

MIGUEL SALUDES

Artist Statement

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The current state of the world is rife with turmoil. Conflicts in the Middle East and Europe rage on, pushing humanity ever closer to the brink. At home, political division and financial instability threaten the very fabric of our nation. Technology, in its unstoppable path forward, continues to permeate every aspect of our existence. On the one hand, it has the potential to improve our lives and bring us closer together, yet paradoxically, it can also drive us apart. With every swipe of our thumbs, we risk further distancing ourselves from the physical realm and from those around us. Amidst the prevailing chaos, we must learn to tune out the negative forces that threaten our well-being. Instead, we should focus on all the experiences that enrich our lives, from the most memorable to the most mundane. Personally, I find my greatest fulfillment in family, nature, and art. These three elements serve as the pillars of my life's foundation. They provide stability, meaning, and relief in these often precarious times.

I am a proud son of a civil rights activist who valiantly faced the tyrannical regime of Fidel Castro. For many years, the Cuban state police ruthlessly persecuted my family, subjecting us to psychological and sometimes physical harassment. As a result, I witnessed first-hand the suffering and uncertainty that afflicted my parents. For years, I watched the shadow of public repudiation grow ever more menacing over our heads. Ultimately, my birth nation transformed into a toxic, hostile land that no longer felt welcoming.

During the difficult years of my youth, I turned to drawing and painting as a way to escape the many tensions that burdened us. Amidst all the turmoil, I found comfort and inspiration in the pristine coastal beauty of my hometown of Cojimar, a sleepy fishing village that once prompted Ernest Hemingway to write "The Old Man and the Sea". Even now, I can still hear the soft puffing of fishing boats entering the bay. I can also see children diving in the turquoise waters and smell the salt lingering in the air. Without a doubt, my birth town was a welcome haven in those troubling times, ultimately inspiring some of my first artworks.

When my family noticed my interest in drawing and painting, they wholeheartedly supported my development as an artist. One such way was encouraging me to visit the national fine arts museum in Havana. During my

regular trips there, I developed an appreciation for the work of two Cuban painters who left a lasting impression on my young mind: Esteban Chartrand and Tomás Sánchez.

Chartrand, a 19th century Cuban master, introduced me to the Romantic pursuit of the Sublime. His paintings, evoking a sense of solitude, wonder and awe, resonated with me. I was also impressed by the authenticity and Cubanness infused into his landscapes, which often included national symbols like the royal palm tree, the thatched bohío house, and the itinerant guajiro peasant.

My love for landscape painting deepened through the work of Tomás Sánchez. His wonderful reimaginings of Cuba are profound reflections of his mind and soul. Sanchez's work taught me that landscape painting is a three-fold meditative journey. It begins with the artist's immersion in nature, a place where reflection and self-discovery can take place. The second phase unfolds during the act of creation, where mindful breathing and repetitive brushstrokes induce a state of calm focus. Finally, as the viewer engages with the finished painting, they can be transported to a higher state of mind, guided by the harmonious interplay of visual patterns, colors and forms. Tomás Sánchez's paintings were certainly my gateway to a peaceful world, free from the sorrows that had mounted in the months before my departure from Cuba.

In 2005, my family received political asylum in the United States, marking an end to years of hardship. Abruptly, we were faced with the difficult decision of parting ways with loved ones and places that had defined a significant part of our lives until then. When we boarded our one-way flight to Miami, we embarked on a new journey, knowing we might never get the opportunity to return.

After landing on these shores, I embraced the values and traditions of my adoptive home. Still, I have faced challenges along this steep and arduous climb that is adjusting to life in a new country. Conversely, the decades I've spent away from Cuba have eroded my connection with my birth nation. Living in this unique melting pot has afforded me the opportunity to experience life beyond the confines of the hermetic island. I have been exposed to a wider range of idiosyncrasies that have dramatically changed my identity, for the better. However, the trade-off is that I have gradually become more estranged from my own culture as the years go by.

My love for painting has been a true constant throughout this tangential existence. It began as a coping mechanism, an escape from the

political perils that affected my family. Now, it provides me with a sense of belonging during times when I feel homeless, trapped in a void between two worlds. Essentially, painting has helped me navigate the complexities of my Cuban-American experience.

