

City of Atlanta,
Office of Cultural Affairs presents the
12TH ANNUAL MASTERS SERIES

mario petrarena
conversations: past and present

February 3 - April 1, 2006
City Gallery East



STATEMENT FROM THE DIRECTOR

Amidst Atlanta's evolution into an international city, the vitality of our rich cultural community has increased its brilliance. The colors, smells, and sounds that make Atlanta a home for its residents, and a return destination for all who visit, are more vibrant than ever! It is Atlanta's strong multicultural fabric that is the inspiration for the Office of Cultural Affairs 2006 Masters Series. It is our pleasure to present the collage and sculpture works of Mario Petirena.

For over twenty years, Mario and his wife, Susan, have called Atlanta home. Mario's quiet, yet intense, creative vision and personal commitment to our visual arts community can be traced back as early as 1981. His work explores our humanity with an unassuming nature that embraces both his Cuban heritage and American ideals. Mario's commitment to the development of Atlanta's art scene includes serving on boards for the High Museum of Art, The Contemporary and a variety of other committees. This intriguing artist has been featured in every visual art venue in the Atlanta area, several museums and galleries throughout the continental United States, Puerto Rico and recently Beijing China.

Again, City Gallery East invites you to embrace the art of an amazing spirit named Mario Petirena for the 12th Annual Masters Series. Enjoy!

Camille Russell Love
Director, City of Atlanta Office of Cultural Affairs



CURATOR'S STATEMENT

My relationship with Mario Petirena began over ten years ago. We shared a vicarious friendship through two mutual friends Amalia Amaki and Tina Dunkley. The actual introduction was made by Amalia Amaki. We were like kindred spirits and became good friends in a very short time. From the beginning of my journey with Mario, I was impressed by his personal passion and compassion. Through the years that I have known him, I have been continuously inspired and impressed by his struggle to understand life, the world and ultimately himself.

I have been equally impressed and inspired by his dedication to his work. He is constantly in pursuit of the raw materials for his work from rummaging through the magazine bins at the Dekalb Farmers Market, never-ending trips to thrift stores and junk shops in pursuit of plastic flowers and old photographs and visits to my garden in search of anything interesting and rusty.

I have been in Mario's studio countless times and attended numerous shows. However, working on this project enabled me to take a more focused look at his body of work. What I recently concluded is that Mario has enough credible work in each of his chosen media for an impressive career in: collage, ceramics, installation or mixed media.

The work in this exhibition represents a sampling of work from the various disciplines that Mario explores. I am especially pleased that we chose Mario as our 12th Annual Masters Series artist. He is most deserving. I hope this show will encourage you to start conversations of your own and inspire you to start your personal journey in pursuit of understanding.

Freddie Styles
Curator, City Gallery East

the forgetting day
collage on paper
12 x 9.75 inches
2005



Speak (Again) Memory

Our world craves the poetic, but is suspicious of the poetic act. In a world inundated by pre-packaged nostalgic beauty, there is a distinct notion that true poetry is either an historic relic handed down from the past, or the irrelevant subject of arcane academic departments and no longer operative in our daily lives. For over a century artists have been working to expand the traditional boundaries of commercial and academic cultures. Modern artists argued for an expanded idea of art, and in a line that runs from Schoenberg and Kandinsky through Duchamp and Beuys, and worked to bring our changing experience of the world into the house of art. In an era that embraces both the nostalgic reverie of neo-traditionalism and the ugly beauty of alternative subcultures, the dialectical relationship between the past and present dissolves into a pluralism of "one thousand plateaus." This contemporary "transvaluation of values" creates a climate of multi-content compacting possibilities where the message of the merchant princes and marketeers of art collide with the unending desire for new neo-avant-gardes.

The art of Mario Petirena embraces the gratuitous poetic act. Working along the perimeters of the familiar and the unknowable, he creates objects and environments out of the refuse of daily life that displace function and logic; hybrid images that refuse a single fixed reading, and environments that suggest novelistic fragmentary worlds. Petirena's attachment to the poetry of memory is deeply rooted in his personal history and his own highly personal poetic method. As a Cuban-American he is himself a hybrid, caught between the cultures of two worlds at odds, worlds in conflict politically, socially and aesthetically. He embraces both sides of the hyphen.

things still unsaid
collage on paper
12.5 x 8.5 inches
2002

After leaving Cuba at age eight, his childhood world was at once that of an exile, but also that of an inherited cultural legacy constantly discussed and mythologized by his parents and the Cuban émigré community that formed his extended family. This ever present mythical Cuban world, experienced through the haze of memory, stands in stark contrast to the America of the last three decades, saturated by a commercial media culture that has dominated both the demands of the market and our image world. Nevertheless, Petrirena sees these opposing realms as his two realities, and readily embraces the contradictions others try to reconcile in being a Cuban-American.

The Mexican photographer Manuel Bravo once said "one doesn't know how one receives influences. One receives them and absorbs them. It's like food, you eat it and it affects you." This statement is particularly true for Mario Petrirena's approach to life and his art. He studied at the University of Florida and The Rochester Institute of Technology, where he absorbed several important lifelong influences. At Rochester, he studied clay with Hobart Cowles, a teacher who instilled in him the necessity of listening to yourself and trusting your instincts. In his view the artist's studio was a refuge, "a place where the voices of the outside world were silenced so that you can hear yourself and hopefully have something to say." Another key influence of his student years was Duane Michals, who lectured at the University of Florida and made a profound impression on Petrirena. Although not particularly interested in photography, the young artist was impressed by the strong narrative qualities of Michals' work, and made him realize that the path to becoming an artist was the endless pursuit of a passionate personal vision. Another important influence from his college days that only surfaced decades after his graduation is that of the photographer Jerry Uelsmann. Although Petrirena never studied under Uelsmann at the University of Florida, he saw his work regularly in the University's faculty shows. In Uelsmann's dream-like work, Petrirena found a model for an art that operated far beyond the formalism dominant in the American art of the period, a model for images that evoke memory and desire through a personally fabricated universe cobbled together from fragments of real worlds.

