



Hershey | Affective Memories
Luis Enrique Silvestre

ON VIEW:
January 22 - February 20, 2022

Opening Reception:
Saturday, January 22 from 1-4pm

EVANSTON **ART**
CENTER



Organized by Alina Valle
Curated by Cynthia Taboada

The Model Town of Hershey in Cuba*

Milton Hershey first visited Cuba in January 1916, evidently falling in love with the country at first sight. Viewing Cuba as a country of eternal spring, Hershey was excited by the immense sugar plantations. In 1916, the world was embroiled in the first Great War and sugar, essential for the production of milk chocolate, was in short supply. During that initial visit to Cuba, Milton Hershey decided to purchase sugar plantations and mills so that he could grind and refine his own sugar for use in his Hershey's chocolate factory.

The flagship of Hershey's Cuban properties would become a new factory and town, Central Hershey, located north of Havana. The site chosen for Central Hershey was not close to transportation route or a ready supply of workers. However, Milton Hershey envisioned a new town built along with the sugar mill. His vision and concern for his employees resulted in a loyal workforce. The sugar mill was completed in 1918.

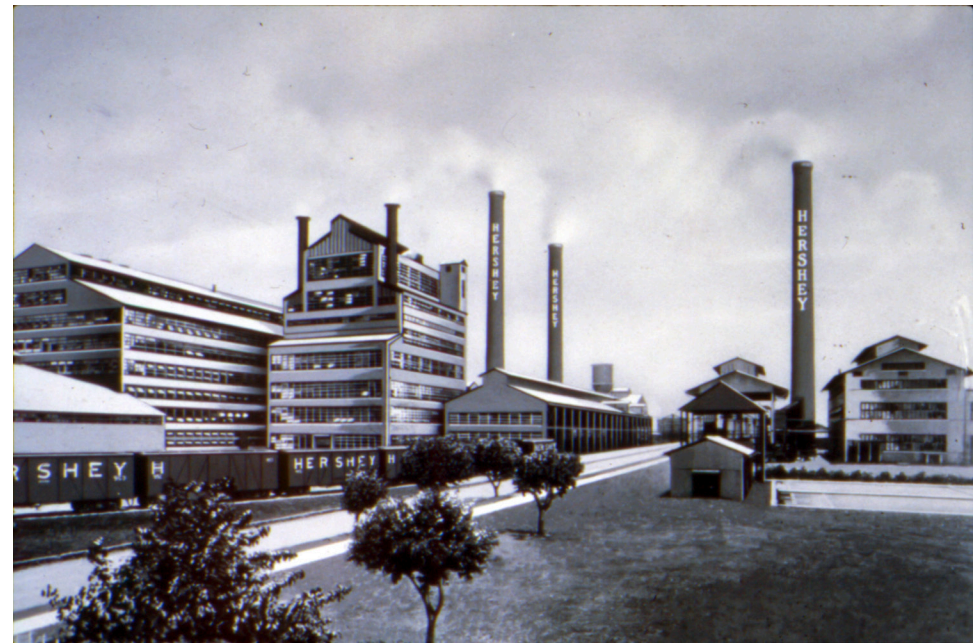
To transport construction materials to the Hershey Plant and to market the sugar, Hershey built a railroad that eventually ran between the main ports of Havana and Matanzas, which was entirely electric and completed in October 1922.

To provide for his workers in Central Hershey, Mr. Hershey built a town or "*batey*." In addition to comfortable rental houses, he also ensured that good health services and recreational facilities, including a baseball diamond, a golf course and sports club, and a general store were available. Milton Hershey provided free public education to the children of its workers.

Hershey's presence and his way of doing business in Cuba stood in stark contrast to most foreign businessmen who exploited the country and its people and took their profits home. Cuba praised and honored Milton Hershey with many awards, including the highest honor the country could bestow: the Grand Cross of the National Order of Carlos Manuel de Cespedes.

Hershey's Cuban properties were sold in 1946 to the Cuban Atlantic Sugar Company. At the time of the sale, operations included 60,000 acres of land, 5 raw sugar mills, a peanut oil factory, an agave factory, 4 power plants, and 251 miles of railroad track with locomotives and railway cars.

