

Amelia Peláez and the Insertion of the Female Sphere: The Cuban *Vanguardia* Reconsidered

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Modern Cuban painting began early in the twentieth century when the island's avant garde artists broke with the teachings of the beaux arts academy in favor of European modernist styles that would better articulate their personal and regional identities. Known as the *vanguardia*, or vanguard, this movement began to take form in Havana in the 1920s, coalesced in the 1930s, but would not reach its peak until the 1940s.¹ The *vanguardia* included a loosely based group of painters born around the turn of the nineteenth century, who initially were trained at the Academy of San Alejandro² in Havana during the early 1920s. Many of these artists also studied in Paris, the artistic center of the European avant garde movement. They were part of a larger cultural elite that was attempting to define a Cuban national identity in the language of some of the modern ideas taking shape in the Western cultural centers. For the *vanguardia* the search for a Cuban national identity, or *Cubanidad*, centered on what they perceived to be the most autochthonous and untouched traditions of the island.

In this essay, I will explore the career of Amelia Peláez within the broader realm of the Cuban *vanguardia*. I will also trace the development of her work from romanticized and highly academic landscapes, during her time at San Alejandro in the 1910s and 1920s, to the synthetic abstractions of the 1930s and 1940s, for which she is best remembered. I will argue that her highly personal artistic career was the result of her genuine desire to contribute to the collective program of the *vanguardia*, to which she interjected a definition of the Cuban essence that included the personal and familial realms of women.

Early Training at San Alejandro and Immersion in the School of Paris (1916-1934)

Amelia Peláez was born on January 5, 1896, in the quiet

provincial town of Yaguajay, in Las Villas Province, on the north coast of Cuba to the town physician Doctor Manuel Peláez y Laredo and his wife María del Carmen del Casal y Lastra. Peláez was the fifth of eleven children of the marriage, both members of the landed Cuban Creole middle class. Additionally, her mother was the sister of poet Julián del Casal and in this way her family was associated with the highest intellectual circles of Havana.³ When Doctor Peláez became ill in 1915, he moved the family to Havana, where they settled in a comfortable house in the quiet suburb of La Víbora, at 261 Estrada Palma Street. Giulio Blanc mentions that La Víbora is to this day a neighborhood that has a "sleepy, old-fashioned flavor to it" and that it appealed to provincial families for these reasons.⁴ Built in 1912, the Peláez house (Figure 1) was of a neoclassical design but incorporated many elements peculiar to Cuban Creole architecture including: elaborate curvilinear iron grille-work; colorful tiled floors; high ceilings; arched doorways; *medio puntos* (fanlights at the arches filtering the sunlight through colored glass plates); and rococo-inspired columns, cornices, friezes and railings. Some of these features are preserved in the Peláez house to this day.

Upon the death of her father in 1915, Amelia Peláez's mother was left to administer a household of eleven children. The following year, she enrolled Peláez at San Alejandro.⁵ At the time, the academy was led by artists such as Armando Menocal, Esteban Velderrama, A. Rodríguez Morey, and Leopoldo Romañach. Mostly, these artists followed the French neoclassical school, brought to Havana by San Alejandro's first director, the French painter Juan Bautista Vermay who had been a disciple of David. Of all of them, it was Leopoldo Romañach (1862-1951) who was able to provide Peláez with an "orientation and a cultural and social environment far superior to what she was accustomed to"⁶—so much so that she remembered him as her best teacher ever. Conservative and

This paper summarizes research I conducted for a graduate seminar in Caribbean Modernism. Field research in Cuba during the summer of 2000 augmented my sources and enabled me to turn the seminar paper into my Master's Thesis, "Amelia Peláez and the Insertion of the Female Sphere: The Cuban *Vanguardia* Reconsidered (1920s-1950s)," defended Spring, 2001.

¹ Juan A. Martínez, "An Introduction to Modern Cuban Painting, c. 1927-1950" in María Lluïsa Borràs and Antonio Zaya, eds., *Cuba Siglo XX: Modernidad y Sincretismo* (Gran Canaria, Spain: Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, 1996): 365.