Petrirena has also been influenced by the art of the Spanish-speaking world. The complexity of the Velázquez of *Las Meninas*, the symbolic narrative quality of Picasso's *Guernica*, the deeply personal work of Frida Kahlo and the process-driven work of Anna Mendieta are all important points of referral in his work. Interestingly, these are all artists with strong autobiographical focus, especially that of Kahlo, who fascinates Petrirena because she was "fearless in mining herself." Two other major influences on Petrirena's outlook are the autobiographical work of Vincent Van Gogh and the singular art pottery of George Ohr, known as "the mad potter of Biloxi." Petrirena recalls that his first contact with Ohr's work "shook me to the core", and he spent a week of intense study in the Ohr Museum in Biloxi, Mississippi, absorbing Ohr's pursuit of virtuosity, singularity, and individuality in clay.

Petrirena's techniques of assemblage and collage have their roots in Surrealism's reliance on the intuitive mining of the unconscious mind, chance operations and the use of startling juxtapositions of materials and images. His approach to adapting the techniques of Surrealism, however, is highly personal, part choice and part cultural inheritance. The contributions of Spanish and Latin American artists, writers, and musicians to Surrealism are well documented. It comes as no surprise that the secular art of imagination thrives within a context of the mystical strains of Catholicism associated with the Spanish church and the Colonial Baroque, a cultural force that is still visible in the plaster saints, allusions to icons and reliquaries, and his use of symbolic iconography.

across the turquoise sea
glass, found objects
10 x 6 x 6 inches
2004



Petrirena's collage works are hybrid images that are a collision of cultures and times. Rather than creating an abstract "Mertz" style collage, Petrirena overlays two or three images that are still somewhat complete and readable in themselves even as fragments. In *things still unsaid*, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* is overlaid with an image of the bronze head of a Roman senator and the body of a contemporary tattooed figure of ambiguous sexuality. While knowing in its reference to contemporary readings of the sexual ambiguity of the *Mona Lisa*, the image is jarring in its difficulty in resolving the three divergent codes into one coherent image. It remains made up of three distinct images, yet is indefinably something else. Other collages such as *of her needs and his pain* and *in reality as in memory* overlay the faces of classic statuary on contemporary fashion images, barely making an effort to mask the beefcake cheesiness of the fashion ad. Nature is a constant theme in Petrirena's work, and his use of color and sensual texture derived from the natural world inspire his most abstract use of the collage medium.

Assemblage expands the use of intuition and poetic juxtaposition into three dimensions. Petrirena's studio itself is one large assemblage with shelves of bodies of small works and corners of found objects artfully arranged as ideas for future works. Confinement is one the persistent themes behind Petrirena's sculpture, with the use of chains, cages, and glass to bluntly symbolize a metaphysical idea of containment. His use of glass is an important example of Petrirena's method of mining subconscious memory for poetic ends. As a child of Operation Pedro Pan in 1962, Petrirena was airlifted out of Cuba with thousands of other children threatened with the rumor that the new communist state was going to send children *en masse* to the Soviet Union for a proper Marxist-Leninist indoctrination. The artist has spoken at length about the loneliness and isolation he felt exiled in a new country with an unfamiliar language without his parents for seven months. An epiphany occurred when he was interviewed by Yvonne M. Conde, author of the book,

in the small silences
collage on paper
10.25 x 10.5 inches
2005

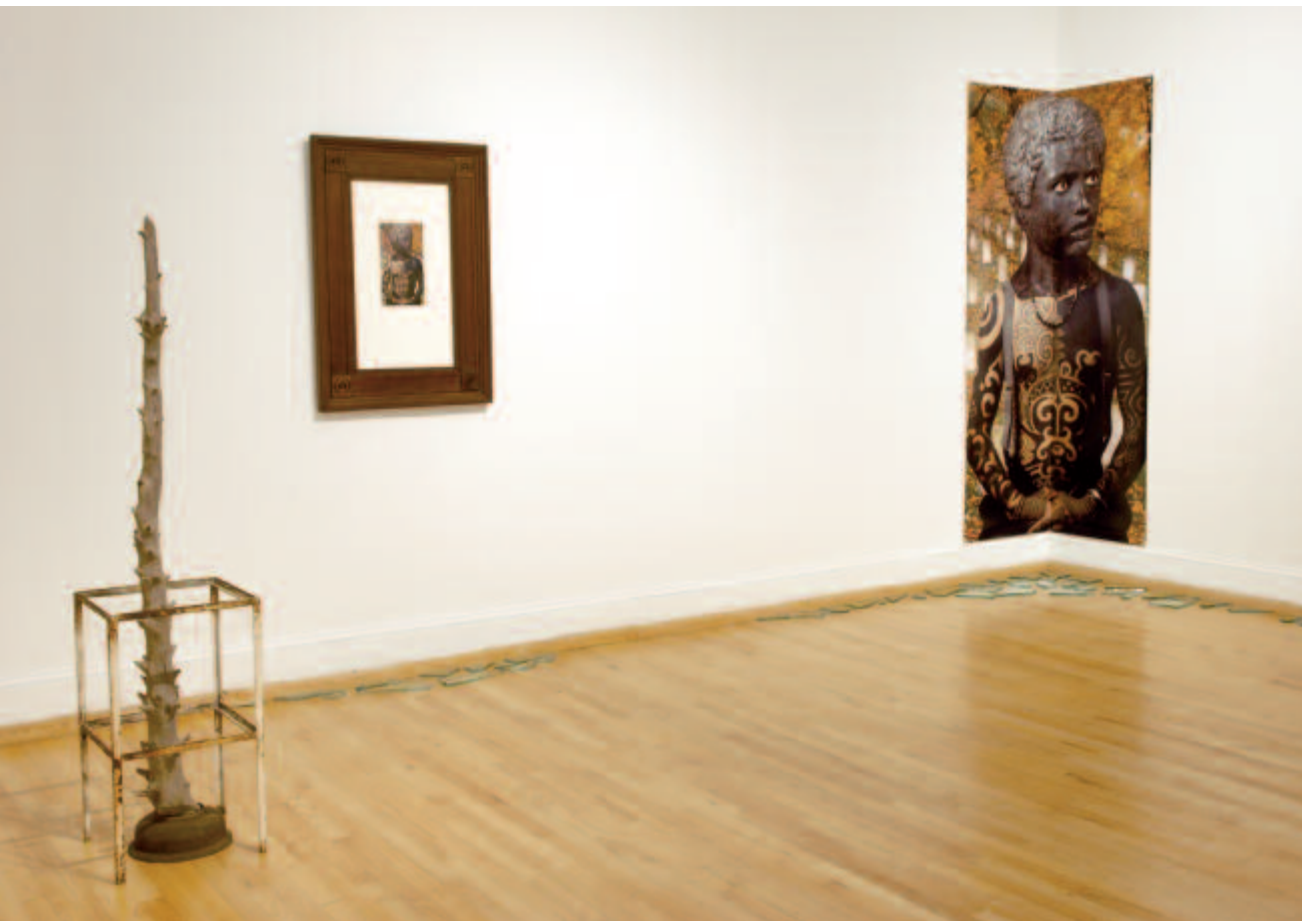
Operation Pedro Pan. When she described her own recollection of waving goodbye to her parents through the glass wall at the passport processing center of the Havana immigration office, memories of his own separation and painful departure came flooding back to him. This recollection finally explained his almost compulsive attraction to the use of glass as a material symbolic of separation and loss in his work over the last decade.