*Text adapted from Hershey Community Archives, Pennsylvania, <https://hersheyarchives.org/encyclopedia/cuba-central-hershey-1916-1946/>



Hershey | Affective Memories by Luis Enrique Silvestre

The Road Back to the Model Town of Hershey: Caring Memories

How many paths lead back to our roots, what we call “affective memories?” Are we cognizant of our movements around the world as immigrants or exiles or as simple owners of our destiny, always moving forward facing a future composed of equal parts uncertainty and equal parts hope?

In this series of paintings, “Hershey: Affective Memories,” Luis Enrique Silvestre forces us to confront an intense debate, initiated through his explorations. He also resurfaces reflections of what we leave behind, by will or by necessity, and how memory plays a fundamental role in the construction and maintenance of our personal histories, as well as our history as citizens of a society and our capacity to transform our surroundings.

In this exhibition, we confront the poetic memory of the artist’s experiences in Hershey, a model town founded by Milton Hershey in Cuba in 1916. This town was built alongside the industrial villas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where sugar and derivatives from the famous Hershey’s chocolate were produced, providing enormous economic potential during the early twentieth century. From this particular historical context, including the slow and definitive abandonment of the town following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, a present-day Hershey is constructed, with pain and melancholy, as if representing the soul of the Cuban nation, a nation itself betrayed by the revolution. This series by Silvestre stems from his reminiscences, of the dichotomy between past and present, and which considers his new reality following his move from Cuba to Brazil and his life in a new country for the past 20 years.

Through a discourse full of emotion and symbolism, we see paintings of places and pseudo-places that refer to the Cuban model city, where the artist spent his childhood, raised by his grandparents. This place awakened in him an eternal duality of feelings, from the tender memory of a bakery illuminated at night, in “*On & Off*,” to the melancholy of self-exile. We see the mixture of the happy atmosphere of childhood revisited in tiny details, as flashes of memory in “*Atmosphere*” and “*The Sugar Mill*,” and the crude reality of the economic and social abandonment of this place, denounced by the artist in the sequence “*Beach House*” and “*Gold Trading House*.”

Silvestre’s Hershey is not a simple village depicted in a painting, but a symbolic town, like our unflagging memory, where happiness and exile represent two sides to the same coin. Rather than a Manichean view, these memories are endowed with a complex charge and shades of

feelings inherent in human psychology. In it, we confront not only with the memory of the individual artist, but also with the meaning of a nation and its inability to transpose the harsh reality, finding a solution through escape.

The symbolic places, separated from reality through the artist’s lens, are diluted from figurative representations on the path to abstraction in two ways: from the geometrization of forms and reduction of subject matter and composition throughout the series, as in “*The Snack Shop*,” “*Hershey*,” and “*Mailbox*,” and, from surrealism, which emerge clearly in the animated objects, protagonists portrayed in interior views, as in “*Perpetual Machine*,” and in impossible situations, as in floating houses and architecture.

The road back to the Cuban model town of Hershey brings us the artist’s trajectory, symbolically represented here as a summary of images: the boy living on the island facing the unavailable horizon in “*Change*,” the artist reflecting on his values and need to escape in “*Vanishing Point*,” the man who decides to live in exile in another country in “*Happy Exile*” and encounters São Paulo and Concrete Art; in “*Hand That Builds, Hand That Destroys*,” the artist reinvents himself in his ability to rework his visual language without sacrificing his Cuban identity, and as he looks in the mirror in “*Model*,” a conceptual work that closes the exhibition. Throughout all of the work in this exhibition, we see the diversity of styles the artist employs.

Luis Enrique Silvestre is the only artist representing the model town Hershey through painting. In this exhibition “Hershey: Affective Memories,” he delights us with his vision, loaded with affection, lyricism, and incomparable pictorial quality; at the same time, this series integrates the history of the small town of Hershey through the narrative of a piece of artwork.

We are enormously grateful to the Hershey Community Archives, which kindly provided images of the former Hershey, and which also appear in this exhibition and catalog. Captions for the works were provided in an interview with the artist, which combine his memories and poetics, in July 2021. We share them here with the public so that, in a joint exercise, we can access and understand the places of our memories that run along a particular vein, while powerful, our reminiscences are experienced through the bias of affective memory.