² Juan A. Martínez, *Cuban Art and National Identity: The Vanguardia Painters, 1927-1950* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1994) 3.

³ José Seoane Gallo, *Palmas Reales en el Sena* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1988) 13-4.

⁴ Giulio Blanc, *Amelia Peláez: 1896-1968, A Retrospective* (Miami: Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture, 1988) 19.

⁵ Seoane Gallo 27-30.

⁶ Quoted in Seoane Gallo 31.

working in an impressionistic style as is evidenced in his picture *Marine* (Figure 2), Romañach's influence can be felt in Peláez's *Veleros* (Sailboats) of 1925, still part of the Peláez Family Collection in Havana (Figure 3). While Peláez made use of her master's palette and brushstrokes, instead of depicting the broad expanse of the Cuban coast, Peláez zoomed in on a view of a small dock with sailboats. This work suggests the beginning of a painting style that placed considerable attention on detail. As we will see, much like her interest in the microcosmic elements of larger landscape compositions, which in a sense destabilized traditional ideas of the genre, Peláez's mature work centered on equally simplified aspects of interior scenes.

In 1927, sponsored by the San Alejandro Alumni Association, the artist left for Paris accompanied by the folklorist Lydia Cabrera, who was at the time also pursuing an artistic career.⁷ In Paris, Peláez and Cabrera immediately entered the *Grand Chaumière* and also took courses at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* and at the school of the Louvre Museum. By 1931 they had become dissatisfied with what was being taught at these academic institutions so they enrolled at Fernand Léger's *Académie Contemporaine*. There they met the Russian Constructivist Alexandra Exter (1884-1949), who had gained notoriety in the avant garde circles of Paris as early as 1923 when she defended a more practical and simpler industrial dress for women.⁸ Whitney Chadwick writes in *Women, Art and Society* (1996) that Exter was part of a group of cosmopolitan Russian vanguard artists who welcomed European innovations including Cubism and Futurism (Vladimir Tatlin, Kasimir Malevich and others).⁹ From 1914 to 1917, many of these well-traveled Russian artists returned home from abroad to "produce a new art for the people" in support of the budding political revolution.

Exter brought to Peláez's work a latent interest in Cubism, a concession to color, a deconstruction of forms and, perhaps more importantly, abstraction. In other words, she represented for Peláez the antithesis of the style that she had cultivated in Cuba under Romañach. However, perhaps more importantly, Exter's influence was felt beyond her artistic practice, to the extent that she instilled in Peláez a strong sense of

worth and determination to continue as a professional woman artist.¹⁰

By 1933 Peláez had spent six years in Paris and her immersion in the Parisian avant garde was undeniable, having participated in the *Salón de Tuilleries* and the *Salón des Indépendants* no less. That year, she showed at the Galerie Zak in the Rue de l'Abbaye, in the Plaza of St. Germain des Prés, exhibiting thirty-eight works including twenty-one still lifes, nine landscapes, and eight portraits of women.¹¹ The exhibition was well-received in Parisian circles, as evidenced by the words of the critic André Salomon who noted that "Amelia Peláez del Casal is a painter that, from the start, has been in the lines of those artists whose careers are worth following closely."¹² Peláez exhibited works including her *Still Life in Ochre* of 1930 (Figure 4), depicting three unidentifiable fruits laid over an ochre table that recedes towards a background of wrought iron bars. This picture recalls Alexandra Exter's work including an untitled gouache of 1925 given to Peláez by the Artist, now part of the Peláez Family Collection (Figure 5), to the extent that it shows the artist's experimentation and concern with reductively rendered and overtly simplified objects, as well as with the application of color and paint.

In all, Peláez spent seven years in Paris; initially she received funding from San Alejandro, and later on a stipend from her mother allowed her to remain there. Perhaps a nascent interest in contributing to the creation of a visual language capable of expressing a Cuban reality, hastened the artist's return to the island in 1934.

