

# Art in America



Nicolás Guillén  
Landrián: *En un Barrio Viejo*, 1963,  
film, 9 minutes.  
Courtesy Instituto  
Cubano del  
Arte e Industrial  
Cinematográficos  
(ICAIC), Havana.



# Nicolás Guillén Landrián

by William Cordova

*Fin pero no es el fin.*<sup>1</sup>

—Nicolás Guillén Landrián,  
*En un Barrio Viejo*, 1963

CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW

William Cordova's work is included in the New Orleans biennial, "Prospect.3: Notes for Now," Oct. 25, 2014-Jan. 25, 2015.

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MY FIRST INTRODUCTION but not my first introduction to Nicolás Guillén Landrián (1938-2003) was not through his short, rarely seen, often censored experimental films made in post-revolutionary Cuba during the 1960s. Rather, it was during my childhood in Lima, Peru, listening to my uncle read passages from "Sensemayá," a short poem by the famous Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, the uncle of Nicolás Guillén Landrián. Guillén's onomatopoeic writing changed poetry in the way James Brown transformed music, getting his band to treat brass instruments like drums. Guillén's poetry was influenced by and evolved from late 19th-century and early 20th-century Afro-Cuban music, including rumba, son and kiriba, forms that employ the tres (a string-based instrument) and/or syncopated rhythms.

"Sensemayá" is an interpretation of a ritual in which the Mayombero makes an offering to Babalú-Ayé.<sup>2</sup>

Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!  
Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!  
Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!  
La culebra tiene los ojos de vidrio . . .<sup>3</sup>

It was in the U.S. that I first saw Desi Arnaz chanting "Babalú, Babalú-Ayé." Here was an interpretation of a sacred ritual being broadcast nationally during the repressive 1950s McCarthy era via the "I Love Lucy" TV series. I was dumbfounded, because neither Lucy, Desi nor his band members were black. But they made their offering right in front of the camera. Rumba, son, festejo, blues, salsa, jazz, etc., are subversive in nature when one understands that the symbolism within the rhythms and lyrics is rooted in African culture. Arnaz was aware of what he was saying and performing. He, however—much like Eric

Clapton, who professed to have “shot the sheriff”<sup>4</sup>—never really practiced what he sang.

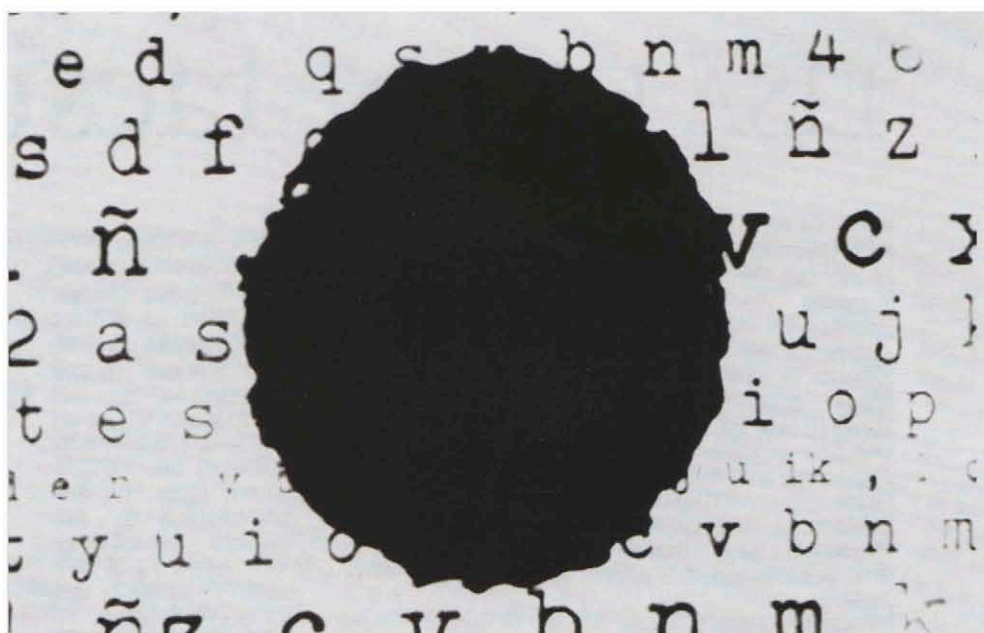
*En un Barrio Viejo* (1963), an approximately 9-minute film by Landrián, creates an amalgamation of narratives to the rhythms of acoustic and ambient sounds. He shows the routines of everyday Cuban life, presenting the people, places and sounds that had been invisible or reduced to simplistic stereotypes in the country’s pre-revolutionary cinema. Landrián captures Cuba of the 1960s: its past and present, its deteriorating class structure, its new socialism, its young and old, its religions—all coexisting. Landrián’s work recalls his uncle’s syncopated poems, such as “Rumba,” “Canto Negro,” “Quirino” and “Sensemayá.”

