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## The Abandoned Garden\_Paintings from 2016 to 2017

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# The Abandoned Garden

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Paintings from 2016 to 2017

**Juan Alberto Negroni**

**5/8/2017**

This thesis articulates my process of conceiving and creating a cohesive body of work based on imagery rooted in the domestic garden. By the depiction of floral motifs, I explore and visit the garden, a place of transcendental importance for me and my father. It now symbolizes a portal between two worlds and a moment and space to have a last conversation with him.

By exploring the presence and roles of the garden and the household environment in the work of Myrna Báez and Arnaldo Roche-Rabell the thesis explicates the constant appearance of these elements in my practice. I approach specific moments of personal grief and turmoil while at the same time establish a connection with the concept of homeland by appropriating some characteristics of flora such as its fragility, its ephemerality and its regenerative capacity.

My work springs from an engagement with the domestic garden. By the depiction of floral motifs, I explore and visit a place of transcendental importance for me and for my father. The creation of this space came to me slowly as I learned how to speak of my identity in a different culture and language. The garden space refers to a lost homeland. It now acts as a portal between two worlds and a moment and space to have a last encounter with him. By exploring the presence and roles of the garden and the household environment in the work of the artists Myrna Báez and Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, this thesis speaks of the constant appearance of these elements in my work. I believe that in Báez and Roche's case, these components are used to suggest a familiar, nostalgic and emotional atmosphere (PI 1 and 2). I share these intentions and add some characteristics of flora such as its fragility, ephemerality, its own physical fluidity, and its regenerative capacity (PI 3).

Even when I have worked a lot on canvas, I prefer to work on paper; and I have ever since I began my BFA in printmaking. For me as a student, paper became an interesting challenge. It gives me a sense of proximity and intimacy with the work and the process. And even when it can be a fragile surface, paper joins but does not dictate the image. Coming from a formal training in printmaking, I make images influenced by the flatness and thinness of the paper and the multi-layering construction of printmaking. When the garden became a subject, paper seemed the obvious choice -- especially when the recurrent image is based on a close and personal encounter with plants, and more specifically, with the thin quality of their leaves (PI 4).

Ever since I moved to Dallas, my work has been an exploration and a study of the construction of my identity. At first my intentions were to explain or share the experience of what I thought

it meant to come from Puerto Rico. I tried to let the viewer find themselves in front of an abstract representation of the Caribbean Sea water's temperature, the colors of the fresh mango pulp and its sweet aroma, the golden yellow of the fried plantains, or even the jazzy beats of an Afro Caribbean rhythm played on a pair of bongos or a set of congas. I was depicting a folkloric idea, an encounter with the exotic, an idealized unknown land, a honeymoon destination. Because I had never had to explain myself or work outside my homeland context, my efforts fell short. I soon realized I was not getting far with my intentions to share circumstances that could not be shared. That is when I decided to step back and reconsider my position, and to tell a true story.

I began to examine my childhood years in Puerto Rico, seeing it as a set of scenes. This nostalgia, this memory of moments, of concepts, and of people led further to recalling the location of the garden, the windows, and the accumulation of household objects. I found these important and determinant as the sites for locating my identity. I had been working in collage, quickly and decisively. Now the only way to get at it was drawing. The backyard, the objects, and the domestic garden had refused to appear until I could interpret them through drawing. It was here that I could accomplish comprehensive studies of the anatomy of the garden and of plants. This new habit helped me to understand the role of the garden. These new ways of approaching composition in my work led me to a series of works where I explored those recurrent elements that often appeared as parts of my memories as a young kid. The garden or the plant pot was always there as an extra character of my movie. The Miami window destabilized my point of view until it was not certain if I was outside looking in or inside looking out (PI 5). The window of my childhood was an object of access and transition. It can also be a

barrier and a frontier. The window blocks light but can also stimulate communication and openness.

