

Lopez Dirube Shaping the Scenes of Silence

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"Mother, why are you speaking so silently?"

Rolando Lopez Dirube hadn't awakened that Sunday in time for mass and his mother was trying to "hustle" him up. It was in August. He was nine years old. He had become totally deaf overnight.

The previous May he had "kind of lost" hearing ability in one ear. His grandfather who had taught him of other ancestors on both sides of the Cuban wars who had fought with honor and fierceness, needed a hearing-aid because of old age. The Cuban rebellions over the last century had been more sanguinary and had used more cannons than the American Revolution aries. Rolando had tried the gadget on and had said "Quien fuera sordo para poder usar el aparato." (If only one were deaf so one could use this apparatus.)

Now in August he was deaf.

Since then 29 doctors in Cuba, New York, Philadelphia, Madrid and Puerto Rico have declared Lopez Dirube's ears "perfect". But huge machines and other apparatuses in huge halls in Philadelphia and other places have declared him stone deaf. Rolando has been a medical mystery; doctors have passed him on to each other in wonder and awe. The latest allergy tests have been tried in Puerto Rico. No results. And he goes on sculpting to the rhythm of "cha cha cha," a graphic expression he uses to explain his working procedures, as if sculpting were a dance.

Dance: body vibrations. His whole body is a receptor, an ear or a hearing apparatus. His works now on exhibit University of Puerto Rico Museum are Listening Silent Presences as they look at you, sometimes brazenly, sometimes steadily, sometimes like a stubborn bull, much like him. The "Dirube" name means "he from the other side of the mountain with no money; he from Spain" among French Basques.

Dirube writes in his own introduction to his exhibit some interesting views on superficiality and on the Samurai martial arts. He makes a virtue out of a former sin, an esthetic principle out of the vulnerability of armor and seeks the other side of surfaces, topologically, conceptually, as in Klein's bottle, or by lovingly penetrating them, "by force if need be."

"A woman's epidermis continues inside her parts", he avers. "The access to the beyond, behind the plane, is a constant theme in most of my works", he writes. (Notice the difference between the spoken and the

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A Lopez Dirube sculpture now on exhibit in the University of Puerto Rico Museum.

written word: biology versus geometry; what a hand does or an ear hears and what the mind idealizes — a vital continuous dialogue. A key. Remember the distance between a "persona" or "personality" and its intimate being.)

What Dirube seems to be seeking now in his works are the mysteries of possible life within the sphere, behind the actual presences of his sculptures and drawings. It is a good idea and in good time since he has been accused of being "decorative" and "superficial" as an artist. Decoration is an immanent quality in any of the visual arts. But superficiality? In response he is closing in on himself and since, as a human he is quality, he is getting closer to ideal quality in his creations. If Goya had died at Lopez Dirube's present age of 47, he

wouldn't be known to us here and now. The Goya we do know came alive after he shut himself inside the "Casa del Sordo" (House of the Deaf) and stopped braving the bull all over the land. Better to penetrate than to race on the surface.

Dirube's present sparkling show consists of 35 sculptures and 20 drawings done in the past two years, over and beyond countless graphics and other productions like the huge, evidently quite handsome, modular relief wall at One Biscayne Tower in Miami. The 35 sculptures are carved and polished in beautiful hardwoods "so they would quickly sink in water", he says "but I am a very good swimmer!" Copper tubing weaves in and out as an organic detail in some of them, instead of the ropes he has used before. Somehow the ropes

were more like his beloved Samurai but the tubing is harder to bend gracefully — more daring. He is still racing. (Man against matter, or for show?) The works are attractive, anyway. And some are naked beauty.

NOTE: Do go to see the show before it closes on Wednesday. But before you go, read up on the ear's anatomy and on topological figures, to enjoy on an extra level.

I always meant to know Dirube of the Basque name and Cuban roots, now my neighbor, colleague and friend, in Catano's Bayview. The present show has drawn us together more than other occasions. I watched as he despaired of opening on time. One day the works were in an idling boat's hold off Santo Domingo. Then suddenly on a Sunday their many tons have been transported to Puerto Rico by leased airplane and he is excited: Tomorrow, Monday, unpack! Repair bases! Paint them! Arrange works in the museum hall! On time for the opening! Cha, Cha, Chaa! But now he feels like celebrating. Yakety yak time...

