

DECOLONIZING REFINEMENT

Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié

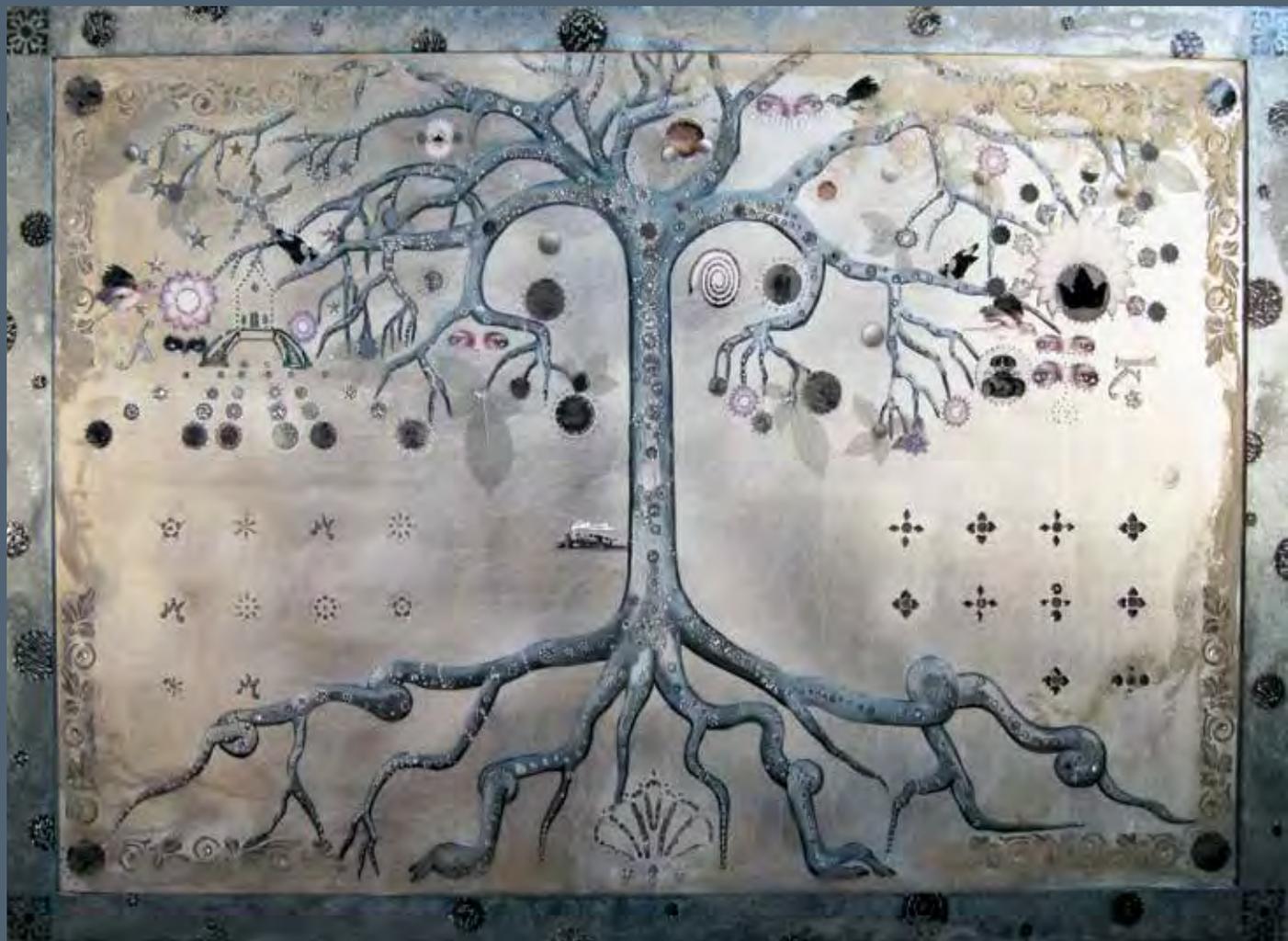
Florida State University

• Edouard Duval-Carrié

• Museum of Fine Arts

DECOLONIZING REFINEMENT

Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié



EXHIBITION CURATORS

Paul B. Niell | Michael D. Carrasco | Lesley A. Wolff

ESSAYS BY THE CURATORS &

Anthony Bogues | Martin Munro | Edward J. Sullivan

FEBRUARY 16 — APRIL 1, 2018

Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts

Exhibition Organization

The exhibition *Decolonizing Refinement: Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié* was organized by the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts in concert with Professor Paul Niell of the Department of Art History. Project Staff: Allys Palladino-Craig, Editor and Grant Writer; Jean D. Young, Registrar and Book Designer; Viki D. Thompson Wylder, Curator of Education; Wayne T. Vonada, Jr., Exhibitions Preparator and Designer; Elizabeth McLendon, Archivist and Communications Coordinator; Rachel Collins, College of Fine Arts Chief Operations Manager.

