

JUAN FRANCISCO ELSO

Juan Francisco Elso is the spiritual center of Cuban art in the 1980s, a sculptor whose work behaves less like an object than like an offering. He built figures, vessels, and flying machines from earth, wood, wax, jute, branches, and ash, and charged them with the weight of ritual: the martyred effigy of *Por América* (José Martí) (1986), carved in wood and plaster and studded with darts, remains one of the decisive images of late twentieth century Latin American art. Drawing on Afro-Cuban religion, Indigenous cosmologies, and a deliberate refusal of industrial material, Elso proposed that the continent could be imagined as a single wounded body, and that sculpture could serve as its instrument of repair. He worked with blood, with fragility, and with an urgency that sharpened as illness closed in, and the final *Transparency of God* series (1987-1988) reads as a testament made in full knowledge of its own time limit.

Elso emerged with the *Volumen I* generation in Havana in 1981 and exhibited in the first and second Havana Biennials, at the 1986 Venice Biennale, and in *Signs of Transition: 80's Art from Cuba* at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art in New York. He died of leukemia in 1988, at the age of thirty two. *Por América*, the project he planned for the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil in Mexico City, was realized posthumously in 1990 and followed in 1991 by a memorial exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. His work was reintroduced to a wide public by *Adiós Utopía* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Walker Art Center, and by the first museum retrospective in more than thirty years, *Por América*, organized by El Museo del Barrio in 2022 and shown at the Phoenix Art Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami. His work is held by the Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City, El Museo del Barrio, and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana, among others.

Born in Havana, Cuba, 1956. Died in 1988.

Education: Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro, Havana, to 1972; Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA), Havana, 1972-1976.

Lived and worked in Havana, Cuba, and Mexico City, Mexico.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023** Juan Francisco Elso: Por América. Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), North Miami, USA (through 2024).
Juan Francisco Elso: Por América. Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, USA.
- 2022** Juan Francisco Elso: Por América. El Museo del Barrio, New York, USA (through 2023).
- 1991** Latin American Spirituality: The Sculpture of Juan Francisco Elso (1984-1988). Hayden Gallery, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, USA.
- 1990** Por América. Museo de Arte Alvar y Carmen T. de Carrillo Gil, Mexico City, Mexico.
- 1986** Ensayo sobre América. Casa de Cultura de Plaza, Havana, Cuba.
- 1982** Tierra, maíz, vida. Casa de Cultura de Plaza, Havana, Cuba.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2017** Adiós Utopía: Dreams and Deceptions in Cuban Art since 1950. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA.
- 1997** Así está la cosa. Instalación y arte objeto en América Latina. Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, Mexico.
- 1993** Ante América. Traveling exhibition, Bogotá, Colombia, and Queens Museum, New York, USA.
- 1988** Signs of Transition: 80's Art from Cuba. Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, New York, USA.
- 1986** XLII Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.
2nd Havana Biennial. Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba.
- 1984** 1st Havana Biennial. Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba.
- 1981** Volumen I. Centro de Arte Internacional, Havana, Cuba.

AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES

- 1986** Honorable Mention, 2nd Havana Biennial, Havana, Cuba.
- 1982** First Prize, Salón Paisaje 82, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba.

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA.
- Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., USA.
- El Museo del Barrio, New York, USA.
- Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), UNAM, Mexico City, Mexico.
- Colección y Archivo, Fundación Televisa, Mexico City, Mexico.
- Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba.
- Charpenel Collection, Guadalajara, Mexico.
- Ella Fontanals-Cisneros Collection, Miami, USA.
- The Watch Hill Collection.
- Collection of Magali Lara, Mexico.