

Exhibition Brochure

**REYNIER
LEYVA
NOVO**

**Former
Present
Today**

Blaffer Art Museum

January 12—March 10, 2024



What It Is, What It Has Been (George Washington), 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

"Those ghosts that do not allow you to be free can be as real as they are violent."

-REYNIER LEYVA NOVO

Outside the eye
by Steven Matijcio

The execution, and arguably the essence of political action, is much about misdirection. Pomp, pageantry, oration, towering monuments and theatrical gestures crowd our screens and photo banks as tangible manifestations of ideological might. But all too often these seemingly iconic signs are flares of something larger in the subterranean; the proverbial tips of the iceberg; shark fins peeking above the water. That is to say, these marquee-crowding actions are indicative of a danger greater, and simultaneously more opaque/obscure, because it lives *outside* the visible. These are forces that cannot be seen, that penetrate deep into the flesh and substrate of society – saturating and re-organizing its operations according to their hegemonic code.

When one attempts to apprehend this dialectic of absence and presence, you soon realize that conspiratorial allusions to its operation have become part of the contemporary autocrats' playbook. Within the bombast and rhetoric, they villainize the insidious (and

conveniently amorphous) "deep state" that has long targeted "the people" and their populism. *Trust me*, they say, and I will "drain the swamp," cast revelatory light on those who work nefariously in shadows, unveil the secrets, and bring new prosperity by being shamelessly in-your-face. Misdirection and masquerade; Boorish bluntness incapable of opacity. If one publicly castigates such malevolent actions, how could they possibly be accused of doing the very same?

The work of Reynier Leyva Novo seeks to map this elusive exercise of political manipulation by speaking, and thereby exposing, its articulation. His personal experience lends particular insight into the fraught revolutionary movement of his native Cuba, but Novo's purview is broadly trans-national, and pan-historical. He considers the genealogy and legacy of political subterfuge in supposedly disparate epochs and lands, from Soviet Russia and 20th century Latin America to Colonial/Confederate United States and Communist China. The synecdoche within his broadly spanning research is, time and time again, the monument – mining all they symbolize, and all they obscure.



Blind Paintings, Mnemosyne's Whisper (Christopher Columbus Statue, Minnesota State Capitol, June 10, 2020), 2023. Image courtesy of the artist and Stephen Hanley, Imaging and Conservation Specialist, MFAH Sarah Campbell Blaffer Conservation Lab, Acrylic paint and graphite on canvas, infrared photograph printed on EPSON Cold Press acid free paper, 340 gsm.

When a regime chooses to speak itself in bronze, cement or stone, this is a bold declaration of timelessness meant to outlast, and ultimately outlive its human subjects. Some may say that we don't see as many rulers perched on warhorses in the town square or chiseled leaders pointing towards bright futures as we once did. That may be true in material terms (and indicative of the cultural decline of public gathering in general), but such an observation overlooks the manner in which said monumentality metamorphoses within the digital era. Statues can be toppled, books can be burned and iconoclasm remains deliciously cathartic for many, but the roots of these weeds remain deeply entrenched in the figurative soil. By mapping, casting, and displaying small slices of historical moments in a museum setting, Novo conducts a quasi-medical operation: these are biopsies of cancerous ideologies, whose infection remains.

As this dialectic of absence and presence mutates, so too does Novo's artistic language and translation. Consider the comparison between the *Happy Day* series, in which political leaders are seamlessly removed from photographs via image-editing software, and his nebulous series of busts *What It Is, What It Has Been*, where layer after layer of paint is added to a political countenance. Both practices skillfully blur the assumed protagonist while retaining the context, the setting, and the gap. In so doing, whether by extraction or aggregation, these works speak poignantly to the continued incision that systemic ideology leaves within a system. Like the lines traced by a finger on a foggy mirror, these forces remain beneath the visible surface – arguably stronger (and more cagey) by shedding their ability to be seen, and monitored.

In the course of her thoughtful review of Novo's work in 2015 for the online journal *InVisible Culture*, writer Guillermina De Ferrari insightfully notes, “by alluding

to history through layers of vital opacity, Novo's art makes a political statement against the invisible deceptiveness of discursive clarity.” No matter how thoroughly researched and tracked the malignancy, there is an inherent pathos in this work that reflects the impossibility of exorcism. Political practices of exploitation and manipulation are deeply embedded in their respective contexts and carried forward – ever forward – by way of institutions, archives, traditions, individuals who have vested interest in the status quo, and all the baggage that the weaponized use of “history” bears. And while Novo cannot deliver a complete apprehension of the subjects he so relentlessly hunts, there is no less value in his unwavering call for agency and awareness. We cannot know all that lives and operates beyond our eyes, but knowing that these forces continue to circulate is the first step in/to address.