Cynthia Taboada
Curator



Change | Cambio
2019. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 153 cm X 184 cm

This work recalls a children's playground, the gates of the Hershey houses in Cuba, constructed in keeping with the American style, featuring large portals and stairs that lead to the main entrance and where "WELCOME" signs are usually placed. In this case, the standard sign is replaced with the slogan "CHANGE," stating the need for change: "Things need change. You can't allow an idea to stagnate. For many years, Cuba has needed change." The landscape of a near reaction, an almost reactionary blue and green, against a hazy horizon, symbolizes a chemical reaction in the air, rendering the landscape as inhospitable in the artist's memories.



Vanishing Point | Punto de fuga
2013. Oil on canvas, 70 cm X 120 cm

"*Vanishing Point*" carries tremendous symbolic energy. Through a portrayal of the real, just as the artist represented the typical American-style houses in the model town, replete with its portals and stairs seen in the piece "*Change*," here Silvestre appropriates another symbol from his daily life, a lawn chair, often seen in houses in Hershey. Here, he positions the lawn chair as the primary subject of the painting, an object with a soul like an alter-ego representing his symbolic and affective universe. The isolated, solitary chair positioned in the landscape becomes a chair of a reflection, "the vanishing point" reflects not the perspective, but figures as a place of inflection where the artist ponders the ultimate strategy for escape, leaving Cuba for another context, another country. "This apparent beauty of the landscape, apparent tranquility, represents the outer layer, where an existential conflict lies."



Conflict Mediator | Mediator de Conflictos
2015. Acrylic on canvas, 121 cm X 128 cm

Here, we encounter a pessimistic view, represented in an organic form, symbolized through the inkblots attempting to escape or trapped inside a rigid geometric structure that floats in the air. We see the trampoline-like feature at the top of the structure, suggesting a leap into the void, into space signifying an escape. In this dramatic context of forms and feelings, the intention in the title *Conflict Mediator* seeks to achieve some balance, a way to mediate the conflict between organic form and geometry, just as in life given the countless dualities.



On & Off
2016. Oil on canvas, 62 cm X 99 cm

The title of this piece draws upon the dichotomy of life in Hershey, in a painting that brings into play the darkness we can see from the outside of the geometric building. In this piece, the artist intentionally recalls the Bauhaus school, with a dark blue sky, the presence of a leaf-less tree indicating a fork reminding us of the bifurcation between two paths. This gloomy external environment contrasts its interior, from where a bright yellow light spills out, indicating the existence of life inside the house. Beyond the symbolic aspects of *On & Off*, this painting directly associates with the artist's life in Hershey. As he finished the painting, the identity of the place emerged from his reminiscences: "I realized with great affection that this building reflected the bakery we passed in the evenings after going to the cinema. When it was lit, we went there to eat something.... One thing ... an important thing that I remembered is that the bakery not only gave us bread when we were children, but when I began to study art and painting when getting materials in Cuba was precarious, the bread flour arrived in bags, which are like a canvas, although not as good as store-bought canvasses. But, in this sense, the bakery supported me by providing the materials I needed, so that I could develop my skills during the first years of my career as a painter."



Beach House I | Casa de playa I
2019. Oil on canvas, 100 cm X 130.5 cm



Beach House II | Casa de playa II
2021. Acrylic on canvas, 100 cm X 160 cm

The diptychs: *Beach House I* and *Beach House II*, as a set show through the subjectivity of memory the house that remained in the artist's memories, a simple summer house he helped his father build on virgin beaches along the coast near the town of Hershey. It took a while to build the beach house given the lack of materials available in Cuba: "I never wanted to create a representation of the house from photos, relying instead on a more subjective memory." There were no photos of the house, and these images reflect not the real house, but how the artist remembers it and treats it with the colors, the sky, and the textures. All reflect his ideas regarding life, in layers that add to each other and in the whole that forms a mirror, a mirrored house, another subjective view from the artist which he uses to reflect himself. In doing so, he confronts the time he lived in Cuba against his new reality in another country.