Petirena has developed a personal iconography of memory and fragmentation that permeates much of his work, but is particularly important to his approach to installation art. The origins of a *Gesamtkunstwerke* or total work of art that provide the basis form installation art are mostly romantic in origin. Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* and Otto Runge's conceptual gallery evoking the times of day are historical precedents for mid-twentieth century "happenings" and the contemporary installation artists' desire to create an environment that moves beyond the subject/object relationship of an object hanging on a gallery wall. This romantic compulsion to engulf the viewer's total experience in an artist-created environment aims to overwhelm the viewer with sensory experience beyond everyday experience. Petirena's installations are purposefully minimal in environment, but rich in symbolism. His approach makes the viewer intensely conscious of the sparseness of the surrounding space as a metaphor for psychological void. The room is presented as a container, a big box that houses his objects in a way that at once feels empty, yet sets up an emotional and visual tension between the viewer and the objects it contains. Petirena uses these spaces like chapels radiating off the nave of a Colonial Baroque church, or a series of large reliquaries, creating an intimate environment laden with symbolism and meaning. In his installation work, we see his collage and assemblage dance with one another in a poetic choreography in an evocative environment that address the persistence of memory, the tension between the artificial and the natural, the ongoing collision of cultures, and the passing of time.

Memory is clouded by nostalgia, but deeply rooted in the poetic. Petirena has knowingly staked out a complex indefinable territory for his work. In choosing to explore the boundaries between the past and present, the everyday and the metaphysical, and the personal and the universal, he regularly explores the ambiguity of the illusory realm between the known and the unknowable. As such, he chooses to work with collage, assemblage, and installations, media that are highly intuitive in their composition, metaphoric in their intent and open in their reading. He is wildly nomadic in his choice of materials, visual languages and aesthetic norms, preferring to recontextualize rather than to create *ex nihilo*. Unlike the hermetic poet whose meaning purposefully remains closed or obscured to others, Petirena's intent is to create a zone of empathy between his subjects and his audience. His titles often provide a framework for his viewers to find both personal, as well as common metaphoric associations in the work. With this approach, he assails the fragmentary nature of life and expresses faith in arts ability to synthesize meaning in a fractured world. It is here, in this rarefied realm, where the magic of art unfolds, from artist to work and from artwork to viewer. Speak again memory.

– David Houston
Chief Curator, The Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans
January 2006





at the broken places
photo, collage and found objects
2005





yes
photo, found objects
2005



wise whispers of the past
found objects
2005

marriage is memory, marriage is time
collage on paper, found objects
2005







and any shadow he made
clay, photo, found objects
22 x 8,5 x 3,5 inches
2005



our backs to the sea
clay, found objects
11 x 6 x 4 inches
2005



the soul rejoices in the knowing
found photos, found object
3.5 x 3.25 x 4.25 inches
2005





above:
silent tears
collage
6.5 x 11 x 16 inches
2005

right:
the silence between
collage
7.5 x 9.5 x 12.5 inches
2005





in ways unseen
found photos, wood, plexiglass
35 x 21.5 x 7 inches
2004



right:
waiting for meaning
clay, concrete, found object
15 X 16 X 17 inches
2005

below:
she is my strength
clay, found object
7 x 16 x 10.5 inches
1991







left:
the lottery of existence 2
clay, found object
30 x 15 x 15 inches
2005

right:
in the glad season
clay, found objects
24 x 12 x 24 inches
2005





above:
in the season of dew
collage on paper
12 x 8.75 inches
2002

right:
the doomed scent of her fragility
collage on paper
11.5 x 8.75 inches
2005





in reality as in memory
collage on paper
10.5 x 8.75 inches
2005



of her needs and his pains
collage on paper
12 x 9,5 inches
2005



Encountering Mario Petirena's Work

Encountering Mario Petirena's oeuvre it is inevitable to wonder about the multiple functions art can have. If one stops to take into account the more than twenty years of this artist's professional career looking at his entire body of work, and considers his clay sculptures, his three-dimensional constructions made of the assemblage of found and parts of found objects, his collection of small objects resembling relics, his collages, his installations... if one made this journey, one becomes aware that Petirena has created with his work a zone of inclusion in which art unfolds into multiple functions.

