

## ***Zilia Sánchez: An Island on the Move***

Originally published in the Current Newspapers

“I am an island. Understand me and leave.” This is how Cuban-born artist Zilia Sánchez describes herself and her current exhibition on display at the Phillips Collection. The exhibition, entitled “Soy Isla (I am an Island),” explores 70 years of Sánchez’ prolific body of work. At almost 93 years old, she continues to revisit her themes of femininity and eroticism that recur throughout the decades.

Sánchez has spent a life living on islands -- from her birthplace in Havana, to Manhattan, and finally to Puerto Rico where she currently resides in San Juan. She takes inspiration from all aspects of her life: from Afro-Cuban culture and mythological heroines to her beliefs in isolation and unity, from post-war expressionism to the Caribbean moon.

The exhibition starts as you walk up the spiral staircase to the third floor of the museum. Pieces from the exhibit come into view as you ascend -- a large black moon welcomes you into the gallery that follows Sánchez’ work in chronological order.

It begins in the 1950s with Afro-Cuban inspired works of soft colors and “delicate meandering line [drawings]” that would later influence her tattoo-style paintings. While she took some inspiration from European post-war abstraction, curator Dr. Vesela Sretenovic describes her: “She is like a sponge. Always taking things and transforming them into her language.”

We move forward into Sánchez’ life in 1960s Manhattan. Though she has always supported movements like feminism, the anti-Batista resistance in Cuba and the underrepresented Latino and queer communities of New York and Puerto Rico, (even helping to establish the Puerto Rican political magazine *Zona*), she has always considered herself an outsider, “staying aside, being an island within an island.”

We see the gradual shift towards her signature style -- a union of “the wiggly line, the shaped canvas, the reductive palette.” She uses wood and found objects to push “the painting into the space,” and views the body as a landscape. We are to see the canvas as the body, the wood as the skeleton, the fine black lines as tattoos covering the skin. Her mission has always been “to create a work that does not follow the rules.” Ambiguity is present in every piece; her art defies being put into a category of its own. In a thirteen-minute documentary towards the end of the exhibit, she asserts, “I’m between painting and sculpture.” The curator describes her with a mix of admiration and frustration, “It’s hard to pin her down. It’s impossible.”

“She found herself at home with shaped canvas.” The largest space in the gallery holds her work from the 70s and 80s. You walk through and feel as if you are in a room surrounded by bodies -- curves that sometimes seem to breathe, objects from behind the canvas that reach for you like outstretched hands. Quiet colors of light peach and pale blue add to the fluidity and sensuality of her work. Sánchez, like a bored schoolgirl, covers some of the canvases in delicate scribbles while leaving others blank.

She is influenced strongly by the moon -- a feminine thing, a pure thing. One larger piece is a light blue moon, its *yin* and *yang* interlocking like a puzzle piece. It translates better in her native Spanish: *lunar*, which can mean either moon or birthmark. This idea is critical to her idea of unity, the joining

of the “cosmic and the individual.” While the scale of the pieces grows larger, the motifs of “moon, the body, the sensuality -- is something that reoccurs for 50 years.”

Sánchez has a habit of recurrence, frequently going back to old pieces, reworking and redating them. This idea connects with a video clip at the beginning of the exhibit. Filmed by her partner of over 50 years, Victoria Ruiz, Sánchez puts one of her paintings into the ocean and watches as the tide pushes and pulls it back and forth from the shore. “It’s about letting go,” Sánchez explains. “Seeing how far into the ocean the work can go.”

A room towards the end devoted to women in history and mythology -- Joan of Arc, Antigone, the Amazons -- is the only one not in chronological order. The warrior women are in muted colors, but in their softness lies a fierceness that is undeniable. Evocative of armor or breastplates, Sánchez has brought to life the emotions of each woman while still creating a sense of solidarity. The curator remarks, “this room is her self-portrait in many ways.”

The last room seems to have sapped the color from all the previous ones; the walls are saturated in a deep blue. It is also the smallest, and in this confined space we come face-to-face with Zilia in the documentary. Sánchez appears, petite in a polka-dot blouse and gold earrings. She speaks in short clips about her influences, her life as a teacher and about the destruction of Hurricane Maria in 2017. Much of Sánchez’ work was destroyed in the storm: “the windows opened and the water came in.” And yet, like her painting in the ocean, she is able to let go and return to her art, creating and recreating. Sitting on the bench facing her, Zilia pulls us in until the video is over, until it is time to let go, and leave.