The Rise of the Cuban Avant Garde (1930s-1940s)

Upon Peláez's return to Havana at the age of thirty eight, she began to establish herself as an artist, exhibiting frequently and fully engaged as a member of the Cuban avant garde of the thirties. The island was then experiencing significant political and economic unrest. At the time, Cubans were not participants in their own government, which was at the mercy of U.S. corporations, and the country had been embroiled in economic crisis since the twenties. These circumstances led progressive intellectuals, university students, professionals and members of the bourgeoisie to join workers and peasants in

⁷ Seoane Gallo 23.

⁸ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996) 252. The author quotes Alexandra Exter as having described the Industrial Dress as follows: "The rhythm of modern life demands a minimum loss of time and energy... To present day fashions which change according to the whims of the merchants we must counterpoise a way of dressing that is functional and beautiful in its simplicity."

⁹ Chadwick 264-8. These artists offered a contrasting viewpoint from yet another group who underscored Russian cultural traditions in their work (such as artists Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov), arguing that this was the only way that they express any ideas of importance. Chadwick writes that during his Futurist tour of Russia in 1914, Marinetti recruited Exter among others to participate in the "Free Futurist Exhibition" at the Galleria Sprovieri in Rome.

¹⁰ Chadwick 264-8. Chadwick adds that the full participation of women in the Russian avant garde also owed much to the breakdown of traditional distinctions between the fine and applied arts, which enabled women costume and set designers like Sonia Delaunay and Exter to enter the scene. Their immersion was especially encouraged with the rise of Productivism—the belief that art should be practiced as a trade and that the design of popular items for everyday use had precedence over experimentation and individual expression—as textile and dress design, chores that had been traditionally dominated by women, became a central concern of the Russian artistic milieu.

¹¹ Roberto Pérez León, "Amelia Peláez: Dinámica de la incorporación y la innovación," *Revista Nacional de Cultura* (Venezuela) 56: 298 (July-September 1995): 283-291, 287.

¹² Martínez, *Cuban Art* 64-5.

protesting for change. Specifically, they proposed a new view of nationalism that emphasized reform and opposition to the influence of the United States.¹³ Much as the island was attempting to gain political freedom from the United States, so, too, were the intellectuals attempting to achieve autonomy in the cultural and artistic realms. The Cuban *vanguardia*, led by the *Grupo Minorista*, began to articulate a discourse that centered on an increased awareness of Latin America as a culturally united but politically imagined “nation” in tandem with the desire to cease to be cultural colonies of Europe. Also important was an intellectual and artistic discourse based on nationalism and, related to this, the forging of distinct non-European cultural identities.¹⁴

Although skewed by the notions of class and race prevalent among their milieu, the work of the *vanguardia* artists was still the first to begin to articulate an independent Cuban nationality and culture. For the artists of the *vanguardia*—including Eduardo Abela (1891-1965), Jorge Arche (1905-56), Rafael Blanco (1885-1955), Carlos Enríquez (1900-57), Antonio Gattorno (1904-80), Víctor Manuel (1897-1969), Marcelo Pogolotti (1902-88), Lorenzo Romero Arciaga (b. 1905) and Amelia Peláez¹⁵—a conscious and collective search for the authentic Cuban essence was seen in the day-to-day. Not surprisingly, the nationalist visual vocabulary that they developed predominantly centered on two main manifestations: *Afrocubanismo*, which exalted the values of Cuba’s African population by praising among other things the exoticism of the mulatta, and *Criollismo*,¹⁶ which did the same for the island’s Hispanic or European roots by exalting the virtues of the white peasant, or *guajiro*.¹⁷ Exaltation of either simplified cultural root was acceptable by cultured elites and the general population and was seen as the true venue by which Cubans would free themselves from the vestiges of past colonialism as well as from the escalating presence of American interests and military forces. Amelia Peláez, however, shined as an atypical example of how the Cuban essence could be found in many variant aspects of Cuban life. Aware of her colleagues’ search for a “purer” national identity, unspoiled by foreign influences, Peláez concentrated her efforts on a different, yet equally valid, image of *Cubanidad*: that of the sequestered

lives led by many Cuban women of the upper classes. As we shall see, her works spoke of a private life led within the walls of her home, where she was surrounded by many things that she believed were as unique to Cuba as the traditions of the AfroCubans and the *guajiros*.