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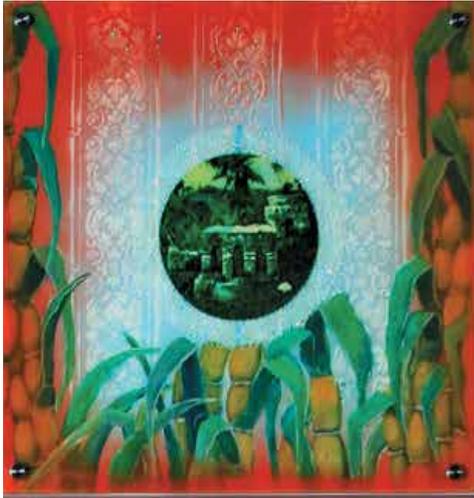


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◀Edouard Duval-Carrié, detail of *Sugar Conventions*, 2013, mixed media on backlit Plexiglas, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the Winthrop-King Institute for Contemporary French and Francophone Studies, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.

It's All Happening in the Margins: An Interview with Edouard Duval-Carrié

Lesley A. Wolff



[On September 1, 2017, as Hurricane Irma was bearing down on the Caribbean, and while Edouard Duval-Carrié was completing installation on an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, he and Lesley A. Wolff met to discuss a number of thematic interests and important philosophical contexts revealed in his latest works.]

LW: Your recent work, which will be exhibited this Spring at the Museum of Fine Arts in the exhibition *Decolonizing Refinement: Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié*, demonstrates new artistic considerations but it also maintains continuity with your past interests. One of the most elaborate series of works in the show is your interpretation of *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), Alejo Carpentier's magical realist novel about the Haitian Revolution. You mention that this novel has been greatly influential to you throughout your artistic career, but it is only now that you've directly engaged the novel visually.

ED-C: I first encountered Carpentier's book when I was 12 or 13—at that time I lived in Puerto Rico. I read it and it was really . . . to me it was a first contact with Haiti. I mean, I'm from Haiti, but to get the history from that angle, somebody looking at it from such a different way. I know my Haitian history, but

▲Installation view, *Cabinete de Curiosités* [objects from Edouard Duval-Carrié's personal collection], 2017. Image courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami.

it was never told in that fantastic fashion, in that totally crazy way. And I loved it. As I become more knowledgeable, I find that it was the beginning of magical realism, and I realized that it's true, that *that* is Haiti, do you understand? It is fantastic realism, magical realism, because everything about the reality of Haiti is so incredible and so particular. And I've always thought it was the best book written on Haiti. I've always used those characters in my repertoire of characters . . . Makandal [for instance] one of my first paintings was about Makandal.

In Haitian history, they really start with the Revolution. They never talk to you about what happened before. So, it was like not a revelation—because I knew about it—but it was a revelation, to realize how the colonial period was as important to the formation of that nation as what happened post-Revolution. The whole idea of Haiti was already there, long before the Revolution. For me, I was quite surprised to realize that everything about us is from that colonial period—the social constructs, the way we think of ourselves, the French language. And now with this whole idea of “refinement,” we [Haitians] are the bases of that as well.

LW: What prompted you to revisit this novel now?

ED-C: First of all, I've been a diligent student of Haiti and I found myself really put to the exigencies of showing to myself and others how *basic* this whole colonial revolution has been. It had consequences on a much larger level than just what happened on the island. I mean I could do a whole project on repercussions of the French and Francophone world, even in places like Florida. I'm finding out that the whole concept of the plantation system has been integrated so much here [in Florida] and it's not different from anywhere else in the New World. They don't have plantations like that in Europe [that are] rooted in this whole idea of having forced labor or labor implanted on the production side. I think it's a New World construct. Even in India, the colonizers of India and China could not have that kind of organization, of occupying a land, and then bringing all of this forced labor. You require other social constructs. So, to me the United States thinks of itself as very foreign to these kinds of problematics, but it is at the core of the history of this nation, of how they [Americans] think of themselves. One of the worst civil wars in the history of mankind was the US Civil War—and that was all about whether we should eliminate the plantation system or not.

