

Henry Erik: Hand-made enigmas tell intimate stories.

If I were an amnesiac, what would exist apart from this surface. Who would be speaking. I told him that I remembered everything that was important because it was a matter of survival & completely submerged. That in a way this past is almost indifferent to my recollection of it.

He said I was so full of contradictions, it was impossible to discuss anything with me, which is generally when we decide to make love. While we were making love I whispered to him that sex with him awakened a memory in my body, something that was dead. He held me very tight & couldn't control himself anymore. I like him best when he's out of control.

Lynne Tillman

Everywhere the big eat the small. It may be pure physics, the whole universe as hungry as gravity.

Max Apple

Henry Erik's work has always been a meeting place for his ideas and passions, an inclusive space where a meshing of concerns could come together & find a theatrical form. His work, in other words, profiles the man; it is the carrier, the DNA, of who he is; the finding of his measure. We, the spectators, negotiate its assembled contradictions that result from the necessarily ambiguous properties of action. He stands dazzled before the glare of the world along with the jackals, the dollars & tourists, huddling together on the darkening shore. Living day by day on the stage-set of a bizarre geo-political opera, he can represent himself mythically &

the world aesthetically, through an acute ethical questioning that leaves all staged versions of ideology agonizing amidst its lies: an ironic anti-hero lost in an elaborate & gaudy romance. He can fuse the Indian, the Oriental, & the popular into an artifact that seems like a cross between a kitsch tourist trophy, heraldic legend, & mapa mundi of his own overriding preoccupations; he can refurbish the lavatories & bathrooms of a school with the violent complexities of its own history; & he can make us enshrine our own secrets before the relentless, unpardoning ravages of time or show how the public & the private interact, fold upon fold, within the history of a building.

He knows that truth is always partial and inevitably incomplete. He projects out towards his own readings of the traces of contemporary history, allowing narratives to overlap & the circus to fill with the sad but irresistible entertainment of the clowns.

Erik is a Cuban child of the postmodern condition. It is a daunting contradiction that will be played against a particularly dramatic backcloth of contemporary events & lived within a context that has clearly not abandoned the meta narratives of either history or ideology. What he has done in his work is to adapt a contemporary narrative strategy to one of the most traditional mediums that man has had at his disposition since the beginning of time: pottery or ceramics. The narrative strategy that lies at the centre of his work, since he is indeed a story teller, is parable which finds itself on the interaction of generally plausible characters (in Erik's case often allegorically charged animals or even symbolical institutions) & more or less consequent, if often unexpected, events in a narrative is deliberately & determinedly concrete, sensuous, & ordinary (Erik includes on occasion this narrative frame or sub-text within his works). His use of parable intends to render more fluid and existential our sense of the world's meanings and, equally, of our connection with it. Unlike realism, parables are not, strictly speaking, about the world but about human beings' relations to it. As a consequence, its strategies characteristically involve the exploitation of ambiguity & indirection & a preference

for open over closed form. Erik's large installations are sites where cultures, ideologies, personal quirks & acid affirmations gather - the allegorical impulse pushes towards critical commentary gives him the distance necessary to avoid all emotional effluvia & concentrate his preferred rhetorical figures of parody & irony. It follows that the pressure of meaning & therefore summons to interpretation that parable imposes are in excess of anything narrative ordinarily exacts from its readers.

As Salle McFague, probably the sanest & most comprehensive of contemporary theological critics, says in her remarks on parable, what we are dealing with is "a highly risky, uncertain, & open-ended enterprise - a manoeuvre of desperation if you will." [1] In Erik's case the parable is rootedly ideological but interpreted through the postmodern loss of belief - a belief that refuses, however, to abandon the ethical impulse.

What Erik has understood, in what is at root a conceptual operation, is that parable, while retaining a core of centrally defining features, lends itself to a process of continual alteration. It is, of course, this openness to modifications that is relevant to his work. It is a reversionary process whose aim is to dislodge the orthodoxies of ideological thought without a collapse into the marshes of cynicism. It is interesting in this respect that the theologians have been attempting to undermine the hegemony of systematic theology, to replace it with, or at any rate subordinate to, a less dogmatic "intermediary or parabolic theology," justified by the belief that the "theological temper of our time is such that the form which holds the mystery in solution is more needed than the one that confronts it directly." [1] To confront pieces, such as *A Procession of Steeds to a Happy End* (1995), *To Win the Grand Prix* (1996), *Along the Jungle Route* (1999), or *Caryatides on Tour de Force* (1999-2000), is to enter an uncertain, but highly fertile, imaginative terrain where cultural references, ideological comment, decorative fetishistic form, local tradition (Erik comes from Camaguey with its notable tradition of potters), & a biting sense of humour full of Cuban in-jokes come together, lie contiguously alongside each other, interacting, conversing, & contradicting. He has effectively exploited a genre

whose characteristic, in Louis Marin's formulation, "is to offer itself immediately to interpretation while making it impossible to confine it to univocal allegorization." [1]

