



KCRW Art Insider | By Carolina A. Miranda

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Color Coded
by Paula Mejía



Cuban-born artist Francisco Masó uses abstraction to record state repression. (Francisco Masó / Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

Seen from a distance, Francisco Masó’s prismatic acrylic paintings at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles appear almost like pleasant studies in color blocking. Each one features a different striped pattern, done in striking hues like coral, canary yellow, and white — colors that seem cut from an early aughts Polo Ralph Lauren catalogue. But the small photographs affixed to the corners of many of these works tell a murkier story.

Sourced by Masó from agencies like Getty and the Associated Press, as well as other corners of the web, the images depict covert agents — each of them clad in colorful striped polos — as they stifle dissent in Cuba, where Masó hails from. The Afro Latinx artist paints the distinctive patterns of these shirts on canvas, which he often presents along with the photographs. The secret police seen

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in the images oscillate between observing hordes of people and engaging in acts of violence against them. In one, a man in a yellow and black striped polo pins someone to the ground. In another, only an arm clad in a neon green, blue, white, and black polo is visible; the person's fingers are splayed, as though about to push through the crowd.

The paintings in the exhibition represent only a fraction of Masó's ongoing series, Aesthetic Register of Covert Forces. He began it in the 2010s after noticing that secret police in Cuba had a penchant for wearing striped polos, a type of unspoken uniform. The show lands in LA at a moment when masked agents are ripping people away from their communities and looming over mass protests. It feels uncannily on the nose.



Page 9. Volume V. Tome 1, 2020. (Francisco Masó / Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

I spoke with Masó about his show in the context of widespread civil unrest and how paintings can act as an archive. This conversation has been translated from the original Spanish, and edited for length and clarity.

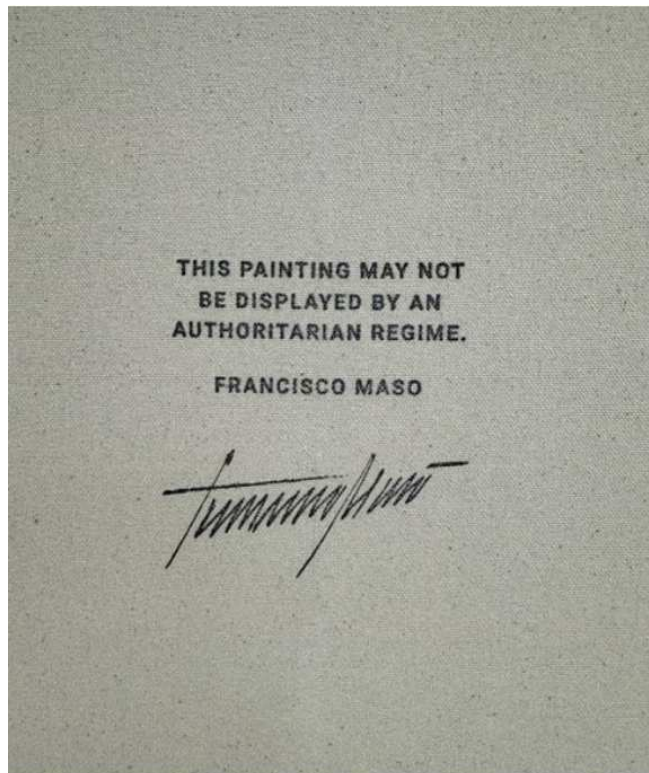
How did you discover the connection between these striped polos and the Cuban secret police?

I started this project in 2014 when I decided to emigrate from the island, from Cuba to Miami. On the island, I didn't have the opportunity to access information on the internet. And really, when I started to search for information about the state of the island, I didn't recognize the images of Cuba that I saw. I realized that these were photographs taken of dissident groups on the island. But in those moments, I didn't understand the dynamic of the photograph. I couldn't identify what was happening inside these images.

Over time, I started to detect a repetitive element. These men regularly had certain colorful characteristics that were abstract, inside a photograph that was already abstract to me. And so I gave myself the task of painting them, so that I could be left with a visual registry of these peculiar elements.

Did you have a moment where you realized this project was bigger than you expected?

Something important about this series is that it's not only the creation of an abstract visual archive, it's also a race against time, a constant struggle with the internet. For instance, if today you search for this photograph on the internet that's called 123 ... if people overwrite that image, the photograph disappears. That testimony of events disappears. So in a way, the paintings become a testimony of a photograph that, at some point, will disappear. The painting replaces — or, let's say — takes on the function that a photograph has. It freezes an event of the past.



The back of Masó's canvases bear an important directive. (Francisco Masó / Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

In the process of creating, I was basically online for five hours a day, especially on the dark web. I prefer to work there, because it's where information is modified the least. If you work with Google or another search engine, the process of erasing information tends to happen a lot faster.

I'm struck by how colorful these shirt choices are.

On the island, a textile industry doesn't exist. The majority of these goods are imported from trading partners or communist nations like China. And they're distributed among officials and the people who belong to government-related organizations. They use it as plainclothes when they have to go

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confront dissident groups. They could have a logo or be from Lacoste. But really, they're generic brands.



Collectively, Masó's paintings function as an archive. (Francisco Masó / Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

What do you make of this exhibit opening right when mass protests against ICE agents and government officials — some in plainclothes or masked — were happening so close by?

Seeing images like these, or images of the protests here, makes you realize that the apparatus, the modus operandi, is the same. It's not the same codes, the codes are different. But I think that in some way this exhibition can give you a feeling of awareness and can help you identify the men who are at the marches. I think it can make you more conscious. You have to pay attention. The work is in solidarity. You can transpose your own personal experience on it. And you can be conscious of all the actions you can take to reclaim your rights.

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Francisco Masó, Documentary Abstraction, is on view at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles through July 19th; luisdejesus.com.

A number of paintings from this series are also on view in the group show *Counter/Surveillance: Control, Privacy, Agency* at the Wende Museum in Culver City through October 19th; wendemuseum.org. Masó will be in conversation with the Wende's Cara Megan on Wednesday, June 18th at 6 PM.