During my artistic development in the United States, I discovered the work of American masters who reinvigorated my appreciation for the genre of landscape painting. Artists such as Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole and Frederic Edwin Church from the Hudson River School showed me Americans' own approach to Romantic painting. On the other hand, Regionalists Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton captivated me with their highly individualized and patriotic renderings of life in the Midwest. I also fell in love with Andrew Wyeth's cool palette and his keen eye for minute details, which he used to paint the people and places closest to his heart. Lastly, Georgia O'Keefe became a significant influence to my work. I found her landscapes of New Mexico to be intimate, deeply felt, and lived in—imbued with the essence of her life.

These teachers helped me escape the nostalgia of depicting the past, and encouraged me to look forward to portraying my new life in the United States. Furthermore, their work motivated me to travel across this land, beginning a life-long quest to explore my personal relationship with the American landscape. In the reassuring company of my wife, and now, our son, I have now ventured into many unfamiliar corners of this nation. We have visited her native state of Pennsylvania numerous times, a place I have grown to love like a second home. During one of our visits there, I made a painting of a simple cornfield that would become the first of my 'American Landscapes'.

Under the verdant canopy of a maple tree, I immersed myself in the glorious sight before me: rows of cornstalk that seamlessly morphed into one infinite field of gold and green. The intense July heat presented a formidable challenge, but nonetheless, I pressed on, taking comfort in the act of faithfully rendering the leaves, stalks, and tassels, as they gently swayed in the summer breeze. This meditative form of painting invited me to root myself in the present to better harmonize with my surroundings.

At some point in the creative process, I was struck by one thought: "I am depicting a quintessential symbol of America". Corn is indeed a staple crop. It has fed families in this nation for generations, from the original natives who learned to cultivate it, to the average family of today. My decision to paint this particular cornfield may have originally stemmed from its unfamiliar beauty. It may have also been a subconscious attempt to revisit a familiar practice from

my youth: finding refuge in nature. Truer still, at that moment, I realized this painting was an attempt by an adopted immigrant to find comfort and acknowledgment in the warm embrace of America.

The sense of finding myself and feeling at home at last was profoundly cathartic. Such a life-defining moment wouldn't have been possible without the lessons from my Cuban and American artistic forefathers, who taught me to search for a higher truth in nature. And so, while painting this cornfield in the quaint town of York, Pennsylvania, I was rewarded with a sense of joy, pride, and patriotism for both my cultures. It felt as if my discordant Cuban-American identity had at last reached a single harmonious tune.

Embracing the genre of landscape painting was my way to uphold and contribute to Cuba's long pictorial tradition. The subject may have been far-removed from the island's autochthonous beauty. Still, my vision, my passion, and my drive while producing this painting were Cuban, nonetheless. Conversely, the act of painting this particular all-American subject was deeply significant to me. It was my way of acknowledging the nation that saved my family from a life of misery.

From that defining moment onwards, the American great outdoors have continued to provide a rewarding escape from life's anxieties and has served as a plentiful source of inspiration for my paintings. Yet, parallel to this pursuit, another personal endeavor has recently flourished: capturing the intimate moments of my family life.

My wife, who has been my guide and companion since we first fell in love, has become a recurring subject in my work. A beautiful, dignified woman, a fierce and endearing mother, a lifelong companion—I often struggle to capture the full measure of her goodness in my work. She has supported me on this quixotic path, always building me up with words of encouragement and forgiving my selfishness whenever I fail to balance family and art. A tireless hard worker, she strives with me to secure a stable and prosperous household where our son can thrive. I choose to paint her, to enshrine our life together, never taking for granted that every day I spend with her is a gift from God.

My son's birth was another life-defining moment bringing immense inspiration into my life. Painting him fills me with incalculable joy. I love capturing his mannerisms, his innocence, his curiosity, and the purity embodied in children—the antithesis of all evils. So I intend to do just that: slow down time, and attempt to transfigure this abstract, immeasurable love I feel for him into lines, forms, and colors.

In essence, the sacred moments spent with my loved ones and immersed in the natural beauty of my adoptive homeland are the sparks that ignite my creative practice. They remind me of how fortunate I am to have come so far, from the troubled yet formative years of my childhood in Cuba to the prosperous and fulfilling life I now enjoy as a family man in America.

As I continue to chart my course in this life, I eagerly anticipate the chapters yet to unfold and the many paintings they will inspire. My purpose remains clear: to explore further corners of this great nation in the company of my loved ones, creating new memories and preserving them through the language that speaks closest to my heart—painting.

In these dark times, when the future often feels uncertain, I look up and see three bright stars shining down on me. Their steady, scintillating light offers assurance as I navigate these turbulent waters. On my voyage toward an authentic and purposeful life, I know I will never lose my way, for I am guided by family, nature, and art.