In the catalogue of a recent show in Los Angeles I made the following observation concerning the coded messages encrypted in *Por la ruta de la jungla*, one of the works within a larger series that he has accurately called *Leyendas Caseras*. The title of the work refers, on the one hand, to the precarious jungle nature of daily life in Cuba & the guerrilla situation that results from living within a situation so matted with contradictions. The tropical, ornamental nature of the pieces quickly convey these readings as sensations, even with the kind of banal excess associated with the false exuberances of tourist art. Yet there are other less immediate readings that might embrace, for example, Marco Polo's journey following the caravan routes of the silk trade where the stretched out text appears almost as woven silk narrating the trials & tribulations of the journey. And the artist himself has a particular legend in mind that explicitly clarifies all the allegorical implications carried within the work:

"According to the story, the Rajah has seven caskets for his seven powers (in Afro-Cuban stories the figure seven represents weakness). He calls his court together to talk to them, & he also summons the master of the keys to open the caskets. The latter turns out to be an exorcist who discovers that the devil is inside the Rajah, & sets about driving him out. In other words, power is corrupted & auratic presence hides a bed of worms. In this instance, the system of political power takes precedent over the system of wealth: the caskets that hold the money & riches are never opened, an idea that stands in direct contrast to occidental systems where wealth creates power. Each of Hernandez's caskets symbolizes a stage in the individual's obsessive search for power, whether Rajah, king, or dictator. Each element carries its own symbolic charge: the baptismal font, the rhinoceros horn of sexual potency, the pipe to smoke, the reliquary, the saddle for war, the anvil to shape history." [1]

Each of his works is as densely woven referentially as this one. And even more to the point they permit & encourage a multiplicity of readings.

These works are not discursive or paraphraseable; they are not self-sufficient; they demand an active engagement on the part of the spectator. They point on the one hand towards a looser, less autonomous conception of form - Erik's sense is hybrid & inclusive - and, on the other, toward a more exigent dynamics of response. To quote McFague again: "The heart of the new hermeneutic project is ... not the interpretation of the parables, but the interpretation of the listeners by the parables" a belief that entails not surprisingly, a stress on confrontation & decision and an awareness that "the goal of parable is finally in the realm of willing, not of knowing." [1]

This use of parable, then, challenges both the passivity of our responses and the completed, perfected, autotelic quality of the work of art & raises fundamental questions about the moral effects and demands of art upon us. This is larger question than I can deal with at this juncture, but it is stubbornly there, & throughout the 90's it has become more & more apparent that it has to be rephrased, effectively articulated from a multiplicity of perspectives. What Henry Erik has achieved in a work

that lifts traditional procedures into the cutting edge of the contemporary through an cart or formal swerve that bends or twists his work away from normative procedures. If we should look for the make-up of this cart we would inevitably refer to hyperbole, dislocation, paradox, radical tonal & narrative shifts that permit the blur & presence of the dissonant & constantly signal the presence of the deviant. Parable cannot escape its theological or ideological roots but it is, nevertheless, the form for a secular people.

Erik is a punk outpost of the Periodo Especial, of the pyramidal social inversions and crumbings of Cuban society, of the new gold chain semi-impresarios that line the Salsa floors and haunt the streets or operate from the now nouveau riche mansions of Havana. Erik does not, as yet, deal with these phenomena directly but

he has taken a broader social view than has usually been the case with Cuban artists who have cantered ironically on the ideological contradictions, idiosyncrasies, and dilemmas of the regime. Yet he is a radically committed punk! He has started to look at some of the shadows - social problems that beset all societies but which have been often pushed to one side in Cuban society as if they were simply scourges of the undeniably decadent West - the mendicant population, transvestites, living conditions in the hostels, race. Yet his project is more complex than mere sociological documentation, he intends also to delve into memory and specific histories. His archaeological digs are a literal metaphor for the surfacing of what has been hidden or forgotten. His first excavation, Discovery 2001-2002, took place in a primary school in San Jose de las Lajas. The grounds on which the school is situated had originally been the site of the town's first church in 1788 and had also served as its cemetery. During the War of Independence it had been used as a burial ground for the anonymous victims of the Spanish General, Valeriano Weyler, who had slaughtered up to 5000 peasants whom he had maintained enclosed in concentration camps between 1896 and 1897. In other words, a site with an accumulation of historical layers! Erik was specifically interested in the victims of slavery and unearthed two different sets of bones that were identified as being of African origin. He built urns, using marble, bronze, ceramics, and glass, thus lending the necessary dignity to their deaths whilst at the same time reminding Cuban society of its history and of the undercurrents of racism that continue to manifest themselves in both subtle and less subtle forms. The second stage of this excavation will deal with the victims of the War of Independence to whom he will erect a small monument.