He glows when he speaks of Cuban history, its bloody sacrificial battles for liberty, especially of Maceo and his Mambises in the manigua, freshly bathed, expectant, nude on horseback, and of the tactical silence of Maximo Gomez in front of the Spaniards' advance. "Oh, I love to hear the silences of Egypt, of Santa Teresa, of the Samurai before battle! Look at Japan!" he continues, "ever apart from those millions in China — because of the Samurai! The austere silent Samurai with his beautiful philosophy."

"As a Puerto Rican I am an Independentista but since I am called Cuban here, as a Cuban I am an Independentista. I love this Caribbean Basin! All its people are my kind. And its women! "Miss World," "Miss Universe," real women, women with an art."

I smile. Hostos would approve. (Caribbean Basin-women) (Expectant Presences — Nudes on horseback) (Perforated Armatures...) (Mother-Grandfather-Maceo) (Gomez-Mambises-the Samurai) ("Who would be deaf?" — The silences) (Cha Cha Chaa and yakety yak times) ("Mother, why are you speaking so silently? — Late for Mass.")

Everything I find is so archetypically wrought! This man, this friend from the mountain's other side. It seems as if I knew him when life began!

Total deafness equals loss of one huge fountain of data necessary to remain alive in a world of tigers and monstrous lizards, or of autos and wasps. No warnings! And no soft music. You are an island, a spot in the vital continuum. Alone! Deaf.

Can you wish deafness on yourself? If so, is it a handicap you daringly

"Deafness' first anguish," said Lopez Dirube, "came later, in my twenties, when I began to feel lonely because of the lack of SOUNDS, not words. The sound of things is like a food you need. The only sounds I can remember from my childhood were the flow of water, the sighs of pine trees, and the beats of hoofs on cobblestones when old, honored Mambises died and their corpses were carried along on their way to the nearby cemetery."



give yourself in a race with others? When 9 years old? Artist Dirube has been racing ever since. Winning mostly short distances but sometimes in depth. Mostly accompanied by some "apparatus" of technique or form but sometimes working with simple beauty, without armour or protective cloth, as his beloved Maceo's Mambises on their horses, killing Spaniards by the hundreds; naked, freshly washed dark shining bodies clasp glistening machetes, yelling "Al deguello!" ("Off with their heads!") (His present show glistens.) (Glitter?) (Or yell!)

Would you dare to be deaf? And if you do dare, is it a defense mechanism, a barrier between you and them, whatever the them you wish to exclude? Lopez Dirube denies any notion of defense — only of attack? "He who defends himself does so because he feels beaten." And as for an excluding barrier, he scoffs. "I am an artist, I try to communicate in wood, or stone, or paint." (Actually those materials are deaf things until shaped by the artist. Then they can listen. Like him, a sonar or expectant ear — like Maceo and Maximo Gomez in the manigua — quiet and still. But sometimes they grab you! It's a shock then: you have been included by his best works. Stone, wood... sometimes metals as adjuncts... and you, included!)

Decidedly, deafness in Lopez Dirube's case is not a device calling for piteous attention, except maybe attention to the quantity of his accomplishments as a racer. A race is, however, limited by the track, a surface measure. His work is superficial many times when he gets enamoured with an "apparatus" of either material or form, as I said, and belabors it intelligently, far too intelligently, to triteness. "To think and to act are one and the same thing," he quotes the Samurai. So he thinks and does variations galore, which is wonderful professionally but then he grabs another apparatus, the show. He exhibits all of them all at once in one place. Picasso, a similar motor, always withheld many works until later, or for quite unconnected shows. Dirube should do the same.