Mutability is also an instrument we can employ and embrace. Novo notably deploys a more modest dialect of monumentality to pay homage to those people who have fundamentally shaped his thinking and values. In this exhibition he honors his grandmother with a series of white flowers that are allowed to live, die, and experience time. Arranged simply in a minimalist sequence across the museum wall and spanning a broad number of species, these flowers embody memory on a more human scale. Personal presence can here be a foil to the pressures exerted from above and beneath, on high and ensconced in the ground below. We can also rise in the fluid terrain of abstraction and the unseen. As George Orwell once said, “All people who work with their hands are partly invisible, and the more important the work they do, the more invisible they are.”





A Happy Day, 2016-2024 (2023)



Installation of *The Motherland calls!* (2023) from the sculpture series *Revolution is an Abstraction*, Blaffer Art Museum, 2024.

With poetic sensitivity, Novo dutifully crafts mechanisms of memory-keeping from prosaic, botanical, and ephemeral encounters in circumstances of protest and exile.

Reynier Leyva Novo's Anti-monuments

by Erika Mei Chua Holum

The flash of a camera's shutter, a glistening fireworks display, a detonated bomb—each make attempts to render permanence through capture whether ceremonial, celebratory, or combative. The bright flash of light is followed by a moment of ocular adjustment and recalibration. A temporary stillness is achieved via freeze-frame, silence under the rubble, a truce. The revolutionary process is underway: another regime comes to power, a different leader takes oath, new policy is enacted, people cheer, people weep, and the only constant is change.

In the near past, most of the world lived under interconnected regimes of colonial imperialism in desperate need of recalibration. Governments laid out systems to maintain and enforce a ruthless drive for dominance, resulting in the loss of sovereignty for other political communities. People under colonial rule organized, resisted, and sought liberation to eventually arrive in the post-colonial moment. Despite the powerful upheaval of colonial rule and revolutionary aims of the resistance, vestiges of power and control remain intact and yet to be reconciled.

Following its revolution, Cuba was no exception. Generations of artists continue to wrestle with the myths,

ideals, and aspirations of the island's ever-changing epoch. Born in Havana, conceptual artist Reynier Leyva Novo investigates sites of memory and monuments erected to symbolize revolutionary power. The spaces constructed to name victors and glorify conquest codify oblique and obfuscated truths in the historical record.

Novo simultaneously disarms the prevalent tendencies to silence and bury narratives lost to history by surgically excavating ideologies and the loci of power embedded in the act of memorialization. With poetic sensitivity, Novo dutifully crafts mechanisms of memory-keeping from prosaic, botanical, and ephemeral encounters in circumstances of protest and exile. In early works to present, Novo convenes moments of pause, stillness, and recalibration for those who must constantly wake to the dawning of another new era.

In his early work, Novo used scent to produce monuments for fallen heroes of Cuba's revolution for the 54th Venice Biennale. The artist worked with historians and perfumers to locate olfactory narrations in war diaries, correspondence and historical accounts of the battles corresponding to heroic soldiers during the revolution. *Smells of War* (2009) imagines the aroma that could have enveloped Cuba's freedom fighters as they took their last breath. Smell, an intimate and private marker of a single individual, triggers memories



Global Active Dust Collection Center (2019). 6th Ghetto Biennale, Port au Prince, Haiti.

and physical reactions through evocation. Novo memorializes these figures, not through etched stone or bronze plaques, but through embodied memory shared through scent. Revolution, unattainable and ephemeral, is chronicled through a powerful invocation of sensorial and intimate connection.

