

Claudio Castillo Guerrero, Visual Artist: "Change for Cuba May Be Near"

Writer William Navarrete interviews artist Claudio Castillo Guerrero.



Claudio Castillo Guerrero before his work 'Florida'

MIAMI, United States — I met Claudio Castillo Guerrero some years ago when he appeared on Radio and Television Martí programs. I also had the opportunity to attend some of his exhibitions in Miami, but the idea of including him in this interview series came from Grace Piney, a dear friend and editor of my first novel in Madrid, as well as organizer of the exile congresses "Con Cuba en la distancia" held in the early years of this century in the Andalusian city of Cádiz, where she lived at the time.

Claudio's story is intertwined with the dark period of the arrival of Castroism, the first exile, the consequences of uprootedness, and the loss of footing in the land where his ancestors had built a solid home and contributed to the history and economic development of the country.

After having lived in New York, Madrid, Málaga, Devon, London, and Aix-en-Provence, Claudio Castillo settled in Miami, where he has lived for over 30 years. It is best that he tell us himself about his adventures, his work, and the more than six decades spent outside his homeland.

— Tell us about your family origins.

My father, Demetrio Castillo Montalvo, born in Cuba, was someone with a great passion for art, photography, and cinema. He didn't get along well with his own father, who had sent him to manage an agricultural colony the family owned in Ciego de Ávila. The other brother, named Joaquín, managed the administration of the Habana sugar mill, near the town of Caimito. This mill had been the property of independence war general Rafael Montalvo Morales and his wife María de los Dolores Lasa Río, who were the parents of Dolores Montalvo Lasa, my paternal grandmother.

My paternal grandfather, Demetrio Castillo Pokorny, was the son of a Polish-American woman named Paulina Pokorny and a man from Santiago de Cuba named Demetrio Castillo Duany. He was the first Cuban to graduate from the American military academy at West Point (New York) after studying Engineering. Demetrio Castillo Duany, my great-grandfather, had studied in Bordeaux (France) and had business interests in New York. He was one of the independence leaders who met with Martí, Maceo, and Gómez just days before the death of the Apostle, in a meeting aimed at organizing the political and military command of the uprising against Spain. He appears alongside Martí, Maceo, and Gómez in a portrait held at the National Museum of Cuba. He was promoted by Maceo to brigadier general during the independence war; he coordinated on land the American landing at Santiago de Cuba, the bombardment at the Battle of Santiago, and was present at the transfer of government from Spain to the United States in 1898. That same year, he became the governor of Santiago de Cuba.

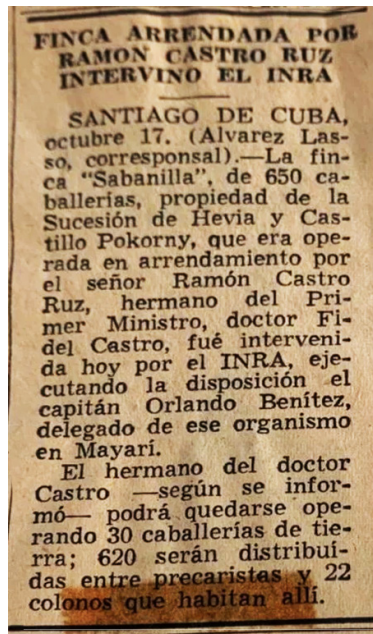


At La Mejorana: Demetrio Castillo Duany, Claudio's great-grandfather, alongside Martí, Gómez, Maceo and other historical figures.

My grandfather, Demetrio Castillo Pokorny, served as aide-de-camp to General Enoch Crowder. He held the position of Secretary of Public Works under President Alfredo Zayas and was closely involved in Cuban politics of that era.

All of this relates to a curious family episode: for the military merits achieved during the independence war, my great-grandfather (Castillo Duany) was awarded the lands where the Sabanilla farm was located in Birán, in the Holguín region. Since he had no interest in managing the property, around 1915 he leased it to Ángel Castro, a Galician who had been a soldier in the Spanish army against the Cuban rebels and had returned to Cuba to settle in that area.

The fact is that when Fidel Castro announced, following the Agrarian Reform Law, that he was going to nationalize his own father's lands, what he was actually nationalizing were the properties of my great-grandfather and his children. My father used to say that as a teenager, in the only meeting they ever had, Fidel had proposed cutting the railway line that crossed the farm in order to force the owners of a neighboring American-owned sugar mill to pay for using the property. My father refused.



Press clipping about the farm leased by Ángel Castro.

— And on your mother's side?

My mother, María Luisa Guerrero Villalón, was the daughter of Fernando Guerrero Messias, a man from Granada who had settled in Cuba, and of Gloria Villalón, daughter of José Ramón Villalón, Secretary of Public Works during the government of Mario García Menocal. He is famous for the dynamite cannon he invented, which is housed in the National Museum of Cuba. I knew them well

because I lived with them in Madrid, where they had settled after the triumph of the Revolution, since my mother died very young, in New York, when I was barely three years old.