In that zone he speaks to himself, meditates on his life and liberates his deepest nervous impulses, energies that refuse to be organized by logic; discovers connections between his personal experience and events of social scope; he thinks about history, faces painful memories, compensates his voids; commemorates; conciliates conflicts; reflects on life itself, on the nature of humanity, their existential regularities and cultural specificities; he looks for beauty, denies it and, ultimately, offers us a personal vision of it.

PROPULSIVE AESTHETIC IMPULSE

Mario Petirena remembers clearly that from childhood he felt an inclination towards beauty that distinguished him from his siblings. Later, as an adolescent, when visiting the house of a friend where objects were endowed with aesthetic meaning to the family, he decided that he was going to create an aesthetically expressive world for himself.¹ Petirena seems to be moved by an aesthetic impulse of organic nature. Like the self-taught artists who transfigure what they touch into art, he takes possession of all kinds of materials and transforms them into artistic materials. Through that transformation his work connects to the ample and contaminated scope of life.

misplaced and ill-fitting
collage on paper
11.25 x 8.5 inches
2005

A SEARCH: THE FREEDOM OF SENSE

His search for freedom is made evident in his application of improvisation techniques that turn his work into a zone of inclusion par excellence, in which all types of associations, interceptions, juxtapositions and coexistences are possible. His work takes form through the addition—always selective in the final stage of the creative process—of materials that he says, "speak to me."² Three basic structures in which his work materializes—collage, assemblage and installation—facilitate the liberation of the creative process through an all-inclusive combinatory method. The collage permits him to establish autonomous relationships between fragments of images, whereas the assemblage and the installation allow him to use the physical space to articulate things or pieces of things. All found materials.

By accidental means, and the anarchy that it implies, the artist travels the route of the sense and the nonsense. His encounter with the most varied materials constantly revitalizes his universe of associations, which is materialized gradually in his compositions. This intuition route equips him with the expressive registries necessary to create amalgamated, illogical structures, sometimes permeated by a sense of humor.

In the beginning, the collage constituted a secondary, rather experimental and playful space, a process of work whose results he did not take very seriously. Later, nevertheless, some of his more ambitious proposals found form in it.³

Basically, Petrirena has developed three great parallel series of collages. One of those series amplifies the face that becomes a fragmented surface, done of superimposed pieces of faces that occupy all the space of the composition. In this case (his self-portraits included), the face is treated like a place where a broken and changing identity is materialized; one built and re-built through life and that in the present, projects itself as a fragmented and still unstable construction. Thus, the identity (an obsessive subject of his work) unfolds as a paradoxical and multiplied construct. The installation *misplaced and ill-fitting* (2005) conjugates an original collage and its reflection amplified on the floor. A beautiful face of a young man appears distorted by three different realities that constitute it. The counterpoint between title⁴ and visual representation in this work suggests a reflection on the conflicts of identity, specifically, in the stage of early youth or adolescence. It is as if Petrirena were commenting the crisis of identity of a young man as a reenactment of the mirror stage defined by Jacques Lacan, with the essential difference that the reflection that the individual obtains of himself is not an image pleasingly unified.

Another set of collages combines the human figure and the landscape. In them a clearly differentiated relationship between figure and background exists. The figures are hybrid (generally they combine tattooed bodies and fragments of sculptures) and are centrally located in a first plane of the composition in a way similar to calendars'. These collages are analogous to dreams in their combination of fragmented realities apparently not related. It seems as if through their strange connections, Petrirena wanted to reveal the hidden reality that Friedrich Nietzsche described when he said that "underneath this reality in which we live and have our being, another and altogether different reality lies concealed."⁵ The installation *at the broken places* (2005) incorporates this kind of collage as its main expressive element accompanied by a

sculptural object (a dried trunk placed within a rusty metal structure) and glass shards on the floor. A unique collage is reproduced in different techniques (color photographs and black and white xerography) and projected spatially in a variety of scales that range from the intimacy of the miniature to a monumental projection, all done with the aim to expose the expressive value of dimension as a formal means.

Finally, a group of constructions integrates the collage as one of their components. For example, the collage becomes a contained relic in *layered thoughts* (2004); it is photographic skin of unknown soldiers in the piece *in ways unseen* (2004); it is sculptural body in the spirals of faces entitled *the silent between, the lesson of pain, and silent tears* (2005).

In general, all of Petrirena's collages are made by pasting pieces of many images together to create a single image. They contain certain incongruence and, with it, a sense of the absurd. As a whole, they superimpose several levels of reality and display a recurrent use of imagery in which frequently nature and culture are joined. Woman and man; flesh and stone; human parts; tattooed skins; beautiful classic faces; realistic, broken and eroded faces; the Eden, Adam and Eve and the Mona Lisa; hands, lips, hairs; sky and earth all appear simultaneously as in a visual concert.

POETIC CONDITION

The reflection on poetry has been a constant in Literature. For example, Julia Kristeva speaks of poetic language on the basis of the distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. She defines the semiotic in relation to the primary impulses (organic in nature) of the human being, to its "energies of life and death." A baby's echolalia, according to this author, illustrates this clearly. But what interests us here is that Kristeva (inspired largely by the formulation of Roman Jakobson) visualizes poetic language in the fractures of the grammar syntax; in the breaks of the logic of the language, when language is put under an aesthetic reorganization beyond its communicative function.⁶

In his own way, Jorge Luis Borges defined poetry through allusion. He commented that "anything suggested is far more effective than anything laid down."⁷ And reviewing an early stage of his life as a writer he later added, "I wanted to express everything. I thought, for example, that if I needed a sunset I should find the exact word for a sunset—or rather, the most surprising metaphor. Now I have come to the conclusion (and this conclusion may sound sad) that I no longer believe in expression: I believe only in allusion."⁸

Under the light of these reflections the presence of a poetic condition in the work of Mario Petrirena reveals itself. The economy of expression and the ambiguity (generally derived from elliptical compositions) that characterize his works cause one to notice how futile it is to want to find an exact meaning for each perception of the senses. Indeed an experience of that type seems to have urged the poet and art critic Jerry Cullum to say on this artist's works: "these works don't translate easily into concepts, but they communicate beautifully."