Perpetual Machine | Máquina perpetúaria
2017. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 100 cm X 120 cm

Although most of these pieces feature exteriors, here the artist focuses on an interior, synthesizing the composition to help us to perceive a dramatic work:

“Subjectively, this work reminds me of the interior of the sugar processing plant, its workshops, some spaces of which persist in my memory.” Viewing this work suggests an abandoned space and open windows, housing a tool related to the sugar mill possibly in disuse, a piece of equipment that, when placed in the center of the canvas, is humanized, becoming the dramatic protagonist of this abandoned space. Next to the sugar scattered across the floor, a machine in perpetual solitude, condemned to uselessness, suggests above all a certain nostalgia that dominates Hershey today. The artist resolves the composition using a few artistic resources, through geometric synthesis and using spots of color, all of which guide us on his journey from figures to abstraction loaded with symbolism.



Beach House III | Casa de Playa
2017. Oil on jute, 50 cm X 60 cm

“This is the same beach house viewed in a different light at another time of day. Still, you can see the deterioration, the salt spray, the abandonment, the neglect, and the lack of resources, but this deterioration is established formally within the painting through symbolism.”

The artist here deals objectively with reality — the results of nature, time, and the lack of resources that definitively impact objects’ longevity, hinting at their disappearance and their finiteness — visually showing through numerous layers of paint applied to jute. This thicker fabric results in more visible brushstrokes and multiple layers of paint. Through a pictorial artifice, Silvestre provides glimpses of action of over time, the disappearance of things in the world, and in this scene of abandonment, how fleeting memories are, slowly slipping away.



Beach House IV | Casa de playa IV
2019 - 2021. Acrylic, oil and wax on canvas, 100 cm X 130.5 cm

The artist continues this series in *Beach House IV* with a definitive abstraction relying on the process of subjectivity. This representation reflects the erasure of memory through the deterioration of the original reality in Hershey. In this intense piece, requiring an enormous physical effort from the artist relying on grooves and wax, we find a beautiful contrasting pictorial representation and abstraction, rather than object realism.



The Snack Shop | El merendero
2016 - 2019. Oil on canvas, 50 cm X 60 cm

The artist relies on a “close up” detailed perspective here — the veins of wood, the textures and grooves of paint reflecting the actions of time. Here, in the figurative detail set against an intense blue sky, we see a painting that moves towards geometric abstraction: “This is a detailed image of a snack bar I visited when I was a kid, where I bought candies and bread. Located two blocks from my house, I remember vividly the peeling wood, how time worked on the wood. I looked at this image a lot; maybe it was the beginning of awareness of things to come a later as I became a painter.”

The choice for the details magnified in the painting reinforces the mechanisms of memory, often selective and always charged with affection, where a small detail returns us to the physical place, fact or circumstance, which the artist brings to us in all of the works in this exhibition. “This was a place where I enjoyed happy times with my friends, a beautiful place which I am honoring here.”



Hershey
2019. Acrylic on canvas, 49 cm X 60.5 cm

In this painting, the model town's nameplate "Hershey" features prominently, alongside the subjective composition with imaginary lines that evoke a train journey heading towards blue infinity. The artist emphasizes reality: although the Cuban Revolution attempting to change the town's name, giving it the name of a revolutionary commander, Camilo Cienfuegos, positioning it in the sugar mill towers, removing any hint of its past as a model city established by the North American, Milton Hershey. Today, the town is known and recognized, both within and beyond its limits, by its original name, the sign for which remains in the local train station.



Interior IV
2013. Oil on canvas, 50 cm X 40 cm

This painting brings easily to mind thoughts of my family, of my grandparents; I think that old General Electric and Westinghouse refrigerators still exist, still run. They are like eternal machines that never die, robust and solidly built, and were found in my own house, and in my grandparents' houses, both maternal and paternal.