While working with it, I realized that the value of the window for me relied on how in my case it became a communication system between my family, my neighbors, and me. During the 80's and early 90's we did not have any cellphones, so windows played an important role in how we communicated with our neighbors or our own family members, from one room to the other or from one house to the other. It was a simple, open channel that kept us close to one another shaping our immediate social environment into a strong one, based on the short distance between small middle-class, suburban houses.

Inside and outside the suburban houses of my childhood, I remember the floral patterns in the wallpapers, the furniture's upholstery, and the potted plants as bringing the outdoors inside. The plants of the front yard and the back yard were in the house. We blurred the line between the outside and the inside atmosphere. I might use the term "ambientalizing" for this -- Interior decoration that makes the interior related to the exterior. It encourages a sense of harmony and enjoyment with the environment. By learning this, I understood Terry Winters' position regarding his practice. With his practice he describes nature in a broader and more open idea of what nature is by looking and understanding painting as a way for searching meaning in life. He believes that abstraction can be used to depict the real world. These thoughts became important to me because they helped me I understand that the quest for dealing with and understanding things we cannot see or touch was justifiable and could lead to concrete outcomes. My practice in this same sense has become an exploration of the significant part nature plays as an object or a character in the development of my identity. If those ideas were

repressed before, I try for catharsis now. This means that I am creating experiences for myself, and connecting in non-verbal ways to establish a cohesive dialog between my past and my present. Nature ceases to play the restricted role of ornamentation.

As artist Gavin Jantjes points out in his essay about my latest body of work:

“In childhood one views the world as a thing of wonder and beauty. We cherish the most significant visual experiences from that period and return to them with sadness and fascination. Observation leads to understanding. It is our nature to look first and think next. The gaze of the very young is a straight forward, almost unadulterated, reading of the visual field. The eyes overlook the uninteresting... it was a time of intense visual inquiry. A process all young children partake in as they develop a sense of their world, comprehending how sight and emotion connect, how the visual can lead to pleasure. As adults, very few of us try to relive those moments as a painted image but when someone does, it is this common, shared experience of early visual discovery that attracts us as viewers.”<sup>1</sup>

Following Mateusz Salwa’s arguments in his essay *The Garden as a Performance*, I could describe my work as a depicted documentation of a performance. But for him, the garden is nothing else than a performative act from the moment it is created, through the moment we interact in any way with it. The garden is always changing. As the way we experience the garden, the performance is also a multisensory experience. The relation between the author, actress/actor and audience gets blurry as all are active participants and are considered co-creators and re-creators of the performance. The garden is that always-present element shaping my perception of life; it unveils, it grows, it gives and takes things from and for me. Recognizing nature’s agency has helped me understand and come to terms with the inevitable aspects and moments in life.

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<sup>1</sup> Jantjes, Gavin, “Memory Garden” *Juan Negroni*, Southern Methodist University, Pollock Gallery MFA Qualifying Exhibition Publication, 2017.

Gisli Palsson, an Icelandic anthropologist, states that there are three models of how people relate to nature:

“orientalism”, that is a domination over nature based on a strict division between society and nature; “paternalism”, likewise based on a division between society and nature which, nevertheless, treats nature as its “other” which is to be protected; and finally “communalism” in which – as in primitive cultures – the division society/nature is not clearly defined and, what is more, society and nature cooperate with each other in no other than dialogical way.”<sup>2</sup>

Putting Palsson’s statement in context, it is important to mention that in my performance with the garden, my work might be described as a combination of the paternal and the communal.

The work I am presenting connects my visual elements with the possibility of a moment in time that may seem impossible – such as conversations with the dead. The employment of transparency works as a comparison with the fragility of life. These transparencies are symbolic representations of sickness, weakness, fragility and decay. As with plants, humans deteriorate by getting weaker and thinner. Our bodies start to curve and the skin loses luster. Human and nonhuman organisms are in the process of dying from the moment they are conceived. The only difference is that humans know the signs when one of us begins to fade. Because of this, we have developed tools for coping with the sense of loss – a loss perhaps motivated by the feeling of being left alone or abandoned.

In this recent body of mixed media work, elements like repetition, contrast and scale play specific roles that, on their own, add layers of meaning.