My maternal grandfather had witnessed the devastation wrought by the Communists during the Spanish Civil War. So when the Revolution triumphed in Cuba, he immediately understood what was going to happen. That is why they left for Madrid right away. I came to know them because when we moved to the Spanish capital, I would see them every Sunday.

— You were born in 1958 and I imagine that, having left the island so young, you have no memories of it. Can you speak to that?



Brothers Joaquín and Demetrio Castillo Montalvo at military school.

Indeed, I was born on December 15, 1958, in a clinic in Vedado. At the time, we lived on a farm called El Atrevido, near the town of El Cano, in the fields outside Havana, which belonged to my mother. And, although I have no memories of Cuba, in my early paintings I painted very Cuban tropical landscapes.

The departure from Cuba, bound for New York, took place on August 28, 1960. I left at two years old with my parents and my three siblings. As I mentioned, my mother died in January 1962. She collapsed on the floor from an aneurysm, in the living room of the apartment, at a moment when only my older sister and I were present. My sister thought our mother had fallen asleep on the floor, and she spent all that time, until our father returned, preventing me from leaving my room so I wouldn't see her "sleeping" that way.



Demetrio Castillo Montalvo and María Luisa Guerrero Villalón, parents of the interviewee.

— Did you move to Madrid after your mother's death?

That's right. What was curious is that my uncle Joaquín's wife also died from the same thing, within a short span of time, also leaving four young children orphaned. I've always thought that the stress of leaving Cuba and the situations our parents went through with so many young children was one of the reasons both women died.

In any case, my father decided we would move to Madrid. He had some money from the last sugar harvests, as it was common to keep accounts in the United States, and that allowed us to live during the early years.

Once in Spain, he hired an English governess for us — I had her until I was nine — and he remarried, to a woman named Margarita de la Torriente. She was, incidentally, the daughter of José Elías de la Torriente Ajuria, who was assassinated for political reasons due to his Torriente Plan, in Miami in 1974 — and to this day it is not known who shot him while he was eating at the table in his Coral Gables home, in front of his wife.



Claudio Castillo before leaving Cuba.

— What was your early schooling like?

My first school was a progressive school in Madrid called Estilo, where my classmates were the children of Saura, Berlanga, Bardén, and many of the Spanish left-wing intellectuals.

As soon as my father remarried, they sent us to boarding schools. My brothers and I were sent to one in Málaga, the ACFI, later called Calderón, run by priests who had been missionaries in Alaska. I was there until I was 15, when I was sent to finish my secondary education at another boarding school in England — Battsborough School, near Plymouth, in Devon. It was an old Victorian manor house in the middle of the countryside. My sister was sent to a school in France, one of my brothers to another school in England, and the other to one in Spain.

When I finished secondary school, I spent a year living in France, in Aix-en-Provence, as I wanted to learn French. Since my artistic inclinations had emerged very early, I wanted to explore the places that had inspired Cézanne's painting.



Claudio Castillo and his three siblings with their mother, María Luisa Guerrero Villalón.

— Did you pursue formal academic studies?

Yes, after the year in Aix-en-Provence I returned to London and enrolled at the London International Film School, where I studied two years of pure technique. Just as I finished studying film techniques, everything went digital. I was living sharing a flat with my brother Sergio, who was a drummer and played in rock bands.

At that time, after studying there, I joined the digital revolution, as I had met someone who was deeply involved in everything related to computer animation. So I opened my own video company in the British capital and we filmed houses that were for sale. Strange as it may seem, I only had a Cuban passport, as I had never wanted to become a Spanish citizen in order to avoid military service, which at the time was compulsory and lasted 18 months.

— Did you stay in London?

Impossible! As I said, my papers were not in order; Spain did not belong to Europe at the time, and my Spanish residency did not authorize me to live in England. So one day the immigration police knocked on my door. I showed them the papers for my thriving business; they told me it was all wonderful but that I was undocumented and that, since my only real nationality was Cuban, I would have to be deported to Cuba. Imagine what that would have meant for someone like me, who had left the island at two years old with no family or connections there whatsoever.



The interviewee in New York, 1980s.

— What happened then?

I fled London in 1981 and returned to Madrid. My brother was able to stay because his papers were in order. I arrived in the Spanish capital right at the time of La Movida, the transition, and also the famous coup attempt, which I experienced almost in real time because my grandparents' apartment was near the Congress of Deputies — the very place where the failed coup took place, on February 23, the year I arrived.