Mario Petrirena deceives the syntax of language, its narrative. His constructions do not aim to precise denotative meanings. This evasion suggests that it is better to feel the implications of art than to find its exact referents. For example, the sculptural wall object *merciless memories* (2000) eludes us with its extreme simplicity, even though its combination between title and visual solution reminds us to the well-known notion of the 'transitional object' of D.W. Winnicott. The single combination of a found rusty metal ring assembled to a bronze cast pacifier, together with a title treated as a text, does not facilitate an unequivocal narrative on the work. Only through the artist's statement does this piece unfold as an evocation of an infantile memory. Petrirena conserves a vivid remembrance of the moment at which his mother deprived him of his pacifier when he was a boy.¹⁰ In Cuba (his native land) it is common that the mothers take away the pacifier from their children when they intuit that they have reached the necessary age and maturity to assume their separate existence in the world.

In a similar way the object-relic *across the turquoise sea* (2003) avoids us in its recycling of three objects: a small glass dome, a metal basket made originally for fishing, and the free standing representation of two praying hands. The work conjugates three emblematic elements of Petrirena's work: two materials (the glass, metaphor of a complete but fragile transparency, and the rusty metal, image of resistance to the inclemency of the passage of time) together with a regular symbol (the two praying hands, a metaphor of hope). This work leaves us just with an allusion articulated on the basis of a radical economy of expression. An allusion perhaps aimed at the illusion, the optimism that carries the Cubans crossing the sea impelled by their yearning of freedom.

INCLUSION: ART AND LIFE

We go on to poetry; we go on to life. And life is, I am sure, made of poetry. Poetry is not alien—
poetry is, as we shall see, lurking round the corner. It may spring on us at any moment.

– Jorge Luis Borges ¹¹

The transformation of all kinds of materials into artistic material approximates this work to the scope of life. Following the Duchampian tradition, Petrirena assumes art as an act of designation. He takes advantage of the artistic conception that synthesizes in naming all artistic creation and defines art more in terms of choice than skills. Recycling materials (images, objects, and fragments of them) extracted from disparate contexts, Mario Petrirena ties his work to the inheritance of the *ready made*. His incorporation of a cup, a chair, a cage, a dummy, a tricycle... bottles, chains, boxes... newspaper and magazine illustrations, photographs, letters... make this connection clear.

On the other hand, his systematic application of a re-contextualization mechanism translates in a vote in favor of the radical force (today made a tradition) that defied artistic conventions and rethought art's nature and social role. The avant-garde initiated an expansive project that put in crisis the practice of art as an exclusive and virtuous activity, breaking its limits and launching it beyond the high culture's institutional sphere. As a result of this vigorously emancipating shaking, a simple attitude, a gesture or an object chosen and re-contextualized by artists acquired the status of art.

This practice of breaking up ordinary things from their daily surroundings that appears reactivated in Petrirena's work still causes a different perception on the part of the spectators. With Petrirena the spectator is forced to watch under a new light articles of the ordinary life whose original usefulness disappears when they are put to operate under new titles and points of view. The reusability of materials and objects implies, in addition, another relationship. When ignoring the original utilitarian functions of his recycled materials Petrirena emulates the poets that dismiss the communicative function of language and 'defamiliarize' it with the purpose of expanding its resonances. In the case of Petrirena the use of this resource takes place in the middle of a creative process submissive to a constant play between sense and nonsense.

AN ETHICS OF MEDIATION

Petrirena defends an ethics of mediation. In our conversations, he maintained a position in which he always tries to mediate the contradictions of life. He has expressed a critical view of those who judge life events from extreme and rigid points of view.¹² The installation *the gray area between yes and no* (2004) conveys his ethics of mediation. Especially made for the garden of the Dalton Gallery in Atlanta, it incorporates plastic flowers (symbol of hope in the vocabulary of the artist) and a natural element.¹³ The flowers form a base that supports the heavy branch of an old tree. The most fragile element is presented as the strongest one. While establishing an absurd relation between the two components of his work, Petrirena subverts common sense and ignores the natural laws that indicate that a cushion of flowers cannot support the physical weight of a heavy branch. By displaying an uncertain thing like a real one, or vice versa, the work destabilizes opposites and their fixation in extreme positions. This interest to mediate between the opposites is made explicit in the title. Between yes and no, the artist proposes an intermediate zone: the gray area. His use of a natural element (the branch of the tree) and of an artificial one (the plastic flowers, a cultural representation of a natural referent) also brings together the opposites. In this site specific work nature and culture are transmuted: the branch of the tree becomes a material of culture and the fake plastic flowers (a product of culture) returns to act in its original context, nature.

