

UrbanGlass

Multiple and One

Sebastian Duncan-Portuondo

Essay and Curation by Alpesh Kantilal-Patel

On View February 1 - March 31, 2023

This is the premiere of mosaic and stained glass artist Sebastian Duncan-Portuondo's artwork in New York City and his first solo exhibition. "Multiple and One" is anchored by his ongoing nomadic installation *Club EXILE*, a response to the 2016 Orlando, Florida Pulse club shootings, the victims of which were primarily lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) Latinos/as. Included in the exhibition are documentary photographs of previous iterations in Miami, Florida, where Sebastian grew up and is currently based, and at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, where he received his Master in Fine Arts degree

Sebastian refers to his *Club EXILE* installation, which is meant to function as an altar, as a "disco chapel." Indeed, performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson has poignantly written about his experiences at Black queer southern clubs "where queer nightlife and church" and "sexuality and spirituality" blur.¹ As 2022 Lambda Literary Award finalist Jen Winston succinctly puts it: "In terms of worship, and safety, gay dance floors gave me more than any cathedral ever did."²

If the tragedy at Pulse seemingly shatters the disco ball into innumerable shards of the mirror mosaic tiles of which it is composed, then Sebastian reconstitutes them into his mechanized dichroic *Club EXILE disco ball* (2018), forever turning. However, you can find the tiles throughout his exhibition in other forms, such as his *Miami Still Life Mosaic* (2019) and flashing hot pink neon *Club EXILE sign* (2017) strategically placed in the window facing the street, beckoning passersby to come into the gallery to investigate what a club founded on exile constitutes. I will return to this point shortly.

He has affixed mirror tiles to everything from his boots, installed alongside his jacket, to a fifty-pound rock. A suite of photographs shows several of these rocks situated near various outdoor locations, or non-places since it is not clear where they are.³ The title of the suite of photographs

1. E. Patrick Johnson, "Remember the Time: Black Queer Nightlife in the South," in *Queer Nightlife*, Kemi Adeyemi, et al., eds. (Detroit: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 231.

2. Eliza Dumais, "Life Lessons Learned On Queer Dancefloors, According To Jen Winston," *Vice*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pkgeag/jen-winston-greedy-queer-nightlife>

3. See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to the Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995).

They Left it to a Future Place (2016) suggests that mirror tiles are distributed across space and time. In these ways, Sebastian ensures that queerness and transness cannot be easily vanquished.

Moreover, he invited the public to assemble mirror tiles to create mosaics that would become part of the *Club EXILE Remembrance Altar*. This iteration will commemorate those lives lost at Pulse and, more recently, Club Q in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 2022. The artist, his partner Christopher, his mother, and his sister helped teach participants the basics of glass cutting. Food, music, and drinks set the mood for the club-inspired workshop. In this sense, the word “solo” to describe Sebastian’s exhibition is inaccurate. Indeed, he is more interested in bringing people together than feeding into the myth of the singular artist as a genius.

The work is not so much about the final material form than the collaborative process of getting there. The exhibition’s title, “Multiple and One,” is meant to amplify this aspect of his practice. It is also a nod to poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant, who invokes this phrase to refer to the multiplicity of identity. Drawing on the metaphor of an archipelago, a geological formation of a chain or series of islands scattered in a body of water with no clear center, Glissant notes that each island is simultaneously its own entity and always already in relation with the other islands. Each island is “both multiple and One, and inextricable.”⁴ He has even gone on to write that he believes the entire world is turning into a veritable archipelago.⁵

What makes Glissant’s thinking so surprising and therefore deeply compelling is that he is acutely aware of the horrors that European colonization has wrought on most of the world—he grew up and lived in Martinique—yet he holds onto the belief that interconnectedness is still something worth striving for.⁶ Similarly, while emerging from a tragedy, Sebastian’s altar leans toward joy and the celebration of life. The statistics of death for trans of color are dispiriting, and the rise of states pushing through anti-transgender bills is frightening.⁷ The threats are real and cannot be ignored. However, death and dying should not be the only way to characterize queer and trans lives. Sebastian’s work taps into

the convivial and instantiates queer and trans joy.⁸ He allows those who come to his workshop to personalize their contributions to the altar. He is interested in them bringing their own stories of exile or exclusion (which may not deal with sexuality and may not even be given a name) to create a space where the minoritarian subjects celebrate a shared sense of belonging: a home within exile. There is a generosity to Sebastian’s practice.

