

SEPTEMBER 10 - NOVEMBER 7, 2014

STAINLESS

ONE OF A KIND

Curated by Rachel Perera Weingeist

Essay by Ted Henken

Why is it that we value an original work of art – one of a kind – more than a copy, a reproduction, a Canal Street knock-off? Is it our aesthetic sensibility, our search for quality and the unique, our showy “bling” ambition, or merely the economists’ law of supply and demand applied to art? How is our awe in the face of rare, one of a kind works of art impacted in the digital age, when virtually any media product (an image, a sound, a text) can be perfectly reproduced and endlessly shared an unlimited number of times at negligible cost in a multiplicity of formats?

Does the value we give an “original” diminish, erode away to nothing in this context, becoming a mere talisman, a fetish, a relic of a bygone era, forcing us to consider trashing our old prints, throwing out all our “vintage” vinyl, and replacing our scores of cherished dog-eared volumes with easily stored, reproducible, and portable e-versions of these hallowed treasures?

Or conversely, does our praise for the “one of a kind” in fact increase in direct proportion to our ability to copy and share (sub)“versions” of it with our “friends”?

With respect to Cuba and the art currently being created there and exported all around the world (even to the United States), what gives Cuban art its current indisputable cache? Is it unique, exceptional, one of a kind (perhaps like the island’s music or even its politics?), or is it just another (lesser?) competitor in the multi-billion dollar international art market, its reputation and prices ironically enhanced because of (and thanks to?) our unending, idiosyncratic, and anachronistic embargo? Moreover, how will the economic reforms currently unfolding on the island that seek to revitalize the country’s long-vilified “non-state sector” and bring in badly needed foreign investment and modern technology – along with the piecemeal “flexibilizations” of US policy under Obama – impact Cuban artists and their engagement with the wide world outside?



Study for: *Qué es lo más pesado, héroes? (How Far Can You For Glory?)*, Stainless, 2014, digital chromogenic print



One of a Kind (The School of Athens), Stainless, 2014, digital chromogenic print

This first-ever US solo exhibition of new work by the upstart three-man art collective known as *Stainless* (Alejandro Piñeiro Bello, Havana, 1990; José Gabriel Capaz, Havana, 1988; and Roberto Fabelo Hung, Havana 1991) is entitled “One of A Kind” precisely with the aim of playfully and pointedly invoking these kinds of questions and reflections among the public. At the same time, the art in this uniquely immersive exhibition seeks to blur if not erase completely the line that separates the artists from their public, inviting viewers to become co-creators of a joint artistic and conceptual experience or “performance” that subverts the idea of what is unique or precious. This phenomena is heightened in the exhibition through the use of wallpaper burnished in gold *laureles* (the bay leaf, an ancient symbol of triumph), covering a number of walls in the gallery. The idea is to force the viewer to question whether the installed vinyl, the work of art hanging on the wall, or the entire wall itself (wallpaper and artwork included) is truly the final product.

As with some of their previous work in Havana, many of the pieces in “One of A Kind” are first painted by hand, then photographed, printed, and displayed as one of an unknown number of copies, rather than a singular, inimitable object. *Stainless* also utilizes a variety of media to assist in this subversion, which include painting, drawing, and video installations. The very name of the group – *Stainless* (originally rendered in English, but best translated as “inoxidable” or “inmanchable” in Spanish) – hints at a cold, industrial aesthetic that has helped to distinguish the trio’s intentions and interests over the past four years from their predecessors. Still, their creative collaboration links them to a long, innovative tradition in Cuban contemporary art of artistic collectives such as “Arte Calle,” “ENEMA,” “Los Carpinteros,” and – most recently – “Omni Zona-Franca.”

Born quite by chance between 2010 and 2011, just as its three members graduated from Havana’s renown San Alejandro Academy of Fine Art, *Stainless* is no stranger to provocation, controversy, or even censure (whether political or pornographic). In fact, one of their early works, *El gran pastel*, is an elaborate rendering of an all-female homoerotic orgy, with each unique naked, spread-eagled figure formed by the nozzle of a pastry tube (in Cuban argot, *pastel* is a double entendre literally meaning cake but used colloquially to refer to group sex).

Later, as part of their first large exhibition at Havana’s *Centro Hispanoamericano de Cultura* in fall 2011, the group launched the interactive “Fuck Me,” a work that invited the public to literally eat the meringue-rendered words of a copy of a love letter written to Capaz by a onetime lover. Perhaps most notable was their planned (and ultimately banned) performance of a game of group masturbation in January 2013 at Havana’s La Acacia Gallery. Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the live performers were not allowed to come, when photographs of the (private) performance were permitted at the exhibit, the expo quickly became wildly popular, with some critics claiming it was the most visited show in the history of Cuban art.

Art critic and an early curator of *Stainless*, Píter Ortega Núñez, has described their work as “markedly interactive and participatory”; deeply concerned with the color and texture of their materials (even at the expense of the work’s message or narrative); invariably erotic; having a “pronounced ludic character” full of “surprise and irony”; and “inclined toward grand formats and monumental scale.” Size, in fact, does matter to them. All of these characteristics are vividly present in the current exhibition, “One of A Kind,” newly and provocatively applied to New York City’s hyper-consumptive world of capital brands and corporate logos. The group’s fascination with marketing and consumerism is evident in the drawing of Times Square (created in New York especially for this show), where masses of people pass through the shopping and entertainment mecca on moving walkways, as well as the print *Cosmos Advertising*, which features an imagined galaxy where familiar logos replace the stars, planets, and galaxies.



One of a Kind (Lord Jesus), Stainless, 2014, digital chromogenic print

Enjoy it. “It’s the Real Thing.”

The 8th Floor wishes to acknowledge the members of Stainless, Alejandro Piñeiro Bello, José Gabriel Capaz, and Roberto Fabelo Hung for their work in creating and installing this exhibition – it’s been a pleasure to share in the process. We also extend a thanks to our collaborators, Ted Henken for his insightful essay, Matt Dalton for his invaluable assistance throughout the process, and Tatiana McCabe for technical support. One of A Kind is the product of the tireless dedication and creativity of the staff at the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection – George Bolster, Michelle Hailey, Matthew Johnson, Yandro Miralles, Anjuli Nanda and Sandi Roegman – whose hard work and efforts are greatly appreciated. As always we are infinitely grateful for the spirit of generosity that Shelley and Donald Rubin embody, without which this opportunity to share a range of Cuban voices would not be possible.

– Rachel Perera Weingeist August 26, 2014

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One of a Kind (Cosmos Advertising), Stainless, 2014, digital chromogenic print