Among his body of steles, the work *between the sea and the sky* (2004) also speaks about mediation between separated universes. The verticality that characterizes the work transforms it in a point of transition between worlds. Its formal

simplicity and the solemnity associated to its material (marble) suggest, respectively, a preference for an economy of expression and a search of symbolic meaning. According to the artist white alludes to purity; the gray veins, to its contamination. The inscription of the word hope appearing on one of its sides points out redemption as a possibility. Finally, Petrirena said this stele is inspired by his experience of the sublime. An experience felt in front of the horizon that the sky and the sea form in the distance.¹⁴

THE PRIVATE MADE PUBLIC

The intimate universe of Mario Petrirena frequently appears exposed in his oeuvre. His works as a whole can be defined as a compendium of personal memories uncovered to the spectator. Art critic Catherine Fox refers to his desire to disclose when she says, "his faith in the power of art makes possible the risk of exposure that pervades his work."¹⁵

The personal experience permeating his work sometimes does not reveal itself completely to the artist. For example, Petrirena has felt an inexplicable, constant attraction for certain materials. With time he has managed to explain (in some cases) how his attraction is connected to specific events of his life. His interest in glass is an example. After many efforts invested on remembering, Petrirena relates his obsession with glass to his last memory of Cuba. He recalls himself standing, moments before his definitive departure from Cuba, behind a glass wall looking at his parents giving him their good-byes from the other side.¹⁶

Nevertheless, in many other pieces, he establishes connections with intimate experiences that he remembers very accurately. For example, *advances and regresses* (1999) revisits (and makes us discover) a period of his youth in which he used dressing up as an armor to lessen his displeasure with his own physical appearance.¹⁷ In general, the work presents the body as text and dislocates certain physical attributes associated with gender identity. The piece consists of a collection of figures-collages (imitating paper dolls) designed to be glued to the wall. When locating the figures over the baseboard of the gallery wall, Petrirena recreates the fashion parades on a walkway and the body cult that they involve. The figures, formed of parts of women and men, exhibit with glamour their half-naked bodies together with a few, eccentric clothes and ornaments. Their gestures and postures emulate those assumed by professional models. *Vanitas*, title of the exhibition in which this piece was exposed for the first time, adds another level of reading to it.¹⁸ Within the framework of that specific context, this installation of collages comments on the transitory beauty of the body, as well as the triviality associated with it. Petrirena plays with the search for beauty based on canonical models, being inspired specifically by the *metro sexual* and *body building* aesthetic of contemporary urban culture.¹⁹ *advances and regresses* also contains a sense of humor that insinuates the artist's critical vision. The hybridism of the figures is a satire, a dislocation of the immutable representations associated with gender.

THE UNIVERSAL SEEN THROUGH THE PERSONAL

Petirena keeps himself loyal to the personal in his work in spite of the preferences for an art with broad social implications that maintain curators erected as arbiters of contemporary art. Arranged as an altar, the installation *me, myself and I* (2004), using a combination of photographic self-portraits, shows how the artist has changed as time has gone by. The title of Petirena's work presents the individual (himself) in three grammatical positions. The first person singular appears related as the case object, reflexive and as the subject. Inspired by a television program (the popular culture of entertainment provides a source for his work), and based on his personal experience, the artist reflects on his own changes of identity in different stages of his life. The set of photos, all taken at important and significant moments, form a mosaic where one discovers, for example, the boy at his first communion and when emigrating from Cuba to the United States; the youth that becomes a college student; the man who falls in love and marries. This mosaic also suggests an identity that spatially extends and multiplies itself. We are different depending on the point of view of the one judging us. We become a prism. The eyes of the beholder may determine if we are one and many at the same time. In this way Petirena makes clear the fictional character of the unity of oneself. He uses his own life experience to demonstrate that identity as a process of creation of a center is an experience both temporarily unfinished and spatially infinite.

SACRED MEMORIALS

Mario Petirena has developed two parallel bodies of work (the steles and the object-relics) directly tied to his first aesthetic experiences. As a boy in Cuba, Petirena and his family went to church for mass every Sunday. Immediately afterwards they visited the family pantheon in the Colón (Columbus) cemetery in Havana to deposit flowers.²⁰

His series of steles and object-relics seem to recreate these two memories. The steles of Petirena recall his family visits to the cemetery, a contemporary catholic version of the ancestral practice of the cult of the dead or the ancestors maintained by the human being through all times and cultures. The object-relics, on the other hand, reconstruct part of the iconographic universe of the catholic religiosity, alluding specifically to the old tradition of the reliquaries. In both cases the works filter the mediating function of the cultural and religious expressions that are their sources. Steles and relics constitute venerated spaces for the encounter of the visible and the invisible worlds. The steles transform the tomb in site for the solemn remembrance of those who have passed away. The relics, through the sacred components that they contain, make possible the divine grace. Both act, insofar as they are spaces of mediation, like vehicles of connections between life and death, the sacred and the profane, respectively. They facilitate the passage between the known and the unknown and vice versa.

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

In some of Mario Petrirena's works he turns himself toward history and society. The installation pieces *their collective silence* (2000) and *the time of flowers* (2000) demonstrate it.

In *their collective silence*, he pieces together three elements: a photographic collage as the main element, candles and glass fragments on the floor, and a rusty metal chain limiting the access to a space treated as a commemorative enclosure. The collage arranges a photo of a battlefield covered with corpses in the foreground and a photo of a lynching in the background; both images point out the most atrocious social violence. Petrirena illuminates them as if he wanted to rescue them from oblivion.

the time of flowers conjugates another three elements: a cushion of plastic flowers, a photographic collage and soil covering the gallery floor. A cushion hangs from the wall as a tribute. The photographic collage combines two images: one aims at social injustice through a group of starving African children who hope for something or somebody located outside the photography's frame; the other (a worn, faded photograph) refers to the violence of war through the list of soldiers who died in Vietnam inscribed on Washington memorial's surface. The layer of soil covering the floor seems to be associated as an organic component to the possibility of a rebirth after all sacrifice.

Finally, *the soul rejoices in the knowing* (2005) celebrates a decisive historical moment of transformation. This object-piece consists of three old photographs glued to the cylinder of a white porcelain device originally created to wet stamps. The three combined photos become a redemptive affirmation. The photograph of a black woman who directly stares to the camera's lens while posing with solemn dignity in front of the American flag, the interior of the Lincoln Memorial, and its exterior view are joined to honor the civil rights achievements of blacks in the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation declared those slaves forever free.