Although this piece was created as a representation from a photograph of old buildings that landed in the artist's hands, this image reflects his own style, recalling elements that featured in the family's daily life and making use of light as it penetrated the house. Similar to *Perpetual Machine*, the artist uses empty space, rendering a solitary object as the painting's protagonist, harkening feelings of loneliness and nostalgia, whereby penetrating light brings sun-kissed comfort. Alternatively, we feel the sadness of a place occupied only by a refrigerator that represents the desolation of the Cuban population in the face of misery. We can imagine a near-empty refrigerator.



Happy Exile | Feliz exile
2016. Oil on canvas and mirror plate, 50 cm X 63 cm

Here, we find a key feature composed of mirrors and silicon dots constructing the phrase, *Happy Exile*. This message reflects characteristics rooted in the artist's symbolism and his life: the idea of an exile that begins internally as a boy from an island, who quite early confronts a horizon, which generates a mix of curiosity and anguish. This idea consolidates when he moved from Hershey to Havana, and from Havana to a new country, Brazil, after deciding to immigrate, aware that the values proclaimed by the Cuban Revolution were not his own, and the way of life imposed on the Island, as well as the insurmountable horizon, left him feeling deeply imprisoned. "Using mirrors fascinates me, since those who view them share the same feelings since becoming an exile represents a challenging process."

Notwithstanding the work's title, the composition featuring an unfinished geometric structure that floats on the canvas, supported by an almost pop-like camouflage painting, leads us to an irony that intensifies the duality, placing two words in opposition to one another: HAPPY and EXILE.



Gold Trading House | Casa del oro
2013 - 2016. Oil on canvas, 40 cm X 50 cm

Through this work, the artist recalls the socioeconomic situation of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Cuba, when an absolute precariousness became the reality for many families. At that time, the government created "exchange houses." The *Casa del Oro* and the *Casa de la Plata* were places where one could exchange valuables, jewelry, and family heirlooms made of gold and silver kept for generations for daily life objects and household appliances made of plastic. These places were created to extract the last resources from Cuban families, leaving them with no memorabilia, yet allowing them to convert their valuables into objects with very little durability, erasing their family histories present in these objects. Here, a place of memory is consolidated both in the artist's experience and in the social history of Cuba, illustrating a harsh strategy created in favor of a national military ideology. The artist represented this place in the painting similar to that in the *Beach House* series: "Conceptually I was not interested in looking for a new model for a house. Through this composition I wanted to bring to light this phenomenon experienced by my father and so many other families."



Mailbox | Buzón
2016. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 30 cm X 40 cm

This piece offers more surrealism, imagining a house as a mailbox. Simultaneously, this space can symbolize play, for games, resembling a foosball table, given its suspension in air. As a mailbox, the house is equally unserviceable; it neither holds nor receives letters, thereby not serving its purpose. Freely interpreted, we glimpse the possibility of and desire for the house itself, being transported to another place, just as letters and the artist's message travel between two worlds: memory and concrete reality.



Shoe Tree | Horma
2016. Oil on jute, 30.5cm X 40.5 cm

The title *Shoe Tree* here demonstrates a repetitive model of composition, much used in this series by the artist. In this piece, we see similarities with *Beach House III*. This work expressively addresses the theme of abandonment, deterioration reflected in the use of paint stains and layers of paint that peel off creating a lyrical symbolism, while simultaneously signifying destruction. "I was interested in seeing how gray mixed with petroleum blue could represent a house being erased, with no residents who must have abandoned it and moved away to another place."



Daysi and Luis | Daysi y Luis
2016. Oil on canvas, 30 cm X 39.5 cm

These are my parents' names, my mother and my father. When I was 3 years old, they separated and never spoke again. There was always something closed off between them, and I always saw this limitation; they seemed like isolated people who will only meet by looking at the sea."

The reference used here again relies on the small beach house neighborhood, quite close to Hershey, adopting a more existential approach. We find here the idea of an uncommunicative family, represented by the houses sitting side-by-side, but not isolated. In this series, we notice that the artist often uses objects to represent people and human feelings. The houses are people, and the object again becomes animated, communicating a message through a painting loaded with symbolism.



