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Lydia Rubio: Alphabet of Gestures

Enrico Mario Santí

Enrico Mario Santí is the William T. Bryan Professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Kentucky, a scholar of Latin American and Comparative Literature, and a frequent art critic. His latest book is Enduring Cuba, and Other Essays, forthcoming.

Lydia Rubio (b. Havana) is an American multi-disciplinary artist who has had over two dozen solo shows, including at the NSU Art Museum, Ft. Lauderdale, and the Bronx Museum. Her work can be found in the permanent collections of numerous universities and private collectors, and as public art commissions at Raleigh-Durham International Airport and The Women's Park, Miami.

For the past thirty-five years, the artist Lydia Rubio has worked with an overall premise: art is a mystery whose solution can be as desirable as it is elusive. No sooner do we begin unraveling one of its clues than it poses other mysteries: cutting off one branch makes a myriad of others sprout. While cutting and pruning, spectators must decode. In this, Rubio proceeds like a postmodern Gnostic, intent on pursuing dispersed clues of a hermetic secret and organizing themes according to a formal strategy of fragments, structured in series that spawn paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints—duly accompanied by diaries, maps, notes, even doodles. The series are ruled, in turn, by insights into a correspondence with conceptual codes that range from the letters of the alphabet to the four elements, cardinal points, and even gods of multicultural pantheons. Taken piecemeal, each form constitutes a clue for a plot whose meaning may well be lost. In the course of our reading, the plot's formal beauty snares us, seducing us into further speculation about questions that

encompass Rubio's personal obsessions: exile, nature, personal identity; or else, the links among image, objects, and language.

Rubio's ongoing search reflects her journey. An exile from Cuba since late childhood, she grew up in Puerto Rico, went to school in Florida and then attended Harvard, where she first trained as an architect, and eventually moved to New York City and later to Miami and Bogotá, where she now lives. In between, world travels: Europe, India, Cuba, and, most recently, Patagonia and Russia.

In New York, where we met thirty years ago, she worked within a community of artists, scholars, writers, and translators. Their own journeys affected her work in ways that artists and art critics might well find unorthodox. We met through Emir Rodríguez Monegal, then my teacher at Yale, and translator-scholar Suzanne Jill Levine, another mutual friend, though our first dialogue, amidst writers as keen as Manuel Puig, Severo Sarduy, Reinaldo Arenas, and Alastair Reid, revolved more around language and poetry than art. Indeed, Lydia Rubio is as much a visual poet as a poetic painter. To be sure, her penchant for creating "unique" travel books as complements to her individual works merits a grand entrance into what we often call "poetry" or "literature."

Since that auspicious first meeting thirty years ago I've been struck by Rubio's visual imagination. I can only describe it as cornucopian; and often, because of its depth, as kabbalistic. Through all the many shows of her work I've been privileged to enjoy, one nagging question keeps recurring: what is the relationship between ideas and forms? Which amounts

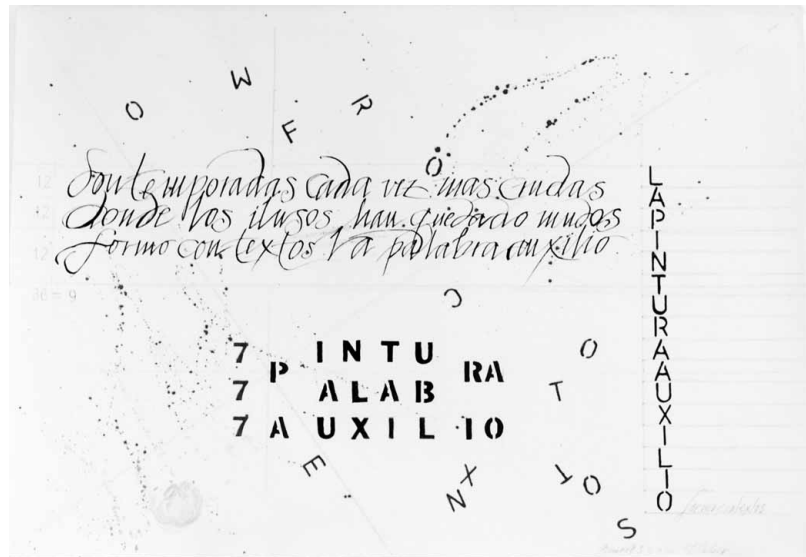


Fig. 1: *La pintura auxilio*, 2010. Ink on Amalfi paper, 19×27 in.

The text reads : New seasons are even cruder, and dreamers have become silent, I form with texts the word "help."



Fig. 2: *I Am the Boat*, 2000. Ink on paper, 14×9.5 in.
The text reads: I am the boat daily flying sailing painting carefully simulating impressions complicating indescribable transformations.

to asking: can we envision equivalences between figures and concepts, or else links among colors, shapes, sizes, calligraphies, and disparate objects in Nature, birds, fish, flowers, mountains?

In order to seek, Rubio first shows. Vision precedes concept. Abstract conceptual play anchors, fastens itself onto sensuous, recognizable forms, all rendered with the detailed mastery, a sheer physicality that, much like Salvador Dalí's oneiric drama, wins us over completely. Ships in series like *Written on Water* (1995) strike us almost like historical prints, though few would dispute that the history they depict is an actual nightmare; familiar landscapes, such as the ones in *Viñales* (2000), display as

many visionary as photographic details. Similarly, analogously, the language, or rather the letters, drawn (rather than written) in more recent pieces, like *La pintura auxilio* (Painting Help) or else the calligrammic *I Am the Boat*—both of which appear in this issue of *Review* [see [figs. 1](#) and [2](#)]*—*strike us at first as frivolous publicity. Yet once that initial impression wears off, we are left with the persistent tension between image and concept: Rubio’s boat, like Rimbaud’s, soars drunkenly with utopian possibilities; and the innocent plea for *Auxilio!* engages the reader in laborious decoding. “An art of illusion,” wrote Emir for Rubio’s Bronx show thirty years ago, “and of obsession is both (calli)graphically lucid and elusive.” And then, as further summary, Emir went on to quote Borges’s famous axiom on art: “the imminence of a revelation that does not occur.”