In works like *Tres arboles por tres palmas* (*Three trees for three palm trees*) (Pl 6 and 7), the scale of the eight foot by eight foot wallpapered wall brings to the viewer a wall typical of walls

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<sup>2</sup> Salwa, Mateusz, *The Garden as a Performance*, (Warsaw PL: University of Warsaw, 2013), 372-385.

in a small house. Here a palm tree leaf is reproduced, repeated, and inverted to create a pattern, a busy image that is visually related to Caribbean imagery rooted in an African heritage of textiles and crafts. Six framed, black ink drawings on Mylar are hung on top of the wallpaper in a tight horizontal row to mimic the family photos in many houses. Since mourning is the ideological foundation for this piece, the ink drawings of floral patterns play a role of a quiet sobriety that work as metaphor for death and its emotional consequences. This work is an installation that, in a personal way, serves as an homage, an altar, a monument, a wake, and at the same time as a portal that cannot be passed through.

Following Gavin Jantjes's thoughts<sup>3</sup> on the presence of patterns and washes in my work and how they suggest proximity, it is important to add that this proximity is also my way of intimating a memory. It is through exercising my memory that I can have a further moment with my father. That metaphoric moment allows me to ask him the last questions, listen to him tell the same old stories or simply ask him for his blessing one last time. The tightness of a pattern and intertwining elements in the composition can fill the space I am left with after my father dies. In this work, a traditional wallpaper acts not only as a decorative element, but as a skin or detritus that corresponds to the visual thickness of an abandoned garden. Its color palette suggests bitterness. Julian Schnabel spoke of an effect like this in a conversation with Beth Citron:

“there is a lot of repetition going on...things that become decorative somehow, like a covering or wallpaper, almost in the best sense, where your kind of take wallpaper and relieve it of its pejorative nature and you just use decoration for meaning.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jantjes, “Memory Garden” *Juan Negróni*

<sup>4</sup> Rubin Museum “Artists on Art: Julian Schnabel”. YouTube video, 02:08. (Feb 2015).  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN-95V6Yo34&t=3s>



Among the artists who use pattern for meaning, I find the complexity of Arnaldo Roches's intensely filled surfaces important to my work. I also feel drawn to the art practices of artists like Myrna Báez, who works with her immediate domestic environment and reinterprets the popular and folkloric image of the Puerto Rican landscape. Her work is a self-examination, but in addition, her depictions of nature concern the territories of tourism and tropical stereotypes. I am intrigued with the subtlety of the transparencies in Báez's painting and with how she interprets nature to make her tropical landscapes look dreamy and idealized. Roches and Báez play with the idea of the motherland, adding to the search for a meaning to the concept of "patria" or fatherland. My understanding of that idea relates both to the death of my father and to having to move from my fatherland, sensing that I don't belong anymore.

Perhaps I am wrong not to insist on the word fatherland rather than motherland when writing in English. I can only say that we have lived in a century when the word fatherland was and is charged with aggressive feeling. So, I am using motherland and homeland. It is closer to my intentions. If we search for the word "motherland" in the Oxford English Dictionary<sup>5</sup>, the first definition it provides us is that motherland is one's native country. This is a practical and often satisfactory definition of a place. But this definition lacks the idea of time and its relation to space. The Panamanian singer-songwriter Rubén Blades released the song *Patria* (Fatherland) in his 1988 album "*Antecedente*" (Antecedent). In the song, when a child asks him the meaning of fatherland he describes how, with his "heart in hands", he responded that homeland was so many different things, so many beautiful things. With a very warm tone of voice this slow tempo salsa song describes in a melancholic way that the motherland is;

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<sup>5</sup> "Motherland", (Oxford English Dictionary) <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/motherland>

“Like the love, you still cherish after grandma died...It’s in the walls of our barrio, and its brown hope, is carried in the souls of all who leave, It’s the martyrs’ who cry flag, flag, flag, flag! Don’t memorize lessons of dictatorship or imprisonment, because the homeland is not defined by those who enslave a country. Homeland is a feeling like an old man’s gaze, like the sun in endless springtime, like the laughter of a newborn sister.”<sup>6</sup>

