In her introduction to the catalog, author-curator Gail Gelburd explains the origin of the title of this traveling exhibition. Seventy years ago, the Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz used the word “ajiaco,” signifying a tasty, stewlike dish, to describe the complex, mixed cultures of his country. By adding “stirrings of the Cuban soul,” Gelburd establishes the guidelines of the metaphor. Throughout her presentation of twenty-five artists, she identifies the spiritual forces that give impetus to their work, reflecting ancestral links to one or more of the island’s original Amerindian inhabitants, Spanish settlers, African slaves and Asian immigrants, and the interrelationships between them.

Nearly half of the Cuban artists represented were born after the revolution of 1959, and none came of age before 1955 except for Wifredo Lam. The catalog is organized into five sections, the first of which Gelburd dedicates to Lam, in recognition of the expressive, non-anecdotal manner in which he integrated his personal heritage of Afro-Cuban and Asian elements into his paintings the first time that he returned to Cuba from Europe. Lam’s syncretism anticipates the explorations, decades later, of the twenty men and women whom Gelburd labels as the “first generation” of contemporary artists from the island. She describes their work in the three sections of the catalog that follow, as she examines the Asian, African, and Amerindian “ingredients” of the stew. In the concluding section, “Ajiaco as Postmodern Theory,” the author singles out four “second generation” artists who, she believes, “have broadened the scope of the investigation” to the point where “there is no one correct way of looking at the world; differing views are not conflicting, but complimentary.” Having surmounted the countless obstacles posed by isolation, politics, and scarcity of materials, these Cuban artists, by applying their ingenuity to the examination of their own cultural legacy, and by incorporating into their art the most meaningful elements of their cherished beliefs and experiences, have found a unique voice. Their collective effort has enriched the ajiaco.

The reader has the impression of strolling through the exhibition accompanied by a knowledgeable, passionate guide. At times Gelburd’s syntax and word choices make her thoughts a little difficult to follow. There is a certain amount of repetition because of the shared beliefs, energies and creative concerns of the artists in question, for whom the author supplies biographical details and supporting quotations, in addition to interpretations of objects that are on view.

The catalog is amply illustrated with excellent color and black and white images of fifty-nine artworks. For ease of reading, it would have been helpful to number the captions and to insert the pertinent figure numbers in the text, with a correlation to the final checklist. The endnotes reveal a solid familiarity with past and current scholarship. Gelburd, an associate professor of Art History at Eastern Connecticut State University, frequently travels to Cuba, and has interviewed numerous artists. Even though several of the artists under consideration have exhibited internationally and some live abroad, few are known to the casual reader or to the art historian. This catalog, without intending to be an exhaustive study, will aid in heightening awareness, deepening knowledge, and contributing to the understanding and appreciation of late twentieth century Cuban art. A Spanish translation of the entire contents is also included.

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