LW: You raise this idea of “the core” of the nation as a notion rooted in “the problematics” of production and labor, which has me thinking about how you incorporate historical images into your work. Lately your work has become more focused on types of historical and botanical illustrations.

ED-C: This compendium of commodities, you know? They [illustrations] were created to find any thing that could serve for industry—for me it's very important to look at all of that. And I think they're beautiful, visually. I think they're fascinating.



▲[top] Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Ti Noël in Sans Souci*, from *The Kingdom of This World* series, 2017, engraving on Plexiglas, 31 x 27 inches.

▲[bottom] Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Metamorphose #1*, from *The Kingdom of This World* series, 2017, engraving on Plexiglas, 31 x 27 inches.

▶[facing page] Edouard Duval-Carrié, *L'Orange De Mme Lenormand De Mezy*, from *The Kingdom of This World* series, 2017, engraving on Plexiglas, 31 x 27 inches.

LW: Thinking about layers: layers of history, layers of institutions, layers that literally comprise your work. In this regard, I find *The Kingdom of This World* particularly interesting. The mode of production you employ is very layered.

ED-C: That's true.

LW: Your illustrations for *The Kingdom of This World* comprise multiple media. You have etched acrylic plates with illustrations of Carpentier's descriptive imagery. From these plates you have produced prints. Using FSU's Facility for Arts Research, you have duplicated these acrylic plates and framed them as museum objects in their own right. In addition, you have produced paintings based on this imagery. Can you tell us why you've chosen to convey these scenes in multiple ways? Is there a conceptual motivation? This seems to resonate with ideas of "refinement."

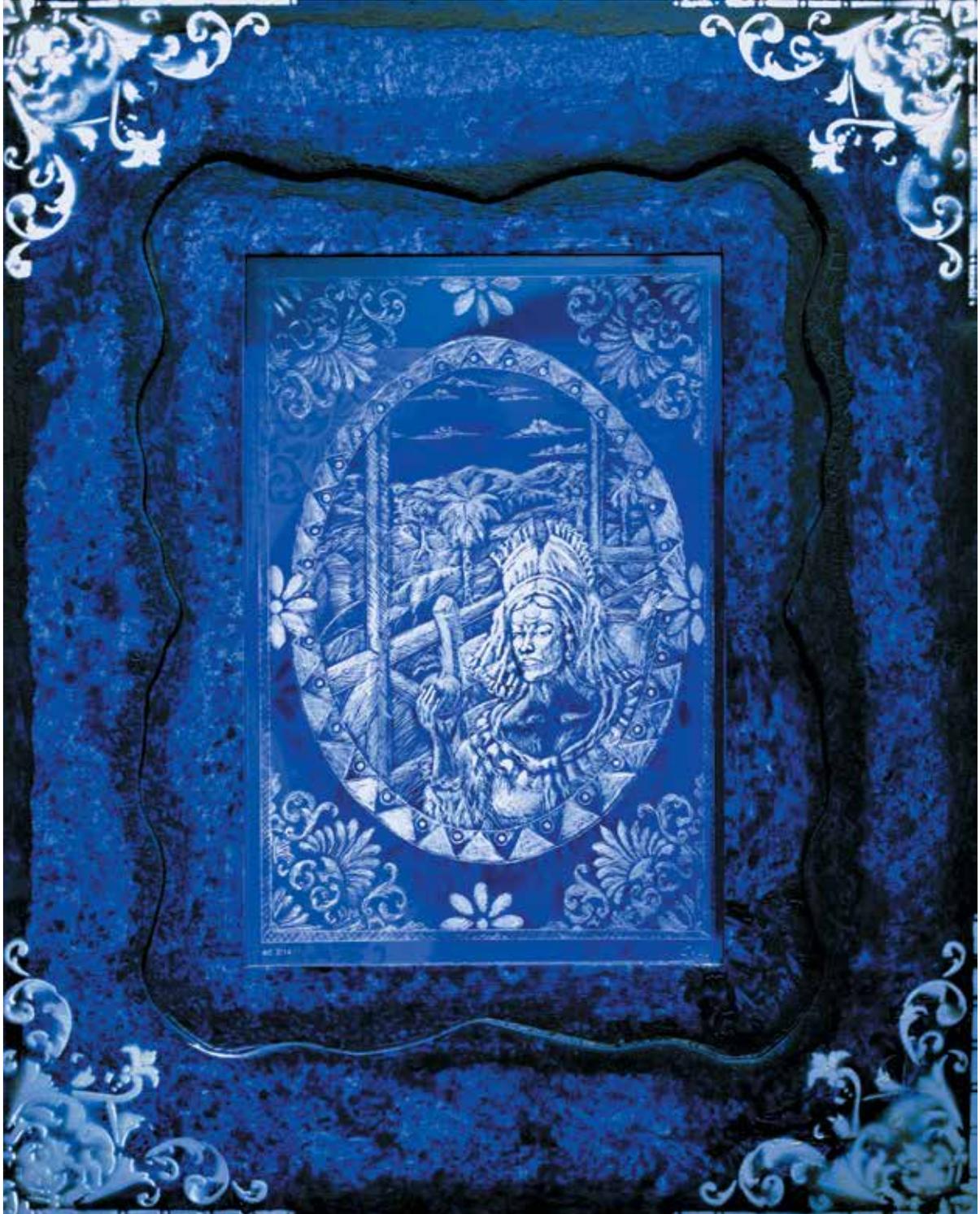
ED-C: Now that you mention it, I had decided to make sure that the work I did had a sequence. I realize that when I go directly to a large canvas or a large work I always have to revisit it. It never congeals well at first. And my work is so layered. And so complex. I decided to go back to make sure I produce studies first and that on whatever surface I use, that the idea was well developed before attacking what it was I saw in my head. Sometimes I should have stayed with the study, you know?! [He laughs.]