Blades, who has distinguished himself as an outspoken political artist, is also recognized for using the most casual images in his lyrics. In this song *Patria*, he describes or mentions images and things that may seem only personal representations of the fatherland. Still, everyone who listens to this song can understand precisely to what he is referring to. For Blades, it is impossible to define simply a concept as broad as this one. On the other hand, he thinks that such an important thing should not be separated from day to day experience. It is also implicit in this song that the idea of fatherland is sometimes even stronger in those who do not live there anymore. This may be like the concept of “nation.” But *patria* has more poetic and emotional connotations. It is a notion of an idealized place and a significant reference to better times.

Displacement from one’s place of origin will, in most cases, activate new notions of patriotism. The term patriotism may seem more politically oriented, a lot less poetic, less romantic, and distant from the notion of homeland. Apparently, when we start missing banal things, like the smells of your mother’s food, the feeling of the December breeze, the sound of your father’s voice calling you from the other side of the house, the tree in front of your favorite bar, patriotism begins welling up within you. Homeland stops being only about your birthplace, and it starts being about where your soul was born and abandoned. With this new feeling, physical and geographical limits start opening or disappearing. We begin finding our own pieces of that

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<sup>6</sup> Blades, Rubén, “Patria,” in *Antecedente* (United Kingdom: Elektra), 1998.

homeland in our new place. We immediately identify the closest restaurant that serves our native food, and the bar that plays our music. Being able to have similar experiences to the native ones becomes an act of loyalty and solidarity. The food may be good enough, and the music somewhat the same. Still no one can argue that this notion of homeland is an idea constructed on what we have been taught to appreciate, want, and respect as valuable signs of our individual and collective identity.

The islands of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Puerto Rico (PI 8), show us complex constructions of the idea of motherland, including ideas of Africa as a homeland/fatherland. For people of the African diaspora, that great continent seems to serve as motherland and fatherland. Sometimes, without ever having visited Africa, descendants of the continent find a strong bond with its idea. Through the teaching of generations, or through religious beliefs, or through a system of tradition and education, African descendants hold Africa to be the fatherland. And in this sense, music has led the relationship to Africa, holding ancient ideas and making new forms influenced by them. Africa, the birthplace of humanity, makes a whole life around the musical elements of culture and religion. Jamaican singer song writer Robert Nesta Marley, better known as Bob Marley expands on this idea in his song Africa Unite:

“Africa unite  
 'Cause we're moving right out of Babylon  
 And we're going to our Father's land  
 How good and how pleasant it would be  
 Before God and man, yeah  
 To see the unification of all Africans, yeah  
 As it's been said already  
 Let it be done, yeah  
 We are the children of the Rastaman  
 We are the children of the Iyaman  
 So, Africa unite

'Cause the children (Africa unite) wanna come home, yeah  
 Africa unite  
 'Cause we're moving right out of Babylon  
 And we're grooving to our Father's land  
 How good and how pleasant it would be  
 Before God and man  
 To see the unification of all Rastaman, yeah  
 As it's been said already, let it be done tell you who we are under the sun  
 We are..."<sup>7</sup>

Haiti and the Dominican Republic have shared the island of La Española for more than five hundred years. It is upon La Española that the black experience in the New World began. It was the first island to import Africans as slaves. The oldest of the European New World colonies, The Dominican Republic, was founded by Christopher Columbus's brother, Bartolome. Perhaps this is the reason that Dominicans think of Spain as their motherland while for Haitians it is Africa. Cubans who fled Fidel Castro's revolution for places in Florida and Puerto Rico grieve for Cuba, their motherland, as for a dead parent. In some cases, we can say that metaphorically, for many people the motherland is like a bad or neglectful homeland that displacement and nostalgia has made one forgive.