Atmosphere | Atmosfera
2016. Oil on jute, 30.5cm X 40.5 cm

In *Atmosphere*, the artist is not interested in the geometric composition, but in the context within which it is presented, signifying well-being, light, and good feelings that recall his childhood in the model town. "An air of well-being was constant, with nature, trees, and this luminosity reminding me of a typical tree in the model town, known as an Alamo tree, with exceptionally green leaves. All of the houses had an Alamo tree providing an exceptionally luminous bit of green." The composition between the layered sky with the house as a closed structure, highly geometric, in the typical shape for any house, provides a stark contrast, symbolizing the duality always presents in his affective memories, the atmospheric context of well-being anchored in a place of dense structure, that is dark and closed.



The Sugar Mill | El Central
2019. Oil on canvas, 40 cm X 30 cm

The Sugar Mill captures the Hershey sugar factory, a significant landmark in the city, a three-tower factory featuring various warehouses and spaces for processing sugar. The artist visited the factor with his grandfather, the site administrator, to record harvests.

It was a place of incredible importance to Cuba's economy until the 1970s and for the community formed there, adhering to a specific pattern of industrialization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, characterized by the so-called model city, an industrial village configured to house its employees and equipped with the facilities necessary for their well-being. Today, the mill is a mere shell, inactive and dilapidating. "I had this vision when I climbed the hill from the beach house, the first thing I saw was the three towers, and the second was one of the warehouse façades in the sugar mill complex. This shape still exists. I attempted to combine the form with the texture of the place and create this symbiotic relationship."



Hand That Builds, Hand That Destroys | Mano que construye, mano que destruye
2017. Oil on canvas and collage, 30 cm X 40 cm

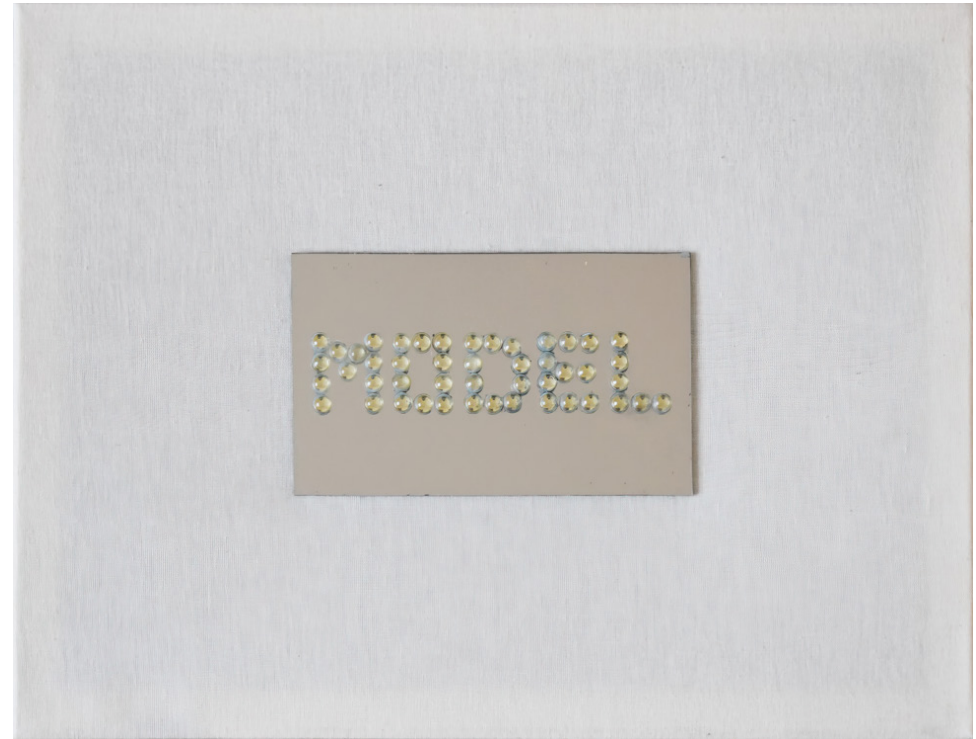
Formally, this work combines an oil painting with elements of a collage, based on a photo that the artist took because of the attractive architectural structure. Interested in the constructive form of the background, he felt the building resembles a piece of the fragmented city wall, which has an element on the right that that looks like an open hand. According to the artist, the concept of this piece relies on Mr. Hershey, who built the Cuban model city. In this symbolic representation, one hand builds, while the other destroys.