ARTISTIC CREATION AS A COMPENSATORY SPACE

The process of artistic creation unfolds as a compensatory process for Petrirena who says, "I revisit things to heal. I do it for myself."²¹ And he adds, "I am interested in naming my feelings. Sometimes when one makes an admission it evaporates just from the fact that one is dealing with it."²² This healing function of his work is made transparent in *me, myself, I*, specifically in its version for the Columbus Museum.²³ In it Petrirena incorporates the impression in ceramics (that is made traditionally as a memorabilia from childhood) of an infantile hand of unknown origin to fill a void in his personal history. Also, in *merciless memories* he compensates for the negative memory of his mother taking his pacifier away from him. Finally, in *advances and regresses* he revisits with humor an early stage of his youth colored by conflicts of identity and purges the memory of his non identification with culturally fixed gender paradigms.

The exhibit *conversations: past and present* promises to reinvent for us the sense of art in life. Mario Petrirena, "sitting on a fence looking from there into different worlds," opens and displays himself in his work and, with it, he tries to enhance if not all our being at least our eyes, our hearts, and our minds.²⁴

Ana Fernández
art historian and independent curator
Atlanta, January, 2006

The author's original translation of this text from Spanish into English was edited by Dr. Antonio Valdés Rodríguez, a GSU certified Spanish-English and English-Spanish translator.

NOTES

1. Mario Petrirena, series of personal and telephone conversations with the author, Atlanta, Oct.-Nov., 2005.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Petrirena treats his titles as verses (it explains the absence of capital letters). As a whole the titles can be considered a poetic body that evidences the conceptual weight of this artist's creative process.
5. Quoted in George Heard Hamilton, *Painting and Sculpture en Europe, 1880-1946* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 392.
6. Julia Kristeva. Interview, Ross Mitchell Guberman ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 212.
7. Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 31.
8. Borges, 117.
9. Jerry Cullum, "Elusive Celebrations of Hope and the Human Spirit," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Friday, Oct. 6, 2000):Q8. Review on *hoping*, solo show at Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, 2000.
10. Mario Petrirena, series of conversations with the author.
11. Borges, 3.
12. Mario Petrirena, series of conversations with the author.
13. Installation for *Tender Landscapes*, group show curated by Lisa Alembik, Gallery Dalton, Agnes Scott College, Atlanta, 2004. A earlier version was displayed in *Georgia Biennial*, City Gallery East, Atlanta; Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah; Albany Museum of Art, Albany, Georgia, 2002. The current use of fake plastic flowers by Petrirena is linked to his affective world. Fake plastic flowers were always used by his parents to decorate their home.
14. Mario Petrirena, series of conversations with the author.
15. Ibid.
16. Catherine Fox, "Artist Bravely Exposes Soul in Work," *The Atlanta Journal-The Atlanta Constitution* (Tuesday, April 18, 1989): 3D. Review on *recent work*, a solo show at Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, 1989.
17. Mario Petrirena, series of conversations with the author.
18. Ibid.
19. *Vanitas*, group show curated by Cathy Byrd, Gallery Dalton, Agnes Scott College, Atlanta, 1999.
20. Mario Petrirena, series of conversations with the author.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Installation for *Redefining Georgia: Perspectivas en Arte Contemporáneo* group show curated by Érica Mohar, The Columbus Museum, Columbus, Georgia, 2004.
25. Mario Petrirena, series of conversations with the author.

Mario Petrirena

- 1953 Born in Union de Reyes, Cuba
- 1962 Arrives in the United States of America
- 1981 Moves to Atlanta, Georgia with his wife Susan
- 1987 Son Gregory is born

education

- 1981 MFA, Rochester Institute of Technology,
School for American Craftsmen, Rochester, NY
- 1977 BA, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL

selected solo exhibitions

- 2005 *homage to loftin and ohr: an installation*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
- 2004 *Mario Petrirena*, Presidents Gallery, Brenau University, Gainesville, Ga
two sides of the same coin/new and old work, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
- 2000 *Hoping*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
- 1999 *Portraits*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
- 1998 *Mario Petrirena*, Mayor's Office, City Hall, Atlanta, Ga
- 1997 *Private Territory*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
- 1994 *Recent Clay Sculpture*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
- 1993 *Recent Work*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
Mario Petrirena, Clayton State College, Morrow, Ga
- 1992 *Recent Sculpture*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
- 1991 *Recent Work*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
- 1990 *Recent Clay Sculpture*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga
- 1989 *Recent Work*, Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Ga



truth and beauty
photo, found objects
10 x 6 x 6 inches
2004

selected group exhibitions

- 2005 *Convergence*, curated by Feng Boyi, Beijing, China
Cuban Art New York 2005, Dactyl Foundation, New York, NY
- 2004 *Redefining Georgia: Perspectivas en Arte Contemporaneo*,
The Columbus Museum, Columbus, Ga
- 2003 *The Story of the South: Art and Culture, 1890-2003*,
Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, La
Clay, Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta, Ga
Georgia Triennial, City Gallery East, Atlanta; Museum of Arts and
Sciences, Macon, Ga; Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Ga; Albany
Museum of Art, Albany, Ga
Celebrating the Permanent Collection, The Museum of Contemporary
Art of Georgia, Atlanta, Ga
New Orleans Triennial, New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, La
- 1998 *Connections and Contradictions: Modern and Contemporary Art from
Atlanta Collections*, Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga
Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, Fl
- 1997 *Breaking Barriers*, Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Fl
- 1993 *Crosscurrents: Rethinking 20th Century Art*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Ga
- 1992 CUBA/USA, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Il
Fondo del Sol, Washington, D.C.
The Minnesota Museum of Art, St. Paul, Mn
The Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, Fl
Nexus, Philadelphia, Pa
University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, Fl
- 1991 *Art of Our Time*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Ga
- 1989 *Birmingham Biennial*, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Al
- 1988 *Southern Expressions: A Sense of Self*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Ga
Latin American Artist of the Southeast Coastal Region,
Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, La
Art and Culture Center, Hollywood, Fl
The Figure and Clay, Pewabic Pottery, Detroit, Mi
- 1987 *27th National Exhibition: American Ceramics Now*,
Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY
American Craft Museum, New York, NY
Art Museum, Sacramento, Ca
Decordova and Dana Museum, Lincoln, Ma
Butler Institute of Art, Youngstown, Oh
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Ne
Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Al
Outside Cuba/Fuera de Cuba, Jane Zimmeali Art Museum,
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Arts, New York, NY
Miami University Art Museum, Oxford, Oh
Museo de Arte de Ponce, Ponce, Puerto Rico
Center for the Fine Arts, Miami, Fl
The Atlanta College of Art/New Vision, Atlanta, Ga