“I DO NOT HAVE ANY aesthetic conflicts with any of my films,” Landrián stated. “All aesthetic conflicts are the result of conceptual conflicts. I wanted to be an interpreter of my reality. I always found myself in the vortex of alienation. The result as a whole is every film I made.”<sup>5</sup> *Congo Reales* (1962), *Homenaje a Picasso* (1961), *Coffea Arábica* (1968), *Desde la Habana*, 1969, *recordar* (1969) and *Para Construir una Casa* (1972) are a few of Landrián’s films that survive today. Many of them incorporate text as image, successions of stills and static montage shots juxtaposed with pedestrian conversations, qualities that echo French journalist-turned-filmmaker Chris Marker’s early 1950s films. Landrián also riffed on the Kuleshov Effect, a film-editing exercise devised by Soviet filmmaker and theorist Lev Kuleshov, in which the same image can appear differently to an audience based on the images that appear before or after. In a sense Landrián, like the late Senegalese writer/director Ousmane Sembène, was producing films that reflect his heritage, his own presence.

Landrián was barely 22 when he established himself as a filmmaker. Having attended the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) in 1960, he knew European film very well. He had also absorbed various literary strategies that changed the way we read and write as well as interpret visually and intellectually, such as those informing William S. Burroughs’s cut-up text pieces and Zora Neale Hurston’s folkloric stories of rural black life in the American South. What Jean-Michel Basquiat did with painting, Landrián did with celluloid. He had a quick rise in the Cuban film industry during the 1960s and won several international awards. Some of his films criticized contradictions in the government policies of the day and were not well received by officials. He was arrested and hospitalized for erratic behavior multiple times.

It is important to note that his actions were not anti-Castro or anti-Cuban. Rather, his position, like that of his uncle, was as an observant interpreter of his environment. Unfortunately, Landrián worked during a period of great change for a young government that was not prepared to accept his eccentric ideas. Communist Cuba was about building nationalism more than anything else. The last film he made in Cuba was *Nosotros en el Cuyaguateteje* (1972). Despite his early success, only a few of Landrián’s films were ever screened in or outside of his country, and his work became available in Cuba publicly only in 2002.

Landrián’s films exist as offerings, gestures and ephemeral sculptures. They are predecessors of Third Cinema, an anti-neocolonialist film movement identified by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in 1969. Landrián’s work was at the heart of Miami-based Onajide Shabaka’s film *Total Disappearance, 1905* (2012), as well as *I Wish It Were True* (2005), a renegade cinema archive I made in collaboration with



artist Leslie Hewitt, which we called Fourth Cinema. Landrián’s syncopated portraits of random objects—a baby stroller, a wheel, a cloud, etc., displayed at irregular intervals with pop culture visuals and sounds interjected to influence the narrative—inspired my films *Badussy* (2003) and *sacsayhuaman (stand up next 2 a mountain)*, 2006, as well as *reserving the spillage* (in collaboration with Jerome Reyes), 2014, which preserves traces of erased histories within the New Orleans landscape.

Today, Landrián is still relatively unknown. However, his style can be seen in Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (1968). Gutiérrez Alea copied Landrián’s use of text-as-image and jump-cut editing in this film, but he never acknowledged this or noted Landrián’s contributions to Cuban revolutionary cinema. Gutiérrez Alea’s work before and after was far more influenced by Italian Neo-Realism. Many filmmakers—for example, Stan Douglas in his *Inconsolable Memories*, 2005—show the influence of Landrián’s editing style, which they derived from knowledge of Gutiérrez Alea’s *Memorias del Subdesarrollo*. Landrián’s effect on the many filmmakers who probably never knew of him points to issues of heritage, authorship, ownership, amnesia and erasure. “*Fin pero no es el fin.*”

Landrián: *Coffea Arábica*, 1968, film, 18 minutes. Courtesy ICAIC.

No le des con el pie, que te muerde,  
no le des con el pie, que se va!

Sensemaya, la culebra,  
sensemaya.  
Sensemaya, con sus ojos,  
sensemaya.<sup>6</sup>

1. “The end but not the end.”
2. In Afro-Cuban religious traditions, the Mayombero is the priest and Babalú-Ayé is the spirit.
3. Nicolás Guillén, from “Sensemayá” (Chant to kill a snake), 1934. “Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!/Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!/Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!/The snake has eyes of glass.”
4. Bob Marley wrote the song “I Shot the Sheriff,” 1973.
5. Manuel Zayas, *Three Letters from Nicolás Guillén Landrián*, 2003, play-doc.com.
6. Guillén, from “Sensemayá.” “Don’t hit ‘em with your foot, because he’ll bite,/don’t hit ‘em with your foot, because he’ll vanish!/Sensemayá, the snake,/sensemaya./Sensemayá, with his eyes,/sensemaya.” The poem is intentionally written in a dialect familiar to mountain peasant people in Cuba.