Re-acquaintance with the Familial Home (1934-1950)

More than anything, Amelia Peláez’s return to Cuba in 1934 represented a self-imposed exile within the walls of the familial house in La Víbora. The result of this exile was an exclusive concern with “the nature that I can enjoy from the immediacy of my own home and its surroundings.”¹⁸ It seems that her Parisian years could not erase the indelible mark left by the genteel upbringing of her youth, particularly when it came to the prescribed roles for women of her class. Amelia Peláez chose to carve out her own space within her suburban home, facilitated by the unfortunate (or fortunate?) fact that after the death of her father, the Peláez household had been presided over by her mother and upon her death in 1964 (just four years before that of the artist), by the artist and her unwed sisters.

Peláez’s concern for the feminine sphere is readily apparent and is the one constant element in the evolving nature of her work. By the mid thirties, her work was characterized by the shift from an austere and distanced rendering of objects, typical of her Parisian period, to more exuberant and abstracted investigations of Cuban themes, primarily those concerned with domestic interiors. For instance, *Hibiscus* of 1936 (Figure 6), now in New York, clearly privileged a tropical flower, highlighted in crimson tones, over indiscernible background elements rendered in a series of superimposed curvilinear planes. Here Peláez employed what Alejandro Alonso has termed a “concentric rhythm,” or a central motif surrounded by a series of uninterrupted undulated planes.¹⁹ Tied to these curvilinear forms, which suggest bountiful abundance, Giulio Blanc recognizes in the red flowers a distinctively feminine erotic presence.²⁰ According to Blanc, Peláez toyed with similar ideas of sexuality and fertility in her *Still Life in Red* of 1938 now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Figure 7) with the inclusion of fruit such as the *guanábana* and pome-

¹³ Martínez, *Cuban Art* 45-6. Of course, these conflicts culminated with the Cuban Revolution of 1933. That year, President Franklin D. Roosevelt concerned over the fate of U.S. investments in Cuba appointed then Assistant Secretary of State Sumner Welles as official mediator in the Cuban crisis, “in order to end [it] in a way that was favorable to the United States.”

¹⁴ Martín Casanovas, *Orbita de Revista de Avance* (Havana: n.p., 1972) 14-9.

¹⁵ See Yolanda Wood, *De la plástica cubana y caribeña* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1990) 40, 75. Most of these artists participated in the landmark exhibition *Primera Exposición de Arte Moderno* (First Exhibition of New Art) held in 1927 at the Association of Painters and Sculptors in Havana. The exhibition commemorated the first edition of the *Grupo Minorista*’s new journal *Revista de Avance*. Yolanda Wood mentions that the exhibition was also referred to as “independent” or “modern” art and artists by contemporaneous critics.

¹⁶ Please note that in the Spanish Caribbean, the term Creole, or *criollo*, was originally used to describe a person of European extraction born in the Americas as a distinction between them and peninsular Spaniards, or *peninsulares*. Although the term had an underlying racial—and thus class-based meaning (i.e. white descendants of European colonizers); gradually, it was also employed for the descendants of African slaves born in America and any combination thereafter. In the twentieth century, the term *criollo* has come to encompass all aspects of Caribbean culture that are perceived to be indigenous.

¹⁷ Pérez León 286.

¹⁸ Seoane Gallo 174.

¹⁹ Alejandro G. Alonso, *Amelia Peláez* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1987) 10.

²⁰ Blanc 37.

granate, whose fleshiness and abundance of seeds, respectively, might suggest to us these concepts. More importantly however, *Still Life in Red* pointed towards a directive that shaped her future production: the use of thick black lines to render Cuban architectural elements within her compositions.