awards

- 1991 Cintas Fellowship,
Institute of International Education, New York, NY
- 1990 Individual Artist Grant, Georgia Council for the Arts
- 1988 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship
- 1986 Cintas Fellowship,
Institute of International Education, New York, NY

selected collections

- Alston and Byrd, Atlanta, Ga
The Carter Presidential Center, Atlanta, Ga
Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, Ga
Cintas Foundation, New York, NY
Clayton State College, Morrow, Ga
Hartsfield International Airport, Atlanta, Ga
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Ga
Paul Jones Collection at the Univeristy of Delaware
Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, La
King and Spalding, Atlanta, Ga
Leigh University, Bethlehem, Pa
Macon Museum of Art and Sciences, Macon, Ga
Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Fl
University of Central Florida, Orlando, Fl
The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta, Ga

works in the exhibition

installations

at the broken places, 2005
photo collage on paper and found objects

joy and painful truths, 2005
found objects

wise whispers of the past, 2005
found objects

misplaced and ill-fitting, 2005
photo, collage on paper, glass

marriage is memory, marriage is time, 2005
collage on paper, found objects

advances and regresses, 2005
collage on paper

me, myself and i, 2005
collage on paper

conversations

what broken places, 2005
Xerox, found object

only the memory of it, 2005
collage on paper, photo collage, found objects

yes, 2005
photo, found objects

ill-fitting and misplaced, 2005
clay, collage on paper, found objects

hard sweet wisdom, 2005
found objects

collages

gifts of desperation, 2005
collage on paper
10.5 x 7.75 inches

now, before, after, all at once, 2005
collage on paper
10.75 x 8.75 inches

in the small silences, 2005
collage on paper
10.25 x 10.5 inches

of her needs and his pains, 2005
collage on paper
12 x 9.5 inches

in reality as in memory, 2005
collage on paper
10.5 x 8.75 inches

beyond the horizon's edge, 2000
collage on paper
10 x 8.25 inches

keeper of the fear, 2005
collage on paper
11 x 7 inches

the known world, 2005
collage on paper
8.25 x 8.25 inches

the power of the unspoken, 2005
collage on paper
7.5 x 7 inches

the silencing of self, 2005
collage on paper
10.5 x 7.75 inches

the forgetting day, 2005
collage on paper
12 x 9.75 inches

in unspoken words, 2005
collage on paper
11 x 8.5 inches

the doomed scent of her fragility, 2005
collage on paper
11.5 x 8.75 inches

holiness mode, 2005
collage on paper
11 x 7.5 inches

under a shadowless sun, 2005
mixed-media collage
10.5 x 8 inches

in the season of dew, 2002
collage on paper
12 x 8.75 inches

things still unsaid, 2002
collage on paper
12.5 x 8.5 inches

them, the others, the rest of them, 2001
collage on paper
10 x 7 inches

consistent imperfections, 2002
collage on paper
9.75 x 6.5 inches

many sorrows to break through, 2003
collage on paper
6.875 x 7.875 inches

objects

in ways unseen, 2004
found photos, wood, plexiglass
35 x 21.5 x 7 inches

truth and beauty, 2004
photo, found objects
10 x 6 x 6 inches

layered thoughts, 2004
photo collage, found objects
6 x 7.5 x 7.5 inches

the complex inner life, 1997
photo, found objects
18 x 5.25 x 5.25 inches

the soul rejoices in the knowing, 2005
found photos, found object
3.5 x 3.25 x 4.25 inches

waiting for meaning, 2005
clay, concrete, found object
15 x 16 x 17 inches

across the turquoise sea, 2004
glass, found objects
10 x 6 x 6 inches

alive with silent fire, 2000
glass, found objects
10 x 6 x 6 inches

not wholly forgotten, 1997
found object, clay
16 x 13 x 13 inches

she is my strength, 1991
clay, found object
7 x 16 x 10.5 inches

the silence between, 2005
collage
7.5 x 9.5 x 12.5 inches

the lessons of pain, 2005
collage
8.5 x 11.5 x 13.5 inches

silent tears, 2005
collage
6.5 x 11 x 16 inches

our backs to the sea, 2005
clay, found objects
11 x 6 x 4 inches

and any shadow he made, 2005
clay, photo, found objects
22 x 8.5 x 3.5 inches

the lottery of existence 2, 2005
clay found object
30 x 15 x 15 inches

in the glad season, 2005
clay, found objects
24 x 12 x 24 inches

the i turns to we, 2003
clay
1.25 x 5.5 x 5 inches

the hours inbetween, 2005
clay, found objects
4.5 x 3 x 3 inches

only half heard, 2001
found object, photo
3.75 x 3.25 x 3.25 inches

lost to time, 2001
found objects, photo
5 x 5 x 5 inches

under a different sky, 2005
found objects, photo
7.25 x 4 x 4 inches

advances and regresses
detail from installation
collage on paper
figure height, 11 inches
2005

