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Simulacra and Essence: The Paintings of Luisa Basnuevo

The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum

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Simulacra and Essence

The Paintings of Luisa Basnuevo

NOVEMBER 29, 2008 – APRIL 4, 2009

Frost Art Museum I Florida International University
Director’s Foreword

This exhibition of works by Luisa Basnuevo may be seen as the event that brings the Betty Laird Perry Gallery and The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum full circle. The curator is James Couper, Professor Emeritus in the School of Art and Art History, and the visionary who saw the realization of a gallery for students to exhibit their work and experience that of others in a little space in the PC (Primera Casa) building in 1977. The artist is Luisa Basnuevo, among the first students to receive a BFA and the first to exhibit in that new space. She is also one of the first Visual Arts students to receive the Betty Laird Perry Student Award, a purchase award given to an outstanding student in each class. Her successful career as an artist marks the beginning of a long line of graduates to receive recognition for their work as much as it represents the success of the Art program at FIU, now considered one of the very best in the country.

For me, a member of the faculty of the School of Art and Art History, and the new director and chief curator of the Frost Art Museum, it is a privilege to write this foreword and introduce the catalog of works by Ms. Basnuevo. The exhibition represents both an end and a beginning – the end of that small space that saw such extraordinary exhibits and grew into the “little place that could” under the guidance of Jim Couper and Dahlia Morgan with stellar programs, lecture series, student performances and events – and the beginning of a future location for students and faculty at FIU that is truly a museum space. For years, we saw students enjoy the privilege of seeing the best in art from many extraordinary artists; we saw students working in a professional environment in preparation for their own advent into the world of art. In short, we watched the gallery become a museum. Now, in this beautiful new space, designated for the university art students and faculty by Betty Perry, the wife of the first president of FIU, the bar is lifted even higher. We know our students and faculty will rise to the occasion, just as Jim Couper and his students did over 25 years ago.

I would also like to acknowledge the staff at the Frost Art Museum who worked to make this first exhibition of an FIU alumna such a success, especially Nicole Espaillat, my student assistant who helped in the publication of the catalog. It was truly emotional to see these beautiful paintings installed in our new museum.

Carol Damian
Director and Chief Curator
The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum
Curator’s Acknowledgments

This exhibition by Luisa Basnuevo in the Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum’s Betty Laird Perry Gallery is both an important milestone in Florida International University’s history and a testament to the vision that has guided this university from its inception. Charles E. “Chuck” Perry, FIU’s founding president and his wife Betty Laird Perry are surely among the most important visionaries whose prescience has contributed to the realization of this building and this exhibition. Chuck’s concept for a major, public university always included degree programs in the arts. Betty’s commitment, abundant energy and generosity have remained steadfast and have been critical to insuring success in the cultural dimension of this institution.

From the beginning, the Art Department established a public presence by organizing student exhibitions off campus in the former Miami Art Center. An exhibition space became available on campus in 1976 in an area vacated by the university library. Frank Wyroba, founding chair of the Art Department, asked me to design the Gallery, supervise its renovation and assume the directorship. I agreed, provided that there was unanimous concurrence that a programmatic link between the Gallery and the Art Department would be preserved and that exhibitions were to be of the highest national and international standards. This compact was adopted and the first exhibition, “Contemporary Latin American Drawings,” opened in 1977.

Since then, the Visual Arts Gallery has flourished, becoming The Art Museum at FIU, and finally The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum. Throughout this growth, one critical factor has remained constant, namely the support of Betty Perry. The Betty Laird Perry Student Award, conferred to an individual at the Annual Student Exhibition, and Betty’s contribution of funding for this gallery have been essential. Without her unwavering commitment, it is questionable whether an event such as this inaugural exhibition, “Simulacra and Essence: The Paintings of Luisa Basnuevo,” would be taking place.

Luisa’s receipt of a Betty Perry Award in the early 1980’s had effects shared by other awardees. The financial boost enabled her to finish the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at FIU, and then to go on to Yale University to complete the Master of Fine Arts Program. Her educational accomplishments provided the foundation for a professional career that has been outstanding. Luisa has had numerous solo shows, participated in many group exhibitions, has had her work placed in prestigious collections, and has been the subject of dozens of reviews and articles. Her art is rich, mysterious and compelling, affording me an experience of genuine pleasure while working with her in my role as curator. Mark Ormond’s fine essay is a revealing investigation of the paintings of this fascinating artist. Luisa is an ideal example of the realization of the possibilities offered by a program which has received long and consistent support from a visionary such as Betty Perry.