In Spain I tried to make my way using everything I had learned during my studies and professional experiences in London. I attempted to launch a company using that wealth of technology, but I realized that Spain was still in the Middle Ages and was nowhere near ready to make the leap. It took Televisión Española two years to receive me, and when they finally did and I presented my computer animation project, they told me it was impossible and that it looked like "witchcraft."

Even so, I managed to create the animation for the 1982 FIFA World Cup using computers the size of a refrigerator. The work involved a mix of manual and electronic resources. In the end, after all that work, they didn't even pay me — and it was at that point that I told myself I couldn't keep living in that country.

— Is that when you went to the United States and were able to achieve your goals?

Indeed, though I did not seek asylum under any of the laws that gave Cubans asylum status. I used family reunification instead, through my father and his wife, who was American. Both of them were already living in Miami. I settled in New York, arriving there in June 1983.

At 25, I secured the necessary investors and set up a company headquartered on Park Avenue. I thought I was on top of the world. Everything was going wonderfully until the 1987 stock market crash and things began to slow down. At that point, the massive computers were giving way to the first PCs. I proposed to my partners that we go to England, where the person who had invented them was based, to begin importing them at a price ten times lower than the old machines. My partners didn't want to get involved in my project, so I went alone — and when I returned, I had lost my stake in the company.

— How did you then rebuild your professional life?

I spent some time getting by with small jobs, until the fall of the Berlin Wall came and I told myself that the next communist country to fall would be Cuba. I had kept myself very distant from Cuban affairs throughout my life, perhaps due to my youth and all the ups and downs I'd experienced. It was then that I saw an announcement that they were looking for producers for TV Martí in Miami, a federal television network aiming to broadcast programs to the island. I applied immediately, was investigated for a year and a half, moved to Miami, and in 1992 I was already working at the station.

The position was initially for a producer, but when I arrived they told me to forget about that — what they actually needed was a cameraman and editor. I accepted, and my long professional chapter at that network began.



'Virgen Apparition' — a sensor is used so that the Virgin appears in the work.

— What memories do you have of TV Martí and what you learned there?

I reconnected with Cuba and, clearly, with the Cuban world. I spent 30 years working there, until I retired or was made to retire.

I was able to do several interesting things — to name a few: filming almost the entire 1994 rafters exodus, the camps at Guantánamo Naval Base, the small-plane missions with the Brothers to the Rescue association, in which we flew with the activists to rescue rafters at sea. I also remember covering for TV Martí Fidel Castro's trip to Rome and his meeting, on November 19, 1996, with Pope John Paul II — and countless other assignments at summits, meetings, and events of all kinds around the world.

As is well known, the TV Martí signal never reached the island because the Cuban government spent unimaginable sums to jam it. Around 2015, a project was created to smuggle the signal in through USB drives, which were distributed throughout the country, and free uncensored internet access began to be provided. The drives were sent daily and distributed clandestinely. What matters is that we managed to get the signal into Cuba — but in the end the American government backed down and shut the program down.

— Did you ever return to Cuba?

To the territory of the Republic of Cuba, never — but to the island, yes, since I visited Guantánamo Naval Base about four times. I wanted to stay there because the idea was to broadcast from there, but they wouldn't allow it. They said there was a law prohibiting broadcasting from a military base. We traveled by plane, going around through Haiti to avoid flying over Cuban territory. That is where I saw, for the first time, hummingbirds and the largest iguanas I have ever seen in my life.



'GTMO Landscape' — displays real-time weather conditions based on location.

— Now let's talk about your work as an artist. When did you start and what were your first steps in this field?

I painted from a young age. At 16, I exhibited watercolors depicting Cuban landscapes. In 1979, while still a student at the London film school, I had a major solo exhibition at the Bacardí Gallery in Miami. I realized that, despite having sold nearly everything, I couldn't make a living from it, so I threw myself fully into animation.

Later, when I settled in Miami, Adobe's Flash tool came out, which allowed an image to be separated into layers. That was in 1995. For the first time, you could separate an image and control it. So I took an old watercolor of mine, divided it into four parts, and animated each one independently. For each layer I made 32 animations. I began deconstructing the work and rebuilding it through programming. And what you saw were combinations that would never repeat, because the possible combinations were infinite.

Then I began incorporating the natural cycles of the Moon and synchronized tides, along with real-time weather data, news, and stock market information.



'Banco taíno' — the first generative clock with sunrise and sunset.

— What do you call this type of creation?

Generative art — an autonomous art form that is generated from instructions the artist gives to the computer.

I appeal to a metaphorical sense of "generativity": the capacity of nature to create infinite patterns that repeat without ever producing identical results. In nature we find processes that generate forms through the interaction between energy, matter, and laws like gravity or fluid dynamics. From these interactions, ordered structures emerge from simple rules: waves, wind currents, clouds.