But I feel impelled to hark back indiscreetly to deafness and "perfect ears," the motor I intuit, behind Dirube's racing career. Rolando's inspired and impromptu conversation takes me afieid. Does he evade discussing sacred grounds, those he seems to pursue now behind the shell or periphery of his present works? Behind the skin what temple has been built or what nell denied? "Behind every Samurai there is a monk" he responds. "Not necessarily of the same quality each, but equal in sacrifice!" (Sacrifice! We are on sacrificial grounds, yes!)

I wonder, is he wounding himself

when he cuts the hard woods, bends metals, builds stones with penetrated shells? He is ready (too ready?) with a beautiful answer: "Everything in life is periphic, epidermical. Materials do not dare me into creation: they invite me to dialogue. But wood, for example, implies its own destruction! And when I form it with my chisels, rasps and carborundum stones, I too imply mine own destruction, my end." He quotes Manrique, I think: "La Vida. Que es la vida? Por perdida ya la di cuando al yugo del esclavo como un bravo sacudi." (What is life? I gave it up for lost when like a "bravo" I shook off the slave's yoke.) ("Bravo", brave, a word he uses often. I remember as a child I had to be "brave" to pass by Albonito's cemetery at dusk-I would then whistle and make noises with a stick by hitting shrubs along the way. Is he making noises like those, next to a cemetery? I think but do not speak. I wait.)

"You see, a Samurai never 'dies' in battle: he considers himself dead when he enters battle." (So he has read my unspoken thought! E.S.P. His antennae are all up: I must be treading hallowed ground) (And then I see further: he is using the Samurai philosophy and cosmogony as I used the stick, as so many of my students use Christ and Krishna and Scientology, to be at peace as they face the unknown future.) (All of them reject such a heretical or cynical reading of their particular situation. Will Dirube? I wait. We both like silences.)

"You know... the same metal plates can be two things. On a warrior's chest, they are a cover or armor for the heart inside; on a woman's breasts they are an adornment, an outside arm for delight. That is why I am so wrapped up with Klein's bottle, a bottle in an eternal process of coming inside out, inside out."

How beautifully he has parried my unspoken heretical reading of his situation! He has not denied it but for him it's a process, not a heresy, nor a cynicism. He is my intellectual peer. He has good "ears," a stout heart. I hope so, in my case too, for I am nearer death than he and I don't know if I'll be ready when it comes. Besides, both of us seem to be equally proud but my pride is more negative than his since it desires to transcend (read "evade" too) and I scarcely exhibit any works. He dares to expose himself more and he believes in finalized works, finished art objects, though he himself is in process. Should I probe more after his parry?

Hearing is a complicated process. The three parts of the ear are a progression of many empty chambers, with a hammer, anvil and stirrup, acted on by the vibration-gathering membranes, and which act on fluids

whose swells in turn activate hair cells in Corti's organ, which then bend on a tectorial membrane and send impulses through the 8th cranial nerve to the brain where interpretations are made, the message cognized. Notice how many of the above terms apply to the sculptor's lexicon or to Lopez Dirube's life, including the fluids. He learned to swim before he walked, considers the sea more faithful than the earth because it warns you of dangers before it is too late. When he is tired or harassed by too much yakety yak, he takes to the Bay of San Juan in any one of his boats in search of relief. He now wants a faster boat — faster, not stronger — to go to St. Thomas and back overnight. He has taught many persons to fly in boats. A very accomplished mariner! (The fluid sea: smooth vibrations and swells in primeval silence — in the dark towards San Juan or St. Thomas. I shiver, for I am earthbound, though as his neighbor in Bayview I too love to watch and listen to the sea. — very respectfully.)

Oh deaf ears: you feel the very sharp staccato vibrations Rotando gets from shooting! (Cock the hammer! Ready on the anvil! Bang!) He has never been beaten in marksmanship yet he can not hurt any living thing; not anymore. "I enjoy it when Army majors, police and other official shooters, get 'bravos' when I outshoot them," he comments. ("Bravos" means "mad" in this context)

"Shooting is also a message: Ping! Through space, like a warning" he continues.

