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Alejandro Anreus

*Luis Cruz Azaceta*

A Ver: Revisioning Art History, Volume 10. Minneapolis and Los Angeles: University of Minnesota Press and UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2014. 156 pp.; 82 color ills. Paper \$29.95 (9780895511522)



Abigail McEwen

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As the bounds of American art history edge into new territories, encroaching, for example, upon the fields of modernist and contemporary art, the discipline is also rekindling itself from within, sparked by its engagements with the once shadow presences of African, Asian, Latin, and Native visual traditions. The elasticity of “American” art today, buoyed by this transnational recognizance, appears already propitious for emergent histories of Latino art, long neglected and too often essentialized within the field. Among its leading signposts, the recent anthological exhibition *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2013–14), curated by E. Carmen Ramos, brought new visibility to postwar Latino art within a sanctioning national context. Further testament to the vitality of the field is the recent constitution of the U.S. Latina/o Art Forum (USLAF), precipitated by discussion across the two-part session “Imagining a U.S. Latina/o Art History,” chaired by Adriana Zavala, at the College Art Association’s annual conference in February 2015. In formalizing scholarly and institutional support for Latina/o art, the USLAF is building upon the critical mass of knowledge accrued through the decade-long conference series *Latino Art Now!* and the near-simultaneous launch of the publication project *A Ver: Revisioning Art History*, dedicated to the monographic study of Latino artists. *A Ver*’s backlist includes *Yolanda M. López* (2008), by Karen Mary Davalos, and *Rafael Ferrer* (2012), by Deborah Cullen. Edited by Chon A. Noriega, the series has encompassed Chicano, Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and other U.S. Latino artists, and more books wait in the pipeline. In its tenth volume, Alejandro Anreus examines the career of the Cuban American artist Luis Cruz Azaceta (b. 1942), interleaving biographical and diasporic coordinates within a richly informed social history of his work. (Full disclosure: Anreus served as a member of my PhD dissertation committee in 2010.)

*Luis Cruz Azaceta* opens with a short foreword by Noriega and an introduction by Anreus, in which the site-specificity of Cruz Azaceta’s practice is foreshadowed, and then progresses chronologically through four decades of his painting across six chapters. This book is notable for the depth and discernment of its visual observations, and the close affinities between author and subject mark it with a genuinely collaborative and self-reflective point of view. Cruz Azaceta’s vivid voice, gleaned from extensively cited conversation and communication, serves the book well as its own critical touchstone. The monograph follows the solo exhibition *Bending the Grid: Luis Cruz Azaceta: Dictators, Terrorism, War and Exiles* (Aljira: A Center for Contemporary Art, 2014), which Anreus curated around the monumental painting *Latin American Victims of Dictators, Oppression, Torture, and Death* (1987). A respected historian of Mexican muralism, Anreus acknowledges in his first chapter the magnified self-consciousness that he feels in writing on a Cuban American and Latino artist. Far from a hindrance, his proximity to this history sharpens his narration of Cuban exile, a well-trodden subject to be sure but one whose political and intellectual identities are here suitably and succinctly nuanced. Anreus positions Cruz Azaceta’s practice at the outset as “an elucidation, a deliberate manifestation of the condition of exile” (7), establishing a leitmotif threading through the universal “everyman” personae—proxies for the artist—that turn up in differently diasporic painted environments. The deep responsiveness of the contemporary exilic body to human trauma and violence gives shape to Cruz Azaceta’s artwork, this book centrally argues, and it proceeds to chart the modes and subjects of his “social expressionism.”

Arriving in New York in 1960 at the age of eighteen, Cruz Azaceta acclimated within its art world through the 1970s and 1980s, and the following two chapters narrate his early life and professional maturation. After graduating from the School of Visual Arts (1969)



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and passing briefly through a minimalist-geometric phase, he found greater rapport across expressionist lines reaching from Francisco Goya to George Grosz and Leon Golub. Anreus foregrounds the working-class and edgy ecology of Cruz Azaceta's New York, with its miserable freedoms and gonzo psychodrama, in the development of his first major series—of subway paintings—in the mid-1970s. The grotesque dark humor of paintings like *Loco Local 2* (1975), mined from this ambient urban malaise, demarcate what Anreus identifies as a diasporic Cuban New York—less typecast than Miami, already incipiently Latino. This existential, worlding sensibility emerges more fully in the 1980s with the implementation of self-portraiture within his urban landscapes, which functions as a parodic and sometimes performative social conscience as the artist tries on multiple roles (as victim and victimizer both, for example). If the city remains a locally framing device, by now it serves also as a medium through which to engage the wider world, and Cruz Azaceta ruminates on issues from the AIDS epidemic and race relations to the human toll of dictatorship (epitomized in the *balseiros*, or rafters, fleeing Cuba).