I am particularly interested in chaos theory, which describes how dynamic systems can produce apparently hypnotic and unpredictable patterns — like the flame of a fire. A flame is a dynamic system in which the interaction between energy, matter, and flow generates patterns in constant transformation, where the result never repeats exactly.

These ideas are at the core of my artistic practice: I want to create works that can generate themselves. Starting from repeating patterns, I introduce external variables that produce ever-changing images of that same pattern. From this approach, I incorporated sensors into my works. A camera, by detecting movement, activates visual transformations: effects of smoke, fog, flashes or fluids, as well as the appearance of forms like flowers or animals.

With that idea, I made a work featuring the Virgin of Charity that won a prize in 2008 at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in Long Beach, California. The work is titled *La aparición de la Virgen* (The Apparition of the Virgin). In it, the Virgin appears when the camera sensor detects the presence of a viewer in front of the piece.

And, as with all my work, any given image can only be seen once in a lifetime, because each viewing is unique. This Virgin piece has traveled widely and has been shown in many places, including the Shrine of Our Lady of Charity in Miami.

The most well-known example of generative art is a work by Duchamp in the MoMA collection in New York, made with three strings that fall and never fall the same way twice. The piece is titled Three Standard Stoppages and works through the law of gravity. In my case, the generation is produced through computer programming.

My work has been shown in group exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai (China) and in Taipei (Taiwan). In the latter, I tried to reflect in the work the actual climatic conditions of the place where it was being exhibited. The work displays temperature, humidity, wind, and other data in real time.

I later made a work connected to the stock market, and another in 2009 — shown at a museum in Naples, Florida — that draws headlines and opening paragraphs from real news stories from the BBC and adds fragments from various political speeches. This was a premonition of what we have since come to know as "fake news." This type of art stays connected to the internet at all times and updates every few minutes.

About ten years ago, reflecting on the importance of time in my work, I decided to incorporate a generative clock that never repeats. The piece reflects in real time the weather and the cycles of tides, the Moon, and the Sun. People think my work consists of videos, but it is the exact opposite — there is no beginning and no end; everything changes constantly, without repetition, and eternally.

Right now I have a work — the most political I have ever made — titled Bad Hombres VS The Real Thing. It consists of hundreds of Coca-Cola posters from the 1970s and hundreds of Cuban Revolution posters, featuring left-wing dictators and drug traffickers, which mix together and never repeat. The audio is composed of phrases from Fidel Castro's speeches interspersed with Coca-Cola advertisements. This work is being generated continuously while being broadcast online, and at the end of every hour there is a bloodbath. I believe it is the only work of its kind in the world, and it has been broadcasting for three years now.

On my website I rotate the works, but they are being created and transmitted live — they run on Miami time. The piece broadcasting today is part of a series of clocks that can be seen on my general portfolio website.

My idea of creating "generative" art stems from my concern with human transcendence and the permanence of the artist's work. We are all going to die, but art transcends the human lifecycle — it outlives the artist. I wanted to create a type of work that not only could be preserved unchanged,

but could even continue producing originals after the artist — myself, in this case — is gone. That is why the "generative" quality carries an added dimension: it is not limited to producing a static snapshot. And it is not only changeable through the viewer's interpretation; the work changes in a real, instantaneous, and eternal way. This leads to the idea of a living artwork, and to reflection on immortality.

— And what about artificial intelligence (AI)?

Artificial intelligence is simply another programming tool. I have used AI in the last three works I have made. I use it to generate technical processes that I literally could not carry out myself. It does not replace my creativity as an artist, nor is it AI that "creates" the work.

I used AI to generate images I could not create any other way. In the mosaics, for example, AI generated hundreds of portraits in the style of famous 18th-century portrait artists such as Hayward, Goya, and others. It did in minutes what would have taken me years. In Celebreak, it produced a smile effect (a filter) where none had existed. In Curriculum lunar, it generated hundreds of time-lapse animations from still images that would have been impossible for me to produce.

There is a dichotomy between generative art and the production of images generated by computers and applications. In the second case — which is not what my work is — it is the computer (an AI) that creates the work or final result. This distinction is something that needs to be understood.

AI is still a recent and limited phenomenon. As a tool and as a technique, it can produce wonderful things — but art requires the intervention, the intention, and the emotion of the artist.

— What do you think about what is happening now with the Cuban situation?

I am certain that change for Cuba may be near.

According to the US Southern Command, American drones are currently flying over the island and gathering intelligence there, as they did in Venezuela. That is an indicator that US actions against the Castro dictatorship may be imminent. Conventional warfare has changed forever, as we saw on January 3 in Caracas. In fact, the US has announced the establishment of an autonomous command — that is, they are using drones and cyberwarfare, all controlled remotely. It would not surprise me to see military robots patrolling the Malecón this summer.