"A message to la nada?" interjects Cherson, the architect, Rolando's long time friend. (Does he imply a "Message to Garcia"? Is he making a pun or does he mean the existentialist nothingness?) Existential Dirube admits: "Yes-maybe to La Nada." (Nothingness sounds so very silent and deaf, so very empty. Are there any warnings of its coming? Notice that Dirube often speaks of warnings, and prefers the sea to the earth because of it.)

I find myself calling him Dirube! But he is a Lopez Dirube, no bastard, and his father and grandfather were well known and loved. But I should not think of living mothers. It's simply that, like "Picasso," (who was Ruiz Picasso) "Dirube" is a better name for a fighter. What's in a name? Plenty! Sometimes it's an armor plate, or a sign that captures the essence of many things. Mysteries of the shell, the beginner of myths. "Perforated helmets" is one of his 21 fine crisp drawings with a haunting "Ping!" in this show, carbon black glow.

Oh, deaf ears: you feel the flowingly sharp vibrations that archery is for Dirube! Tense arc, release!

Straight flow, sharp blow. The arrow on perforated target! Deafness helps in shooting both arrows and bullets, makes him unbeatable in those contests or skills. (Who would wish to be deaf?) (Perforated armatures, sharp hatches, train whistle, bullet, arrow, bird's beak are often in his talk and in his work.) I prod him on about "hearing."

"The first level of deafness is commonplace among men," he confides. "You simply do not hear words, like 'dog' or 'stinging wasp'. Yet words are the sign of the cultivated man and how can you subsist as such without them? It's hard until you console yourself. Two things can fool you: words and light. They can change so often they may confuse the nature-culture relationships. To words you can give Cambrone's famous answer in good French: 'Merdel'! Besides, you can quickly learn to read lips. Of course I missed words at first, I had become acculturated by them for my first nine years. No I can read lips through a telescope, and "hear" a conversation a mile away. Some time ago I found out how much the "snow" is worth as I spotted a sale of drugs near the Catano ferry. I was in Bayview in my home, fooling with a friend's telescope." (So he has won Race. num. 1. He has learned to subsist in four languages, not by ear. It was at this level that he ran all over the field seeking to grasp objects and knowledge, figures against their background, gestals instead of words. A "commonplace" challenge, no anguish — until he was about 21 years old.)

"Deafness' first anguish," he confides, "came later, in my 20s, when I began to feel lonely because of the lack of sounds, not words. The sound of things is like a food you need. The only sounds I can remember from my childhood are the flow of water, the sighs of pine trees, and the beats of horses hoofs on cobblestones when old, honored Mambises died and their corpses were carried along on their way to the nearby cemetery." (I must keep silent. Sacred Ground. Water flow, pine sigh, hoof beat, corpse by. Mambises, the Cemetery.)

"It is at a very profound level of consciousness that you become aware of the loneliness of a world without warning signals from a stinging bee or a biting dog. I don't mean the words. I mean the "zing" before the sting, the bark or growl before the bite, the adrenaline flow-produced like food from a warning signal before danger is obvious. At that moment the whole world is dead. Nature is an exteriority and you hit the bottom of deafness on a conscious subsistence level. A body needs that food, denied to you.

"In that anguished moment you in-

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tially don't feel like working at all, only on getting along, maybe working a little for conviviality. Very superficial reaction. Then you feel like not issuing any warnings or data, only of taking them yourself. Input, no output. That might be a good solution for a scholar, research bent. Certainly the real world doesn't care if you deny it your data. So I came upon the Oriental attitudes and on the Samurai. Orders of a Chinese general to a lieutenant, 'If the enemy comes straight in front, close your legs and lift your blade; but if you don't know wherefrom, open your legs and lower your sword.'

Lopez Dirube has been in the last mentioned martial position ever since. Legs open blade lowered. The enemy may come from anywhere, and he is ready for it. "To think and to act are one and the same thing" and his whole body is a listening membrane. In his 20s and 30s he learned all the Samurai martial arts, deepened into the mariner's craft, practiced with bullets and arrows and produced countless individual works plus about 50 large mural commissions (painted, sculpted or both) in Cuba. I understand their style is recalled for us by the Ashford Medical Center murals and sculptures. What do you see there, floor upon floor, following the elevators? An austere colored series of murals with mixed cubistic and futuristic immanent gestalts. The suggestive configurations are all shot up by fine vector lines like bullet and arrow trajectories which form a veil in front of the gestalt.