During the 6th Ghetto Biennale in Port au Prince, Haiti, Novo launched the *Global Active Dust Collection Center* (2019–present), a long-term project inspired by the anti-government, anti-corruption demonstrations in the months prior to the biennial. The piece consists of collecting the dust generated during social protests and mass demonstrations around the world. The artist presented the dust as a living and silent documentation of each protest. Charting an international constellation, Novo enlisted collaborators in Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Iran, Colombia and Hong Kong to collect dust in their respective contexts. After each political demonstration, the slow, innocu-

ous process of collecting dust began. Dust was swept from the steps of government buildings, central plazas, or far-reaches of city avenues, packed as powder into glass containers, and cataloged: the day and time of the demonstration, the exact place, reason, and an approximate number of people involved. The ongoing work meticulously archives political action through what is unseen or left behind. The collected dust is a subtle, unassuming evidence of masses marching, chanting, and gathering around the world, and captured through the smallest remnants that remain alive. Dust is the memory of ephemeral actions and a monument to a brief moment, a particle otherwise to be swept into the corners and crevices of our collective memory and quietly forgotten.

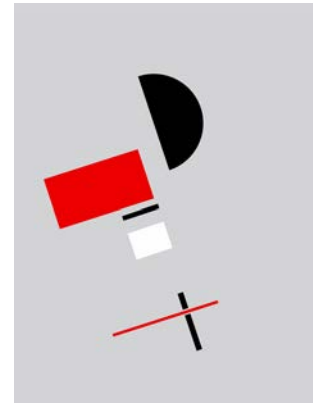
In 2020, Novo conducted a series of “mini-performances” documented on celluloid film acting out the ephemerality of a daydream. The series, *Blank Check*, is set throughout the city of Havana in the months directly



The Scents of War (2011). Scents, glass bottles and vinyl lettering. Installation view at the 54th Venice Biennale, 2011.

prior to the pandemic. The images capture the artist's fleeting associations and ideas as he navigates this city in black and white tableaux, paired with a simple text description. *To walk backwards in front of a Cuba Libre! sign; To pee in the corner of the National Bank; To sweep the Cuatro Caminos supermarket.* The actions become a metaphor for operating as an artist within a circumscribed urban topography and prescribed cultural practices. Through actions—both absurd and mundane—the artist reorients himself in public symbols, formalities, and space throughout post-revolutionary Cuba. Novo states: “Society shapes many of our thoughts even unconsciously. We often discard ideas because they do not fit adequately into our communities’ social, political or moral life. This series of performances is about externalizing these fragments of thought designated as garbage in our minds. They are actions that see the light.” Novo’s documented actions directly challenge the internalization of political ideology and cultural norms and function as a handbook for the practice of anti-monumentality in everyday life.

Novo left Cuba in 2021 to seek refuge from increased political retribution for resisting the Cuban government’s more pervasive acts of censorship, repression, and human rights abuses. Following this departure, the artist began a series of color photographs mapping his journey from Spain, Mexico, and his eventual relocation to the United States. The resulting series, *The Flowers of My Exile* (2023), documents Novo’s migratory route through the collection of wildflowers found



(L-R) *Revolution is an Abstraction #02*, 1936-2023 MB-LV Performance Basecoat red, black and white on concrete slabs (2023) and *Revolution is an Abstraction #20*, 1930-2023,v MB-LV Performance Basecoat on concrete slabs (2023)

along the journey. Wildflowers are often rooted in places where they were not intentionally seeded or planted, and through this survey of images, a floral procession ushers a new phase of the artist’s life after exile. At the Blaffer Art Museum, Novo mounts an installation of eight single flowers, each carefully placed in a vase, as a tribute to his grandmother, who passed away in Cuba in 2023. *The Study of the Color White and the Soul of my Grandmother* (2024) is a discreet yet powerful homage that effectively illustrates the act of anti-monumentality. The delicate care to remember and memorialize a loved one through white flowers—a color symbolically linked to purity, sacredness, and death in the afterlife—slowly wilting in the museum’s corridor while diffusing an aroma as a reminder of the living object.

As an antithesis to the aspirations of monumentality, Novo’s amorphous anti-monuments are carefully salvaged from the impermanence of life and memory. In the quiet centrifuge, garnering movement and momentum, a pulse of hope insists on humanity in the continuing legacies of state-sanctioned violence, genocide, and oppression. Novo locates the steady pulse in the scent of revolution, dust as a living archive, and a slow-wilting flower offering tribute to life’s transience, yet perseverance in struggle.



To read the national newspaper while sitting in the corner of 23rd and 12th streets.'

Blank Check About how to empty the mind (2020). Performance series Ed. # 1, Havana. Photos by Arien Chang. Black and white 35 mm. Negative Silver gelatin print and texts.