In the forties, Peláez continued to experiment with the black line as a compositional tool. This is clear in the gouache *Siesta* (Figure 8) of 1941, where we see a woman enrapt in slumber within her domestic sphere, manifested through curvilinear forms and the thick black lines used to delineate spaces. Another breakthrough was Peláez's decision to grant the Creole architecture and native fruits of Cuba primacy over any other motifs in her work. For instance, although in work prior to this point Peláez had included window grilles and stained glass panels as background decorations, it was only with work from the early forties that she made the decisive transition of integrating architecture into the composition. This can be appreciated in *Still Life* of 1943, now in a private collection in Miami (Figure 9), where the artist obliterated any notions of foreground and background as compositional elements merged into a seemingly flat surface that privileged color and the ever-present black trace that divided the surface into infinite architectural forms. While it is true that in *Still Life* there is a discernable subject matter, some abstracted fish and fruit in this case, what was important here was how the light filtered through colored windows to reflect over the objects and bounce back to an original source, becoming lost in the intricate grille work. This is also seen in *Interior Scene with Columns* of 1951 (Figure 10), which depicts a still life of tropical fruit framed by two columns and enveloped by myriad color planes reminiscent of architectural forms.

Amelia Peláez's Space of Femininity

Like many other women artists of the early modern era, Amelia Peláez embodied the female voice in the paradigm of the male as both the viewer/consumer and creator—and thus *only* worthwhile participant in the creative artistic process. This historical asymmetry between male and female artists has been explored in depth by feminist art historians. In the groundbreaking essay “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity” first published in 1988, British scholar Griselda Pollock examines modernity through the notions of space and of *the gaze*. She argues that modernity as a social process implied a spatial appreciation of a “spectacular” city that was only open to a class and gender-specific gaze.²¹ Pollock suggests that it was not unusual for women operating throughout much of the twentieth century to play out their lives negotiating their position in society through a public/private discourse. Likewise, in *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (1996), Marsha Meskimmon

discusses the ways in which domesticity places women at the border of the “public and the private, the social and the individual.” Women had no choice but to politicize these private places despite their incongruity with the prevalent models of public or politicized life. Indeed, women who operated between the private and public spheres carried an immense burden.²²

The implications of the work of feminist historians such as Pollock and Meskimmon on the work of Amelia Peláez are quite clear: because women's lives bordered on the public and private, oftentimes they were engaged in activities that encompassed these two realms. Peláez's stature as a professional artist implied exposure to the public world as she engaged in the commerce of art. However, as a woman of means in provincial Cuba, her opportunities for mobility outside the matriarchal house were limited to the spaces and places deemed appropriate by members of her society. This duality suggests that, unlike other members of the Cuban artistic *vanguardia*, Peláez had to create for herself a *modus operandi* that disrupted the clear-cut boundaries between her home and the public sphere. As Meskimmon suggests, during the early decades of the twentieth century even left-leaning intellectuals considered women like Peláez subversive in their desire to permeate the public realm of men.²³ In this sense then, and in claiming for herself a discursive position within the Cuban avant garde, Amelia Peláez can be seen as subversive, especially if we consider that she got her start within the confined environs of San Alejandro. Indeed in her own time, and at a basic level, just the act of becoming a professional artist implied a political imperative.

In Cuba, the avant garde artists of the 1920s through 1950s attempted to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the island's complex cultural history through their depictions of the Afro-Cuban and *guajiro* traditions. Ironically, in arriving at a definition of Cuba, they employed an artistic style that was derived from European sources. To the extent that she made use of Cubism and Constructivism to create her personal style, Amelia Peláez was no exception to this general rule. However, she differed from the rest of her generation in that her work also commented on her experiences as a woman. The artist's contribution represented a very specific and unique definition of *Cubanidad* that revolved around her own existence within a privileged Cuban Creole sphere. It seems inevitable that Peláez's corpus of work referenced a completely different, but not less modern, aspect of modernity than that of her male colleagues. It is perhaps this exaltation of the space where women were held supreme that can be considered her biggest contribution to the legacy of the Cuban *vanguardia*.

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²¹ Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in N. Broude and M. Garrard eds., *The Expanding Discourse* (New York: Icon Editions, 1992) 261.

²² Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996) 161-2.

²³ Meskimmon 161-2.