"I was interested in the composition relying on a modern geometric form, both concrete and limp, creating a dialogue with this corrosive thing in the background, which cannot be restored." There is a genuine contrast between the geometric structure and the background of the painting, but above all, it awakens a memory that merges here. We no longer simply remember the lyrical atmosphere of the old Hershey, but find an overlap and merger with the experience in the new landscape of São Paulo, with its contemporary architecture — we find a city in motion.



The Mailbox Project | Proyecto del buzón
2016. Collage on canvas, 80 cm X 73.5 cm

In *The Mailbox Project*, the artist studies the possibility of expanding the scale of his piece *The Mailbox*, removing the background. This is a re-imagining of his previous work, but with a representation focused more on the geometric form rather than on the landscape or subjective context. He uses the raw canvas, with no preparation, making use of its transparency, upon which he creates a collage composed of layers of oil paint. This represents a collage in dialogue with Brazilian concretism. “Without a doubt, this work refers to my life in São Paulo. After gaining an understanding of the great Brazilian art movements, such as concretism and neoconcretism, this was my first attempt at a dialogue with everything I had learned from this culture, from my own experience.”



Model
2021. Mirror plate on canvas, 30 cm X 40 cm

In this last piece in this series, created in 2021, we find the beginning and the end of the Hershey project: affective memories. On a small raw, unpainted canvas, we only find glued mirror remains, dotted with silicone to form the word “Model”. Synthesizing a feeling of belonging when looking into the mirror and disappearance in the pictorial emptiness, the artist closes his reflections with a conceptual, profound, and intimate work. This work remains open, symbolizing a fundamental questioning of the very notion of a “model”.



Artist Biography

Luis Enrique Silvestre Guerra is a contemporary Cuban artist, born in 1966 in Havana, but raised in Hershey (a Cuban model town founded in 1916 by the chocolate tycoon Mr. Milton Hershey around a sugar mill). At the age of 16, he returned to Havana to continue his studies, through brief periods spent at the Escuela Provincial de Artes Plásticas San Alejandro (San Alejandro Arts School) and the ISDI Instituto Superior de Diseño (Superior Institute of Design) before he landed a job as a graphic designer at Bohemia Magazine, the first news and culture magazine in Latin America, published in Cuba since 1908.

His work and experiences in the Havana cultural scene led to his first artworks, a series of gouache over carton drawings that earned him an honorable mention at the 1988 Salón de la Ciudad de la Habana, and an invitation to join the prestigious ISA Superior Institute of Arts, where he was mentored by artists such as Flavio Garciandía, Eduardo Ponjuán, and Osvaldo Sanchez, proponents of the 1980s Generation artistic movement in Cuba.

In 1999, Silvestre decided to leave Cuba and move to Brazil, following a decade of severe shortages during the Período Especial (an economic crisis sparked by the fall of the Soviet Union known in Cuba as the Special Period). He now lives and works in Vila Madalena, an artist neighborhood in São Paulo.

During his three decades of work, Silvestre created personal portraits of his relationship with Cuba, featuring memories of displacement, scarcity, decay, and authoritarian culture. Painting mainly in oil on canvas, Silvestre moves from his naïve figurative studies inspired by Henri Rousseau and Frida Kahlo assimilating Brazilian Anthropophagy and Concretism, and influenced by contemporary artists such as Tunga, always maintaining obsessive gestures and lyrical imagery. His work has featured in individual shows at the National Museum of Fine Arts (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) and the Cultural Center Laurinda Santos Lobo (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), and in group shows at the Cuenca Biennial (Ecuador), the Wilfredo Lam Center (Havana, Cuba), Berini Gallery (Barcelona, Spain), and the Latin American Art Pavilion at the Red Dot Fair in Miami, Florida. Institutions including the National Museum of Fine Arts (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), the Museum of Contemporary Arts of the University of São Paulo (MAC, USP), and private collectors in Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico, the Netherlands, Canada, and the United States have acquired his works.

This exhibition is sponsored by



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