THE FLOWERS OF MY EXILE
Carnegiea gigantea - Saguaro
 Sunday, May 22, 2022
 Carefree, Arizona, United States
 Day 324



NOVO
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The Flowers of my Exile, Carnegiea gigantea - Saguaro Sunday, May 22, 2022 Carefree, Arizona, United States Day 324

Reynier Leyva Novo: Former Present Today

January 12—March 10, 2024

Remnants of ideology, markers of absence, and the ephemerality of revolution are embedded in recognizable sites of memory, power, and public space around us. Locating these layered and often obscured traces of political presence, multidisciplinary artist Reynier Leyva Novo excavates – and elevates – historical archives and imagery into today. In so doing, he deepens conversations surrounding the space, memory, and narratives of the past made manifest in the present and future. *Former Present Today* is the first solo museum exhibition in Texas for the Cuban conceptual artist and reflects upon re-imagined space, public monuments, and collective memory in nationalist ideology and the failed journey to social utopia.

Relocating from Havana to Houston in 2021, Novo combines research and observation into the icons of memorialization to present perspectives across a multitude of global political contexts. This process underscores power within artistic practice to challenge prevailing narratives, confront historical truths, and deconstruct myths. The artist simultaneously reveals and conceals structures, emblems, and figureheads entrenched in the public imaginary to propose alternative forms of memory-keeping in whispers, traces, and fleeting remains of life. Across large-scale sculptural installation to the subtle delicacy of a flower, Novo creates powerful interventionist responses to spaces of monumentality to consider the complexity of political landscapes and unseen dimensions that shape our collective memory and present reality.

Reynier Leyva Novo: Former Present Today is co-organized by Steven Matijcio, Jane Dale Owen Director & Chief Curator, and Erika Mei Chua Holum, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Assistant Curator at the Blaffer Art Museum. The exhibition is on view until March 10, 2024. The show is generously supported by Paola & Arturo Creixell, Jorge Perez, and Sicardi | Ayers | Bacino. Special thanks go to the University of Houston School of Art and Stephen Hanley, Imaging and Conservation Specialist, MFAH Sarah Campbell Blaffer Conservation Lab.

Major annual funding for the Blaffer Art Museum's 50th Anniversary programming is provided by the Gardenia Foundation, the John R. Eckel Jr. Foundation, the Stolbun Family Foundation, the Brown Foundation, the John P. McGovern Foundation, and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. Generous support has also been made by Beth Robertson, Kaleta Blaffer Johnson, Joan Blaffer Johnson, Annie Dale Owen-Pontez, Abigail Owen-Pontez, Ingrid Arneberg, Micheline & German Newall, Cullen Geiselman & Robert Muse, Paul & Sarah Beth Seifert, Katharine Barthelme & Shane Frank, Jo Dee & Cliff Wright. Important annual support is provided by the Houston Arts Alliance, Texas Commission on the Arts, and Blaffer Art Museum Advisory Board members.

The following donors sustain Blaffer Art Museum in perpetuity by giving through endowments: Cecil Amelia Blaffer von Furstenberg Endowment for Exhibitions and Programs, Jane Dale Owen Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Jo & Jim Furr Exhibition Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Sarah C. Morian Endowment, and the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation Blaffer Gallery Endowment.

Credits

Former Present Today

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Sculptures in bronze, aluminum, stainless steel, and concrete

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Infrared Images

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Soraya Alcala, Conservator Paintings/ Head of Lab,
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Architectural plans

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Technical drawings, 3D modeling, and renders

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3D modeling of sculptures

Daniel Aleman, Ahmed Bueno

Concrete Posters

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3D scan data file of George Washington bust

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El Apartamento gallery

Production of *What it is, What it has been (George Washington)*

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Packaging and transportation

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Acknowledgements:

Dr. Bernie and Mary Arocha, Rodolfo Athaydes, Erin
Beasley, Taina Caragol, Alexander Cooper, Beckham
Dosssett, Steven Evans, Max Fields, Maria Gaztambide
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Reynier Leyva Novo: Former Present Today is funded in part by the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance



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Front Cover: A.C. Evans Design

Centerfold: *A Happy Day* (2023)

Back Cover: *Blind Paintings, Mnemosyne's Whisper* (Ambrose Powell Hill Jr., Richmond, VA, December 14, 2022), 2023. Image courtesy of the artist and Stephen Hanley, Imaging and Conservation Specialist, MFAH Sarah Campbell Blaffer Conservation Lab, Acrylic paint and graphite on canvas, infrared photograph printed on EPSON Cold Press acid free paper, 340 gsm.