LW: You let us in to that study, to that process, and that heightens our ability to read the rest of your work.

ED-C: Exactly.

LW: There's an interesting dynamic between your artistic practice and the historical critiques you embed in your work, which are both very much about processes of refinement. In fact, the impetus for our collaboration came from *Sugar Conventions*, which is a critique and examination of plantation culture onto which you've cleverly affixed *actual sugar* mixed with a glittering paste. Can you elaborate on the relationship between the inclusion of the product itself and a critique of its process?

ED-C: First of all, I read about refinement in *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement* by Kay Dian Kriz (2008), and I was so enthralled with that book. I had never been confronted with the relationship between the production [of sugar] and art . . . I had never considered how one product could prompt a whole aesthetic. That was fascinating to realize, and also that it was so close to me. I mean, we call the Caribbean the "Sugar Islands," all of us, you understand? So it's really a Caribbean story, what Kriz was trying to tell us. To realize how we organized and reconfigured a movement of aesthetics in places like France relative to one commodity. Their cultural Golden Age is related to this period of a massive influx of that particular commodity, sugar, and the wealth it brought. It opened up all sorts of avenues for me, in terms of





▲Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Memory Windows*, 2017, installation view from the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, 58 x 58 inches each.

looking at the whole colonial period and how it was organized in a place like Haiti and realizing that it belongs to the formats seen everywhere else in the New World. Places like the United States, that think that they're very modern societies, are also issued from that [structure], you know? I'm very interested in history, not only history, but the history of art as well, but I never lose sight of the fact that I'm a contemporary artist, living in a contemporary world, with things happening at such a fast pace. I have to figure out where I draw the line or how relevant are these things . . .

LW: Is your hope that people view your work and become curious about the past in the way that you became curious about the past?

ED-C: And to understand where they stem from. People have the most incredible capacity to forget. And [they] don't realize the historical processes that led them to where they are today. If they understand one part of it they might *really* understand the kind of positions they're in.

LW: I think the literal inscription of historical images in your work emphasizes that point.

ED-C: Yes, because I'm not *inventing* anything. And I don't feel any qualms about using any documents. Those are documents that have made an impact, which are suddenly being relegated to the bookshelves of libraries and institutions. But these documents probably were debated and very much in the forefront of the minds of people in the times in which they were created. And they were done with a purpose. That's what people forget: that this purpose maybe has not been erased.

LW: Something that I find interesting about your artistic approach is the way in which you use the Francophone to incorporate an attitude—I know you've used this term in the past—of “politeness.” There's an ease to the relationship between subject and object in your work. Going back to *The Kingdom of This World*, Carpentier's novel contains many passages that recount amputations, mutilations, and metamorphoses of the book's main characters. Many of these are deeply violent and visceral moments in the text. Can you talk about why you've chosen to illustrate these bloody and intense corporeal transformations with ornate flourishes, foliated forms, picturesque landscapes, and an overall sense of Western “elegance”?