Figure 1. Façade, Peláez Family Home, c. 1912, 261 Estrada Palma Street, La Vibora, Havana. Photo: Author.



Figure 2. Leopold Romañach (1862-1951), *Marine*, nd, oil on canvas, 77.5 x 109.5 cm. Collection of Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.



Figure 3. Amelia Peláez (1896-1968), *Veleros*, 1925, oil on canvas over board, 35 x 25 cm. Peláez Family Collection, Havana.



Figure 4. Amelia Peláez (1896-1968), *Still Life in Ochre*, 1930, oil on canvas, 65 x 50.5 cm. Collection of Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.

Figure 5. Alexandra Exter (1884-1949), *Untitled*, 1925, gouache on board. Peláez Family Collection, Havana.

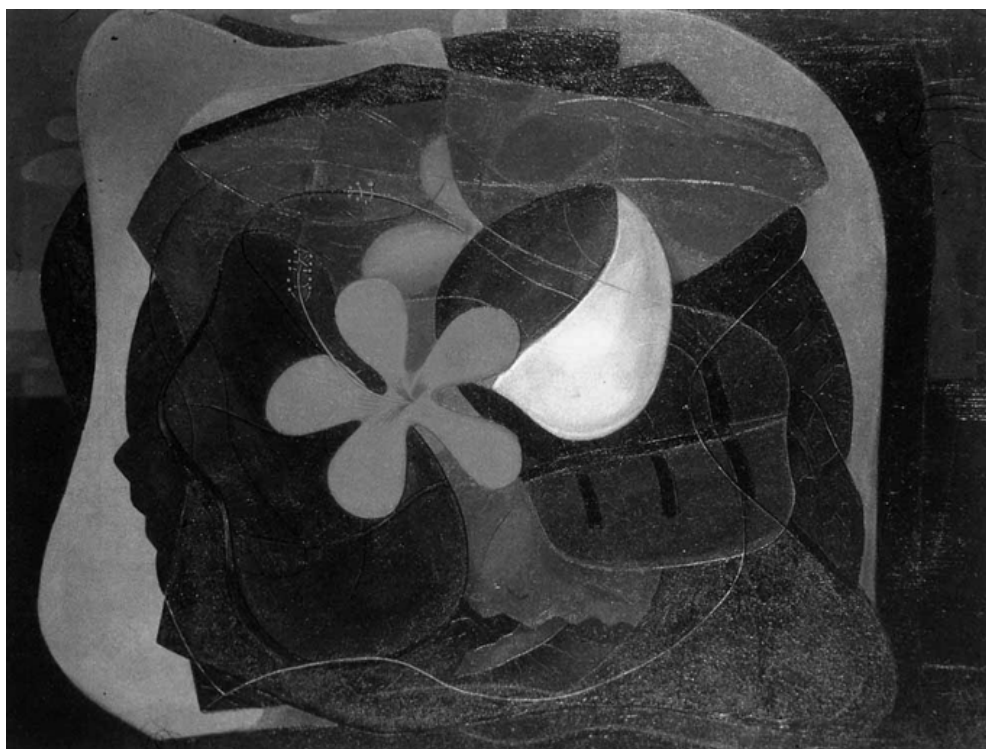


Figure 6. Amelia Peláez (1896-1968), *Hibiscus/Marpacífico*, 1936, oil on canvas, 73.8 x 95 cm. Private Collection, New York.



Figure 7. Amelia Peláez del Casal (1896-1968), *Still Life in Red*, 1938, oil on canvas, 69.3 x 85.1 cm. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Inter-American Fund). Photograph ©2002 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 8. Amelia Peláez (1896-1968), *Siesta*, 1941, sepia ink on paper, 55.5 x 66.5 cm. Collection of Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.



Figure 9. Amelia Peláez (1896-1968), *Still Life*, 1943, gouache on paper, 96.5 x 68.8 cm. Private Collection, Miami.



Figure 10. Amelia Peláez (1896-1968), *Interior Scene with Columns*, 1951, tempera on paper over canvas, 142 x 98.5 cm. Collection of Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.