.7 by 128.3 cm.



**AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ**

b. 1928, Havana, Cuba – d. 2006, New York, NY

*Untitled*

1968

oil on canvas

31 ½ x 31 ½ inches

80.01 x 80.01 cm.



**AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ**

b. 1928, Havana, Cuba – d. 2006, New York, NY

*Untitled*

1973

graphite on paper

22 ¾ x 17 ¼ inches

57.8 x 43.8 cm.



**AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ**

b. 1928, Havana, Cuba – d. 2006, New York, NY

*Untitled*

1966

oil on canvas

25 ½ x 31 ½ inches

64.7 x 80 cm.



## **RAFAEL SORIANO**

b. 1920 Matanzas, Cuba - d. 2015, Miami, Florida

### *Entrada al amanecer*

*Entrance at Dawn*

1981

oil on canvas

24 x 20 inches

60.96 x 50.8 cm.

Signed 'SORIANO' bottom left.

### **EXHIBITIONS**

*Rafael Soriano*, Galería de Arte 9, Lima, Peru, September 1- 1981.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Rafael Soriano*. Lima, Peru: Galería de Arte 9, September 1, 1981, Exhibition catalogue (ill).



**RAFAEL SORIANO**

b. 1920 Matanzas, Cuba - d. 2015, Miami, Florida

*El silencio del ocaso*  
*The Silence of the Sunset*

1995  
oil on canvas  
50 x 50 inches  
127 x 127 cm.

Signed 'SORIANO' bottom right.

**EXHIBITIONS**

*Aniconic Spectral*, LnS Gallery, Miami, FL, April 4 - 25, 2025.



**RAFAEL SORIANO**

b. 1920 Matanzas, Cuba - d. 2015, Miami, Florida

*Levitando hacia el sur*  
*Levitating Towards the South*

1988  
oil on canvas  
50 x 60 inches  
127 x 152.4 cm.

Signed 'SORIANO' bottom right.



**RAFAEL SORIANO**

b. 1920 Matanzas, Cuba - d. 2015, Miami, Florida

*Sortilegio*  
*Spell*

1985  
oil on canvas  
50 x 50 inches  
127 x 127 cm.

Signed, titled, and dated on verso.



## **RAFAEL SORIANO**

b. 1920 Matanzas, Cuba - d. 2015, Miami, Florida

### *Recóndita armonía*

*Hidden Harmony*

1992

oil on canvas

60 x 50 inches

127 x 152.4 cm.

### **EXHIBITIONS**

*Rafael Soriano, Transcendentalism, Distilled*, LnS Gallery, Miami, FL, December 2022 - February 2023.

*Aniconic Spectral*, LnS Gallery, Miami, FL, April 4 - 25, 2025.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Rafael Soriano, Transcendentalism, Distilled*, LnS Gallery, Miami, FL, 2022, essay by Alejandro Anreus, Ph.D., chronology by Carol Damian, Ph.D., poem by Inaugural Poet Laureate, Richard Blanco, accompanying exhibition catalogue page 60 (ill.).



## **RAFAEL SORIANO**

b. 1920 Matanzas, Cuba - d. 2015, Miami, Florida

### *Untitled*

1980  
pastel on paper  
22 x 30 inches  
55.9 x 76.2 cm.

Signed 'SORIANO' bottom right.

### **EXHIBITIONS**

*Rafael Soriano | Entre lo místico y lo espiritual*, Miami Dade College, West Campus Gallery, Doral, Florida, November 22, 2008.

*Aniconic Spectral*, LnS Gallery, Miami, FL, April 4 - 25, 2025.

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*Rafael Soriano: Entre lo místico y lo espiritual*, essay by Orta, Gustavo, Doral: Miami Dade Community College, West Campus Gallery, November 22, 2008. Exhibition catalogue.

*Soriano on Paper*, Anreus, Alejandro, Manhattan: LnS Gallery, September 7 - 10, 2023.



## **RAFAEL SORIANO**

b. 1920 Matanzas, Cuba - d. 2015, Miami, Florida

### *Untitled*

1989  
pastel on paper  
30 x 40 inches  
76.2 x 101.6 cm.

### **EXHIBITIONS**

*Aniconic Spectral*, LnS Gallery, Miami, FL, April 4 - 25, 2025.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Soriano on Paper*, Anreus, Alejandro, Manhattan: LnS Gallery, September 7 - 10, 2023.

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