I never saw so many very fine, most times very straight lines, in any mural. It's hard for me to paint such a very fine line. Dirube painted a million or more of them in a very short time. They do not form the mysterious soft veil that Mark Tobey's "white writing" or Jackson Pollock's paint drizzling produces but they do remind me of the day I landed in the Normandy beaches: bullets galore and behind, the eternally calm Norman earth mass like a deaf witness to the silliness of men. Dirube's individual paintings of definite feminine bodies, veiled by such countless trajectories, bristle the same way. Remember, they were produced while he was reacting to the agony of hitting the bottom of deafness on a conscious subsistence level. He had to come out fighting in all directions, shooting vectors or date or works all over the place. They are his personal sign, given his ancestry and upbringing. But he has changed since.)

"The worst agonies of deafness come on the unconscious subsistence level," he continues. "That's when you are asleep, or if awake, you are not listening, yet your psychic system is not nurtured by the humming noises of the vital continuum. The silence wakes you up, as when a boat's motor stops after you get used to its continuous vibrations. Sometimes you wake up in a panic: no informational or reassuring input is coming in! You have been excluded! This kind of shock comes on a superprimitive just about strictly automatic zoological level. It can cause conscious emotional depressions, because participation in a live world seems to be made so difficult!" (Exc-

luded! From Paradise? No lullaby. No humming noise. You are out!)

"Then the further danger comes when, thus depression-ridden, you can attribute to yourself weakness or personal faults, even a guilty consciousness, when in reality the causes are external and circumstantial." (Causes: external, epidermal, inside out, inside out...)

Silence. In my mind I review Dirube's works as I have seen them in Puerto Rico the past 12 or more years. They have not been mere "productions," they honestly spring from deep inside his heart, under the cover of cha cha cha!

Now I think I know why Dirube stopped shooting geometrical vectors or imposed straight lines unto his first paintings here and started his powerful series of "Combatants." He was then coming to grips with the above two agonies here in Bayview by the sea, the primeval lagoon. Biology displacing Geometry. Cells gasping for oxygen or daylight in the crowded fluids. Monsters fighting for a place in the muddy lagoon floor. Amphibious clayey figures tugging and pushing and scratching on the muddy banks, reptilian pokes, birdlike spokes, and so on in evolution's path up to Dirube's heart. Cubans have been called "worms" here in Puerto Rico, and they are not united among themselves, yakety yak... Jacob fighting his angel and I hand't noticed! No wonder Dirube burned the paint surfaces with torches, to exorcise such apparitions. Those works have a very tactile quality. (If you feel cut-off from, or want to cut-off, the continuum, it is important to touch Touch anything, to serve as a fulcrum.)

He finished the "Combatant" series and then settled on his very simple cast stone-and-rope master works and on his present hard-wood-and-copper sculptures. They are a classical blending of geometry with biology, simple basic geometric shapes with undulating, cellular details, Apollo and Dionysus both present in each work. I wonder: how did he find the way?

"On the third and fourth levels of deafness" (the panicky awakening and the subsequent depression with the guilt potential), he answers, "I read Blake, believe it or not. 'He who binds himself to a joy, the eternal life destroys. He who kisses joy as it flies, lives in Eternity Sunrise!' Such food helps in developing a kind of more permanent state of sanity. Sunrise in Bayview is beautiful, the rosy orbs rising across the bay. Then there is the nurturing beauty of Santa Teresa: I am not moved to love you my God by your promised Paradise, nor am I moved by Hell's fright. I am moved, dear Lord, by seeing you lying on the cross and vilified!"

Closed circle, orb or Spherel Rolando is coming back home to mass. In his on way. No need to "hustle" him up anymore. He is in the Spring where it all started. (Though we shall never know exactly how it started) And I see myself hitting shrubs and whistling, making noises as I pass by the cemetery. I have to be "brave," too, when named and alone under the stars.

Don't we all?