Remembering how complicated this idea of *patria*, motherland or fatherland is, I have intended to study my perceptions and beliefs to see how I can connect with the emotional and physical elements of Puerto Rico. Through the collection and investigation of memories and the objects, spaces, and places related to those memories, I have constructed a new idea of *patria* for myself. I intend to understand my position in the world. In my work, the floral motif has become a strong reference and a significant symbol of my life in Puerto Rico. I don't mind that this motif can seem too close to decoration or can be read as decorative language. Over the

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<sup>7</sup> Marley, Robert Nesta, "Africa Unite," in *Survival* (Kingston, JM: Tuff Gong Records), 1979.

past ten years since I was a professor in an interior design undergraduate program, I have developed a certain respect for and a strong relation to decoration as a body of knowledge. My floral representations or patterns keep me connected to my homeland. They are symbols of the small things, of the everyday things that today I value the most.

In a conversation with Arnaldo Roche,<sup>8</sup> I asked him about the role plants and the garden play in his work and how those elements relate in any way to his personal life. To this he responded about how fascinated he was when he moved to Chicago to study at the Art Institute encountering this completely new geographical environment. Chicago was the place that made him reencounter the flora he knew. He could compare the flora to this new city landscape, and he was moved to make images charged with floral elements. For Roche-Rabell, after rigorous study of architecture in Puerto Rico, moving to Chicago made him confront himself and his identity. At the beginning, he explored the self-portrait which he produced by projecting his face on top of papers and adding layers upon layers of oil pastels (PI 9). For him, drawing in the darkness created a phantasmagoric image of himself, a ghostly representation. For Roche-Rabell these self-portraits, far from being copies of photographs, were the result of a physical effort, they were the result of his body recognizing his place and moment. These studies of his self expansion to a broader exploration where everyday objects and spaces came into the game.

I was drawn to Roche-Rabell's provocative work because of these elements of self-exploration by the depiction of familiar things and places. It was in his work that I saw the field compositions that became a recurrent visual element in my work. I had the suspicion, probably

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<sup>8</sup> Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, e-mail message to author, February 22, 2017.

suggested by Roche's insistent use of blue, that he deliberately intended to make images embedded in introspection, memory, and nostalgia. Even though viewers may read and perceive a certain degree of nostalgia in his paintings, he insisted, in my later conversations with him, that he has no intentions of making any nostalgic references to the past. For him, empathy is his main concern. He wanted to connect with others by speaking of himself and about the human condition. It is important to me that his practice of self-referencing is an exploration and dissertation on himself, his father and his fatherland, just as mine is. He says that these are related but at the same time as autonomous elements. Arnaldo Roche fills his spaces with widely dispersed forms. Since his objects and subjects are scattered all over, the surface is treated as a field of meaning. Though we share an interest in field compositions, our works hardly feel the same, and we pursue different outcomes. While Lilliana Ramos Collado states that:

“Roche chooses something unusual in a still life, he looks from above . . . We have seen attempts of this in Cubists, especially in the still life of Picasso and Juan Gris, who did not take it to its final consequences. The zenith is a strange, unusual look that belongs to cartography and surgery, landscaping and surveying. Often, we see this zenith in artists such as Francis Bacon who, in their scenes of bed and sex where that view from above intensifies the grotesque and painful character of the poses of the characters. That overhead look, also known as God's gaze, rather than look, it scrutinizes, concentrates and at the same time, cuts. The view from above is all-powerful, and it is also attentive, controlling, *scientific, medical*: the hard gaze of the surgeon or anatomist as he delves into the entrails of the human body.”<sup>9</sup>

I place the viewer close to the one object I work with. The viewer is inside the garden in front of the plants, and plants have taken over the whole surface. Going back to Gavin Jantjes words regarding my work:

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<sup>9</sup> Ramos Collado, Lilliana, “*Et in Arcadia ego: Arnaldo Roche y el bodegón jardín*,” (Bodegón con teclado, 2017), 6 <https://bodegonconteclado.wordpress.com/2017/03/01/et-in-arcadia-ego-arnaldo-roche-y-el-bodegon-jardin/>

