



## Into the Blue Light

María Martínez-Cañas takes her chances with new series of photograms • By Elisa Turner

“I am a born-again artist,” confesses María Martínez-Cañas, with reluctance. She is referring to the changes in her work over the last few years, and her hesitation stems from the realization that the shift did not come easily. The price was the letting go of a process that had helped her achieve success but had become too confining.

Martínez-Cañas is best known for her totemic, collagelike compositions of manipulated black-and-white photographs from the early 1990s that incorporate mosaics of Pre-Columbian artifacts and maps of her native Cuba, interspersed with shapes recalling Wifredo Lam’s iconic jungle. The pieces earned her acclaim and a place in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, among other institutions, but by 1996, Martínez-Cañas had begun to feel limited by both her subjects and her meticulous methods.

“I remember going to an exhibit and hearing someone talk about my work, how it was about Cuba and nostalgia. It was time for me to drop anything that had to do with Cuba,” says the 41-year-old, Havana-born artist, an intense but friendly woman who keeps her densely curled black hair away from her face with a tortoiseshell headband. Now based in Miami, Martínez-Cañas grew up in Puerto Rico and studied at the Philadelphia College of Art and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. “I had to be the one to say, ‘Now you have to take chances.’”

Taking chances involved returning to the process that, for her, is at the heart of photography: drawing with light. She started making photograms, shadowlike images that form when objects are placed between light-sensitive paper and a light source. Working in a rented studio in a former tobacco factory in Miami’s Little Havana, Martínez-Cañas took sheets of architectural blueprint paper and scattered them with plant material: bougainvillea blossoms, palm fronds, and tobacco leaves she found lying around in boxes. Then she exposed the compositions to ultraviolet light, creating large and loose images. Atmospheric silhouettes of organic shapes, sometimes melting into spinelike curls, emerged in shades of lapis lazuli blue—a stunning departure from her previous rigorous palette of black, white, and gray.

The results made her gasp. “There was something magical

and incredible about the whole process. I felt energized by the work. You never know 100 percent what is going to happen,” she says, but “this was exactly what I wanted my work to look like.” These new images, she says, “are more free.”

Many in the art world seem to agree. Referring to a “fragile immediacy not seen before,” Olga Viso, curator of contemporary art at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., says that “the maturity of this new work tells me we need to keep watching where this new direction will take her.” Viso is writing the catalogue essay for Martínez-Cañas’s retrospective, opening the 30th of next month at the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale. In the fall the artist’s work will appear at Fredric Snitzer Gallery in Miami, Julie Saul Gallery in New York, and Catherine Edelman Gallery in Chicago.

So far, Martínez-Cañas has printed three series of the blueprint photograms. The most recent, “Impermanent Evidence” (2001), consists of about 20 images, some immersed in water, much as a photographic print develops in a chemical bath. The other two are “Traces of Nature” from 1999 and “Naturaleza Perdida (Nature Lost)” from 2000. Prices range from \$2,000 to \$6,500 depending on size.

Like a number of Miami artists, Martínez-Cañas acknowledges the influence of the late Cuban-born Felix Gonzalez-Torres. His pale gray-and-white photographs and piles of glistening colored candies also meditate on the fleeting textures and ephemeral quality of life. “One of his most beautiful works is a black-and-white photograph of a hand,” she says. “It’s simple, but it’s a way of identifying people, a kind of passport.”

Not long after seeing the image recently, Martínez-Cañas began working with video for the first time since her student days. She shot a clip in which the camera pans so closely over her hand that it’s difficult to identify the surface as human skin. She doesn’t yet know how the clip might figure into a larger piece, but the uncertainty doesn’t seem to bother her. “The process is allowing ideas for things I never considered,” she says. “Suddenly, I am allowing myself to react to things that happen right in front of me.” ■

Elisa Turner is the Miami correspondent for ARTnews.



A photogram from the 2000 series “Nature Lost: VIII.”

TOP: GILZABETH OSPELINO/BOTTOM COURTESY THE ARTIST