I cannot conclude without citing the invaluable contributions of my colleagues in the Department of Art and Art History. Like all of our graduates, Luisa was provided with much by many. One colleague in particular, Dahlia Morgan, deserves the highest recognition and appreciation for her commitment and tireless efforts in completing the monumental task required in establishing this museum. It is an extraordinary addition to the cultural fabric of our university and community.

It has been my great fortune to have served as curator for this exhibition.

James Couper
Emeritus Professor and Founding Museum Director
Simulacra and Essence: The Paintings of Luisa Basnuevo

Beginning with her undergraduate work at Florida International University (FIU) twenty years ago and continuing through her most recent paintings that inaugurate the new galleries of The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Luisa Maria Basnuevo has consistently reinvented and refined her vocabulary of painting. As the title of this exhibition suggests, each canvas is a synthesis of ideas and images. In her investigation of the formal issues of painting, Basnuevo has creatively appropriated shapes and forms from the real world to become vehicles for her study, as well as material for discourse about her imagined terrain. Basnuevo’s intuitive combination of referential elements and process on the same picture plane endows her paintings with energy of anticipation that engages the viewer’s interest and attention. Basnuevo’s life is inextricably meshed with her work as ideas or memories from the past and experiences in the present inform every aspect of her decision making. As an artist she is open to serendipity that can alter the course of her work.1

As an undergraduate at FIU, Carlos Alfonzo’s work became an important inspiration to her. Although she never met him, her paintings were influenced by this Cuban painter’s bold and powerful brush strokes and his equally aggressive forms and symbols. Basnuevo’s interpretation of these forms dominated her compositions as she filled her canvases with a multitude of ovoid, spike and dagger-like shapes using a palette that could be equally brash and boisterous. Sometimes hot earth tones were cooled by green or intensely dark shades of blue and crimson were softened by white. In these early works Basnuevo established a confidence in her decision making about formal issues that has continued to the present.2

Basnuevo admits her graduate professors3 at Yale challenged both her vocabulary and her painting. However, that confrontation seems only to have emboldened her resolve to fuse her ideas in a more masterful and subtle way. At Yale, her canvases witnessed her investigation of color, shapes and texture. The Yale paintings reveal her process, often using graphite to draw shapes or simply change the reading of the two-dimensional plane as a surface for her drawing. Dos Peones (Figure 1), 1991, builds up countless layers of strokes of paint that advance and retreat forward and backward in the composition. Omnia (Figure 2), 1992, introduced an acorn like shape and the red and oranges of burning embers that are repeated later in works such Celorio (Figure 3), 1998, followed by Red Seeds (Figure 4), 1998.

The large paintings hanging in the Frost gallery manifest the sophistication of her evolution and her experimentation. Discourse about formal issues remains paramount as she introduces new patterns of line and use of color in the two Untitled works from 2008. Woven into the paintings a new vocabulary

1) After leaving Cuba in 1971, Basnuevo and her family sought refuge in a four hundred year old family house on the north coast of Spain in the small town of Celorio. On a visit there years later, she returned to Miami with seed pods from a eucalyptus tree that influenced the forms in her paintings for several years. The regimentation of forms in her work is inspired by her love of the religious processions she was part of as a child in Spain. It was her discovery of a book on eighteenth-century warfare and military maps that would influence her idea to arrange elements that resemble tents and encampments.

2) While a student at FIU, Basnuevo had two works accepted into the annual Hortt exhibition at the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art. The juror was Philippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. She also had an exhibition at the expanding museum at FIU and one of her works was purchased for the permanent collection.

3) The English painter John Walker, who was a visiting artist at Yale University, became a mentor to Basnuevo. Like her work, the underlying structure of his painting was non-representational.
reflects Basnuevo’s interest in Celtic designs. It is evident in the sinuously complex vector appearing below the upper edge of *The Gate*, 2008, a work that Basnuevo titled before it was finished. Basnuevo admits she is a “slow” painter and this work evolved over the past year when she lost both her father and her cousin. The bright highlights in the painting and the evanescent white ovoid shapes floating over the dark landscape create a mystical atmosphere of transition.

Basnuevo’s compositions never have a sense of stasis. Movement is suggested by her arrangements of forms that are never perfect in the sense of military precision. Each brushstroke and shape is separate and unique. The light source in *Pradera Oscura (Dark Meadow)*, 2005, is particularly enigmatic and dramatic. Basnuevo animates the surface by starkly contrasting light and dark. The series of fourteen images known as the Black Paintings found on the walls of Goya’s house outside of Madrid have always fascinated her and this canvas fulfilled her desire to make a painting using blacks and browns. There are isolated pods glowing blue-green that provide visual interest as well as a beach–like stretch of sand color outlined with turquoise that seems phosphorescent. This composition has a particular preponderance of ghost images or simulacra.