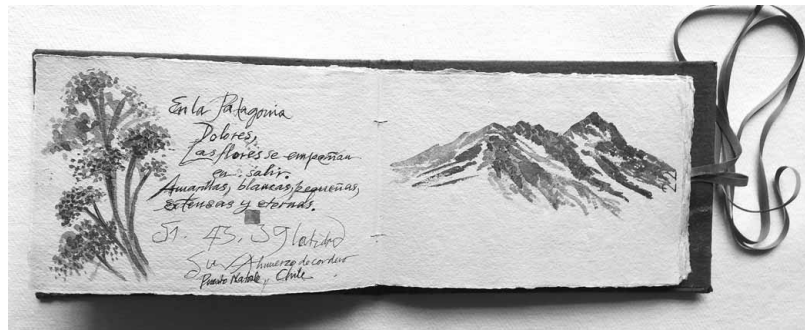


Fig. 3: *Patagonia Journal*, 2015. Watercolor and ink on Indian handmade paper, 40 pages, 7×10.5 in. each, hardbound by artist.

The text reads: In Patagonia, Dolores, flowers insist on blooming, yellow, white, tiny, pervasive, and eternal. 51.47.39 Latitud Sur, Puerto Natales, Chile.

Rubio’s latest series, *Patagonia Journal 2015* [see [fig. 3](#)], reflects her recent foray into the hinterland of Hudson’s “Purple Land.” I am struck especially by its renewed “poetics of water,” aqueous in two senses of the word: waterscapes and watercolors. While the union of subject and medium provides greater movement, swift watercolor brush-strokes allow for more intense light. Dazzling color-schemes thus make up for increased abstraction and relative loss of figuration while hinting at both land and waterscapes, or flashes thereof. (Witness a work like *Night*, on the cover of this issue, which draws out a blue and turquoise light spectrum where little of it is called for.) Rubio herself explains how in this new “poetics of water” she sought out “patterns and rhythms of natural forces.” While confirming indirectly my intuition of her quest after equivalences between image and concept, she stresses yet another aspect of the play in correspondence: “forms that equate the large- to the small-scale

world: river deltas as trees, flocks of birds as shrubs bent by the wind, islands as stains, schools of fish as scribbled spirals.” Indeed, the obsession with water is hardly novel for this Caribbean artist. “Written on Water,” once identified by John Yau as a quote from John Keats, could arguably be the tag on Rubio’s entire visual oeuvre, as if with that oxymoron she strove to capture an impossible metaphysical goal.



Fig. 4: *Indelible*, 2014. Acrylic and chalk on black chalkboard, with eraser and tray, 34×51×3 in. Interactive painting, viewers erase and redraw the landscape. Mauricio Gomez Jaramillo, gallery owner, redrawing in Bogota.

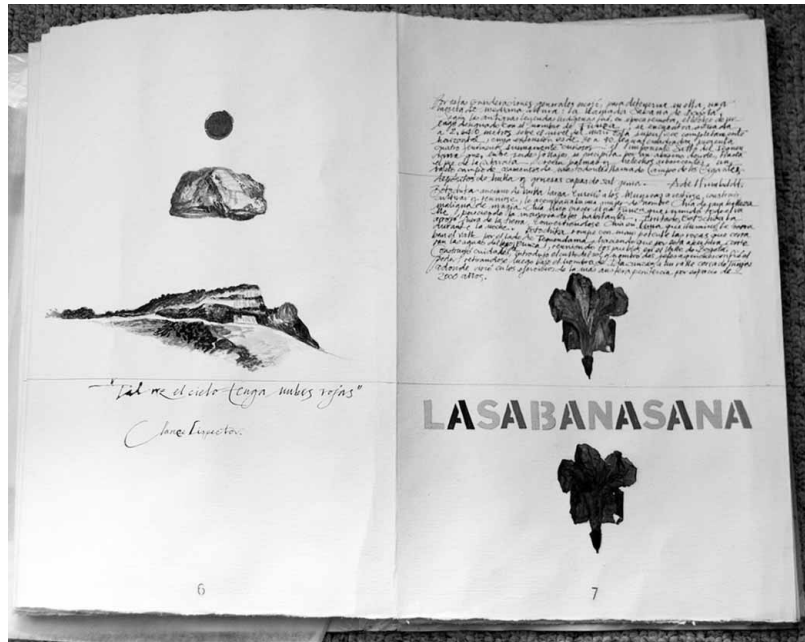


Fig. 5: *Genius Loci Journal*, 2012. Watercolor and ink on watercolor paper. Double-sided accordion book, hardbound by artist, 21x177 in. Texts: by Clarice Lispector, “Maybe the sky has red clouds,” and Alexander von Humboldt.

One additional kabbalistic image summarizes Rubio’s greater scheme: “alphabet of gestures.” If Nature is indeed a Book, and the artist its Reader or Translator, then capturing its spectacle in dazzling figures and colors—Rubio’s “gestures”—and not just in rhymed meditations, takes us all one step further into art as decipherment of “Correspondences,” following Baudelaire’s insight: Nature as Temple, objects as interlocutors. The Artist, finally, would be the Speller of the World’s Alphabet; and of course, the Conveyor of Beauty.

All images are by Lydia Rubio and are reproduced courtesy of the artist.