History we all know is a fiction and tells its own stories from an interested and ideological perspective. It makes and breaks its own heroes, crowns and ignores its own artists, makes visible the figureheads of its own values. History is the narration of power but history is also individual, her/his story across time. Henry in *Los que cavan su piramide* deals with lesser histories that lie untold and unrecognised in the necropolis of Cristobal Colon. This extraordinary display of architecture and monuments, so effuse and rhetorical, so strangely complacent and so unforgettably

dead, has been named World Patrimony. And it is here amidst the heroes, that Erik has exhumed, after investigations in the archives and with the permission of the respective families, a series of lesser mortals and built for them a series of bronze, marble and ceramic urns where their remains will be preserved. It is a gesture of respect and care but also, at the same time, an ironic and parodic poking of the fingers at the inflations of history. And at this level, it is an effective postmodern ethical gesture: a self-determined assumption of responsibility.

Erik has a commitment to the marginalized 'other' to the black slave, the beggar, the transvestite, and to the Jewish community, one of the least known ingredients of Cuban society. It is a community that has its own particular history of keeping to itself and in all probability the ideological structure of Cuban society has further exacerbated this tendency towards exclusion. Erik began the task of exhumation in the Jewish cemetery, situated in Guanabacoa, in 2000. Once again he spoke beforehand with the family and gained their consent for his project that consisted in building a marble tomb for the remains of Samuel Niesenbaum, a rabbi whose family

had been unable to afford the costs involved. The second part of this project has been undertaken this year, using marble from the Isla de la Juventud, and involves the cutting of a 2.00 cm x 1.00 marble slab on which will be inscribed the name and the dates of birth and death of the rabbi (1914-1995) Erik aims to extend both the content and the cultural visibility of his intention by using the slab, placed on the floor, as a kind of projection screen for a video. It is an effective strategy since it implies an aesthetic tightening of an ethical concern and this aesthetization of ethics is very much characteristic of our postmodern period, thrusting responsibility back on the individual given the failure of those social institutions that were supposed to regulate and administer ethical behaviours in the modern period: the church and the state. The future of the West is leisure plus technology, and it is not for the squeamish. Intimacy has become a priority for public consumption, as if we are all longing to recall of what it exactly consists & how to reconstitute it; crime has separated itself from motive; pleasure is now the obsession of those who have

& has effectively adapted itself to schedule, whilst poverty has become the single reality of the overwhelming majority, the rest of the world. The simplicity of the questions accumulates but we have no real theatres in which to articulate them. Cuba in its embrace of the manifest human sadness and emptiness of the tourist industry as a panacea to their economic woes has introduced a massive dosage of vulnerability and cynicism into its own system that it will be unable to control. It further undermines the dreamed utopia of a rational society that finds itself blighted by the market, competition, and the pouvoirs intermediaries which pit particularistic interests against those of the society as a whole. Henry Erik will continue to interrogate as part of his own process of self-definition, moving between ceramic installation & video documentary, stretching out the stories of our time. He'll constantly imagine the present & will undoubtedly find an infinite number of candidates to pull his carriage & almost all will unsurprisingly pull against each other. Each day may well soon be accompanied by the monotony of resurrection. Indeed, whatever the dreams we choose to place in the casket, they will inevitably succumb to the speed of events & the onward impetus that is the essence of our animal condition with or without command. And who would dispute that the cemetery is a living monument across our histories, a chronology of accusation, a place populated by restless shadows, a site to exhume the broken metaphors of truth & memory. Yet, whatever the random rush of change, Erik will stand as Guardian at the Gate, a half-smile constantly activating the roots of his hair with the purple tones & parodic uniform of the hesitant yet oblique ethics of punk! He has found a voice with the energy, acumen & humour to speak to these times. He is also focusing specific, particular and crucial issues of his society.

And as a postscript a remark from my sleep: some people still tell us that Gloria Esteban is Cuban when she is really a refrigerator with a fast car & a lot of restaurants to stand up in!

Kevin Power