“Everything seems within reach. Patterns of vertical and horizontal lines in the foreground or background, suggest an enclosure and Negroni’s layers of stains, and washes, compact the space suggested by his brush marks. Together they draw the viewer in. One feels contentment in this environment. There is no angst, no hunger, only a spiritual peace.”<sup>10</sup>

Because it integrates printmaking and painting, Myrna Báez’s work has consistently interested me. Her use of positive space versus negative space, her polished colors, and dreamy atmospheres are her essential visual characteristics. The plant is often a prominent actor in her landscapes where she strives for the personal and the intimate. Her generalized plant forms, blurry and sometimes translucent, give feelings of a distant memory. Moisture or time may be obscuring these scenes into oblivion. Báez works repeatedly with the mirror and the mirroring window. We spy on figures that see themselves in these mirror/windows, and the windows alter how the figures see themselves. We always feel uninvited. Inside the rooms of Báez paintings, we feel as if we just woke up inside a dream, or that we woke up in someone else’s house, in someone else’s uncertainty. In contrast with my images which are an intended to bring the viewer as close to the forms as possible to find answers, Báez’s work focuses on keeping a distance so more questions about identity can be asked. Recognizable images containing ambiguous relationships among elements incite some sort of conversation. To this we can certainly add that even when her work is full of poetic images that can be attributed to an introspective process of self-recognition, Báez’s work also explores identity in a much broader sense. For artists of her generation, politics and the commonwealth status of Puerto Rico was a major concern, meant to be addressed through their work. While many of her colleagues were graphic and straightforward with their images, Myrna Báez was discreet. María de Jesus González says:

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<sup>10</sup> Jantjes, “Memory Garden” *Juan Negroni*.

“[Báez] had compiled a body of work that included prints and paintings such as landscapes of the Puerto Rican countryside, its towns, still-life, and room interiors. From her body of work, one thing becomes very clear—Myrna Báez is above all a colorist. Her style has remained true, and she continues to use subtle light changes and shade to suggest specific times of day and climatic conditions in her paintings—especially in her landscapes. Her goal is to express the specificity of the island’s geographical and floral elements. Using acrylic paint, she is able to use washes, airbrushing, and glazes to achieve a transparent quality to her painting, which results in a unique style. Báez has immersed herself in her culture and examined every detail of her island, and she is able to translate that experience to her canvas.”<sup>11</sup>

For Báez, the exploration and acknowledgement of Puerto Rico’s political situation and status are parts of a set of ambiguous images that evoke a multiplicity of interpretations. By the application of a very characteristic color palette, Báez approaches landscape in a distinctive way. Doing this she alternates between a political work where she speaks on the preservation of Puerto Rico’s identity and the pursuit of the island’s independence, and she constantly talks about one’s personal identity, gender, and sexuality.

In works on paper for my Master of Fine Arts qualifying exhibition, I have explored the space of the domestic garden. After seeking my identity in new places, I have come to see the garden of my childhood as a communicative portal, as a location of cultural identity, and as a subject open to readings that are physical, personal, and psychological.

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<sup>11</sup> De Jesús González, María, “Myrna Báez: Her Art and Her Identity,” (*Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, 2007), 6.



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1 Myrna Báez, El Gato, 1961, Oil on canvas, 19 ¼" x 21 ½", Private collection



2 Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, *The sower*, 2015, Oil on canvas



3 Juan Alberto Negroni, Untitled (Detail), 2017 MFA Qualifying Exhibition, 2017 Shoe polish on glass, 80" x 57" (2)



4 Juan Alberto Negroni, Untitled, from the Unattended Garden Series, 2016, Mixed media on canvas, 30" x 30"



5 Juan Alberto Negroni, *Ventana trasera*, 2016, Mixed media on canvas, 40" x 40"



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7 Juan Alberto Negroni, La pared agridulce (Tres árboles por tres palmas), 2017,

Wallpaper 8' x 8', Ink on mylar 11" x 8 1/2" (6)





8 Greater Antilles



9 Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, *Burning the Spirit of the Flesh*, 1981, 50" x 40"