ED-C: I try to recapture that whole era Carpentier is talking about by using what I call “conventions,” like stenciled borders, to accentuate the image but also to distance yourself from the image. If you cannot digest the image then look at the borders and you might like it. It's a ploy to get you to engage the image. And it also brings you back to the sense of refinement of that period, of the French tendency to overly decorate. There is a quality to French aesthetics that's very peculiar and that you only find there. And you can extend it to the rest of Europe, but they [the French] have the means to really go at it and to go at it



▲Edouard Duval-Carrié, detail of *Sugar Conventions*, 2013, mixed media on backlit Plexiglas, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the Winthrop-King Institute for Contemporary French and Francophone Studies, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.

bigger [than other nations]. For the French, it was pervasive, because there was much more wealth in that particular nation, due to one particular product—sugar—that permitted it to have a kind of national aesthetic.

LW: Currently, you have an exhibition of your work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, which is entitled *Metamorphosis*.

ED-C: It's really looking at my work and to see how it's gone through such changes. And to see the way one can take an image and change it over and over and every time you might have new meanings or it might have other resonances. Or it might have other ways of dictating what you're looking at.

LW: There is a lot of conversation between this exhibition and our collaboration at the Museum of Fine Arts. At Florida State, we're trying to emphasize a decolonial approach. Do you see "metamorphosis" as a framework to work through decolonizing processes?

ED-C: In the sense that I work on histories that have not been digested yet, yes. I am looking at it on so many different formats and different periods, looking at it geographically and from different perspectives. I thought it was maybe futile because it's a history that's known, but I realize that there's a much more complex mechanism behind it. You see the frustration today of not understanding how things have happened—and this is everywhere.

LW: I sometimes read that sense of frustration in the fabrication of your work, particularly in the dialogue between the layers you've composed. There's a tension, in *Sugar Conventions*, for instance, between the glittered numbers you've superimposed over the sweetness of an image originally painted by Agostino Brunias. There are ideas of caste, hierarchy, and human agency layered there.

ED-C: I'm critiquing the kind of propaganda used for the Caribbean.

LW: Using those docile images to bring that tension back into the image is a decolonial approach.

ED-C: Yes. You find out why the images were produced, originally, and you realize that they were coded back then, and you really have to understand the coding of these images to really get the complexity of the situations that were being described. This character Brunias, for example. He was creating a new world for the Caribbean. Like [Theodor] de Bry. It was real to a certain point, but he left out a lot. *A lot . . . A lot.*

LW: I want to return to something you've mentioned at the beginning of our conversation, the Tallahassee region and its plantation heritage. From an artistic vantage point, how does your encounter with the Tallahassee landscape and its cultural heritage speak to you and to your body of work?



ED-C: There's a colonial flare to the region. First of all, it's the seat of the state. I'm very curious to see what the relationship is to the rest of the United States but also regionally and internationally. Where was it back in the periods of turmoil of their neighbors, where was Tallahassee situated politically? I want to try to understand the modus operandi of a region like that. There are so many stories. I'm very curious to find out if the cycles of the Haitian Revolution had any impact on that particular region, which surely they did from what I've seen. Immediately, when I saw the region, Haiti comes back to mind. And the Marquis de Lafayette¹ was certainly an important voice in postrevolutionary America. I want to know exactly what his affiliations were in the region. As a nobleman from France, he was very comfortable with the production of commodities like sugar. I would like to know about his understanding of the wealth of nations. What did that [wealth] mean to him? He was an important political thinker for his time and I want to know what his positions were.

LW: To return to the 'Marvelous Real,' which you mention at the beginning, do you think there is a way to put that in conversation with the heritage of Tallahassee?

ED-C: If what I think is true, or if what I am concocting in my head is true, it is Marvelous Realism, because it's a very hidden thing. And suddenly you have a cast of characters and ideas floating throughout the Caribbean. It's not from a metropolis to a colony; it's between all the colonial systems. It's a new way of looking . . . it's all happening in the margins.

—Lesley A. Wolff

¹ In 1825, the US government gifted French aristocrat, the Marquis de Lafayette (1757 – 1834), a land grant of over 23,000 acres in Leon County, Florida, as a gesture of gratitude for his financial support during the American Revolution. Though many of Lafayette's French acquaintances subsequently settled in the area, it is unclear whether Lafayette himself ever spent time in north Florida.

▲ *Cabinete de Curiosités*, 2017, installation photo from *Metamorphosis*, Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami. Image courtesy of the artist.