Cruz Azaceta's practice took a new turn in 1992 when he moved to New Orleans and his work assimilated its changed environs, reappraising structures of mobility and violence from this different latitude. His paintings of the 1990s and 2000s, the subjects of the next two chapters, reprise many of the themes introduced in his earlier work—the *balseiro*, terrorism, the city, human disaster—with updated iconography: the Oklahoma City bombing and September 11, 2001, attacks; Hurricane Katrina. Although Anreus carefully explicates the historical background to paintings like *Tchoupitoulas Shoot Out, S.O.S.* (1992) and *Man Carrying his Country* (1993), the affects of exile are now located less in narrative than in formal terms, seen in the compositional displacements of cut-out shapes, mixed-media assemblage, and Polaroid photography. Cruz Azaceta's works broached abstraction around the turn of the millennium, and their blinding, techno-dystopian geometries suggestively allegorize the city as journey, machine, and wasteland. Anreus relates the blighted wilderness of post-Katrina New Orleans to diasporic displacement, returning to the extended metaphor of exile to consider the artist's late paintings—for instance, *Laberintos* (2004) and the *Museum Plans* series (2006–8)—as existential summations of entrapment, futility, and indefatigable hope. The book's last chapter functions as an epilogue, problematizing the inscription of Cruz Azaceta's work within postmodernist and Cuban American art histories and siting it more expansively within modes of humanist and social expressionism.

As the first monograph on Cruz Azaceta, this book provides an authoritative chronicle of the artist's career, synthesizing visual and other primary sources alongside a period history that situates the first-person reality of exile against a splintered social world. Hewing to a conventional, chronological life-and-works format, Anreus apprehends his subject with respect and perspicacity, his focus trained carefully upon the artworks and their specular iconography. Less emphasized, if by design, are the broader contexts to which Cruz Azaceta belongs, and sometimes the absence of that comparative dimension—and the counter-accent on the artist's idiosyncrasy—cordons his work off from meaningful contemporary narratives. (This sui generis positioning of his painting is echoed to some extent in his exhibition history: his work has been minimally seen outside of identity- and place-based contexts and is not well traveled in major national and international circuits.) Anreus reasonably takes pains to distance Cruz Azaceta's practice from the political ideology of the younger Miami artists, around whom the dominant narratives of Cuban American art have been drawn since the 1980s and 1990s. Yet within the diasporic history of Cuban art, he bears consideration alongside artists as varied as Ana Mendieta, Carlos Alfonzo, Félix González-Torres, María Martínez-Cañas, and Los Carpinteros (Dagoberto Rodríguez Sánchez and Marco Antonio Castillo Valdés), particularly as old generational and geographical divides appear ripe for revision. His place within contemporary art histories is similarly, if less warily, unresolved. Anreus notes in passing the incompatibility between Latino art and postmodernism, and yet Cruz Azaceta's practice implicates itself—in its emotional frankness, refusal of political detachment, and commingling of archetype and autobiography—within postmodern discourse. While such disciplinary and historiographical interventions fall largely to the side of the book's purpose, his work warrants future study not only from the perspective of where it comes from, but also for what it is.

Written clearly and with conviction, *Luis Cruz Azaceta* is the definitive publication on the artist and should remain an important reference for years to come. Beautifully illustrated, the book is suitable for a range of readers, from students to specialists in the field, and it adds substantially to the undersized but growing literature on Latino art. Prior scholarship on Cruz Azaceta exists almost exclusively in the form of exhibition catalogues, most notably the publication that accompanied his mid-career retrospective, *Hell: Luis Cruz Azaceta, Selected Works, 1978–1993*, held at New York's Alternative Museum in 1994; an incisive essay by John Yau and a three-way conversation between Geno Rodriguez, Eleanor Heartney, and Victor Zamudio-Taylor remain essential reading. The intervening decades have seen numerous solo and group exhibitions of Cruz Azaceta's work, yet few have broached new interpretive ground, whether by rethinking postwar figuration or in linking his thematics of exilic entrapment to such contemporaries as the Lebanese-born British artist Mona Hatoum and the Argentine Guillermo Kuitca. The publication of *Luis Cruz Azaceta* should stimulate new scholarship along these and other lines. That Cruz Azaceta be included within transnational

discourses of this kind should not, of course, preclude his integration within Cuban art history at today's pregnant, diplomatic moment: he and his generation, for so long estranged from the island, deserve their own, Odyssean, homecoming.

Abigail McEwen  
Assistant Professor, Department of Art History and Archaeology, University of Maryland,  
College Park

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