His family emigrated from Cuba, an archipelago of islands in the Caribbean sea, to Miami, a city shaped into a home by exiles from various parts of the Global South. Not surprisingly, the artist’s works are deeply influenced by the country’s deep engagement with the aesthetics of vitrales, or stained-glass.⁹ One of his recent works on display is a homage to the *los arcos de medio punto*, a half arch of colorful semicircular stained-glass windows that could be found at the top of a window or door of many homes. After Cuba became a republic in 1902, stained glass became especially popular for the rising middle class as a symbol of wealth and *Cubanísimo*. Interestingly, the Urban Dictionary defines this word as a synonym for *Cubanaso*, which “can be used in the same way as ‘flaming’ can be used for homosexuals.”¹⁰ A new work of Sebastian’s incorporates the bars that have become omnipresent as protective measures covering windows of south Florida homes. This is significant for two reasons: bringing in south Florida underscores the transnational and “flaming” character of *Cubanísimo*, and, secondly, the bars suggest vulnerability that is intertwined with the queer joy he brings into being.

Glissant argues that the condition of “globality,” a term he mobilizes to get away from the neoimperialism embedded in the word “globalization,” is predicated on citizens having the right to opacity, or not to be unknown.¹¹ This, of course, is antithetical to how the West fetishizes transparency. Opacity is literally and figuratively what Sebastian provides us when he uses silhouettes of his body that can be seen in his video projection *Study In Eversion* (2017) and his

8. I have to thank the students of my “trans studies meets art history” course I taught during the fall of 2022 at Tyler School of Art and Architecture. What became clear during the semester was that many of the essays I assigned focused on the vulnerability of the trans body: academic scholarship on trans subjectivity can often be clinical and bizarrely disembodied given the subject matter. Sebastian’s work is so powerful because it works against these tendencies. Other examples of artworks by artists that have responded to the Pulse shootings and also foreground queer/trans joy are Erika Diamond’s ongoing series *Imminent Peril - Queer Collection* (2018-) and Cassils’ poignant video *103 Shots* (2016).

9. During the colonial era, stained glass was imported from Europe and then cut and polished by Cuban glaziers. Journalist Richard Potts suggests that stained-glass windows appeared in Cuba most likely as early as the 18th century and reached their peak popularity in the third decade of the 19th century. It lasted until the early 1900s when Cuba became a Republic. See his article “The Anguish of Light – Havana’s Stained Glass Windows,” *Havana Times*, January 22, 2019, <https://havanatimes.org/features/the-anguish-of-light-havanas-stained-glass-windows/>

10. Urban Dictionary, s.v. *Cubanaso*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cubanaso>.

11. See “For Opacity,” in Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189-95.

4. Édouard Glissant, *La cohée du Lamentin* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 15.

5. Édouard Glissant, *Traité Du Toute-Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 193-94. See also my article, “Queer Chinese feminist Archipelago: Shanghai, San Francisco, and Miami,” *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of transContinental Feminism*. 11:1 (December 2021): 194-212.

6. Glissant argues that the condition of “globality” (a term he mobilizes to get away from the neo-imperialism embedded in the word “globalization”) is predicated on citizens having the right to opacity, or not to be unknown. This flies in the face of the way in which the West operates.

7. See Maggie Astor, “G.O.P. State Lawmakers Push a Growing Wave of Anti-Transgender Bills,” January 25, 2023, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/25/us/politics/transgender-laws-republicans.html> and Koko Nakajima and Connie Hanzhang J., “Bills targeting trans youth are growing more common—and radically reshaping lives,” *NPR*, November 28, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/28/1138396067/transgender-youth-bills-trans-sports>.

digital photograph, *Stained Glass Body* (2019). His identity cannot be reduced completely to his genealogy or queerness.

Finally, the *Club EXILE Flying Fish Moon Mosaic* (2019) exemplifies Sebastian's fascination for flying fish, especially how they evolved to evade their predators by propelling themselves out of the water, as a metaphor for how queer and trans subjects, especially those of color, have managed not just to survive but thrive despite the dangers. The sculptural work Evert looks like the flying fish's wing-like fins, which enable it to glide for considerable distances above the water's surface. The eponymously titled projection is particularly poignant and awe-inspiring; in it, a silhouette of the artist is shown using the work to navigate the precarious space between a sea and sky of jagged and sharp broken blue and orange glass.

Sebastian Duncan-Portuondo is a Miami based artist. He has exhibited artwork and created public projects in South Florida, Detroit, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Latin America. He frequently collaborates with artists, architects, dancers, musicians and community partners. He holds a BA in Studio Art and Latin American Studies from Swarthmore College, a BFA in Painting and Art History from New World School of the Arts, and an MFA in Fiber from Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Alpesh Kantilal Patel is associate professor of contemporary art at Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University, Philadelphia. His art historical scholarship, curating, and criticism reflect his queer, anti-racist, and transnational approach to contemporary art. He is the author of *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories* (2017) and is currently working on his monograph *Multiple and One: Writing Queer Global Art Histories*, under contract with Manchester University Press.

About UrbanGlass: Established in New York City in 1977, UrbanGlass fosters experimentation and advances the use and critical understanding of glass as a creative medium. UrbanGlass is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Exhibitions at UrbanGlass are supported by Agnes Gund, Capital Group Companies Global, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Robert Lehman Foundation, Corning Incorporated Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts and many generous individual donors.