In *Procession in Red*, 2005, Basnuevo has concentrated her exploration of paint to the individual encampments of forms in a vast white plane marked only by her painted and graphite line. This painting encourages an almost microscopic reading. Her primary curiosity is each individual element within every configuration of five by seven units. Choosing a subtly different shade of paint and a distinctly different brush mark, she endows each element with a unique identity. In *Crimson Tide*, 2007, her interest is, as the title suggests, a broad sweep across every square inch of the canvas. This vast composition, almost seven by nine feet of linen, is illuminated by a red glare permeating a surface that alternates being glossy or matte and that is punctuated by bright areas threatening to burn through the façade. Its scale defies the viewer’s comprehension of its totality or retention of an imprint of each individual aspect and yet it seems to demand it.

In *The Other Side of the River*, 2007, the campus of Basnuevo’s canvas provides a simultaneous view of her sequential activities with paint and brush. A bold gray linear element hangs from the upper edge of the canvas. The configuration of yellow outlines below this recalls Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings for town fortifications. In contrast to the multitude of tent-like encampments above, Basnuevo has defined the vast space of the lower third of the composition with three white cubes on the left and a stalwart gray counterpoint on the right. In doing so, she adroitly balances the entire composition with these solitary remote elements that seem to surrender simultaneous issues of invincibility and vulnerability.

Basnuevo has been a student of the masters as her studio library attests. The resolution of formal issues of painting tackled by Francis Bacon, Hieronymus Bosch, Vincent van Gogh, Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso, Titian and Velázquez, among others, has inspired her own quest. The paintings on view in this exhibition demonstrate the extraordinary range of her exploration and her passionate interest in painting.

Mark Ormond

*Mark Ormond is an independent curator, professor and writer based in Sarasota, Florida.*

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4) The idea for the title was taken from scripture: “Jesus explained: I am the Gate for the sheep, whoever enters through me will be safe and will go in and out and find pasture.” (John 10: 7-9)

5) “Tierra De Nadie (Nobody’s Land)”, 2006, that is not in this exhibition, is one of Basnuevo’s most complex and cinematic paintings. On a banner that seems simultaneously anchored in the heavens and grounded on earth she has inscribed the words of the title. The composition presenting a bird’s eye view portends an epic drama. A grid of tent-like units is joined by blimp shapes adding to the apocalyptic mood of this work.

6) Some of the insights to Luisa Basnuevo’s work were the result of a day long interview in her North Miami studio on 9 June 2008 and subsequent conversations by telephone.
Procession in Red, 2005
Oil on canvas
66 x 80 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Pradera Oscura (Dark Meadow), 2005
Oil on Canvas
66 x 80 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
The Other Side of The River, 2006
Oil on canvas
66 x 80 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
The Gate, 2008
Oil on canvas
84 x 108 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Untitled 1, 2007
Oil on canvas
72 x 66 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Untitled 2, 2008
Oil on canvas
80 x 66 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Crimson Tide, 2007
Oil on Canvas
84 x 108 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Luisa Maria Basnuevo

BIOGRAPHY

Luisa Basnuevo was born in Cuba and came to the United States via Spain in 1972. She received a BFA from Florida International University and an MFA from Yale University School of Art in 1991. Her paintings have been exhibited in museums and galleries in the United States and abroad, including the Southeastern Center of Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris, France. Her work is included in public and corporate collections throughout Florida, including those of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Polk Museum of Art in Lakeland and Miami Art Museum. She is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts/Southeastern Arts Federation, South Florida Consortium Visual Artist Fellowship and the Division of Cultural Affairs, Florida Department of State.

RESUME

EDUCATION

1991 MFA Yale University, School of Art, New Haven, CT
1988 BFA Florida International University, Miami, FL
1986 AA Miami Dade College, Miami, FL
1983 Ecole des Beaux Arts, Institute of American Universities, Avignon, France

UPCOMING SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2008 “Simulacra and Essence: The Paintings of Luisa Basnuevo,” The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, FL

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2007 “Luisa Basnuevo: New Work,” Art Gallery, University of West Florida, Pensacola, FL
2003 “Terra Incognita,” Art @ Work, Miami, FL

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2007 “Luisa Basnuevo: Pencil to Palette,” Dunedin Fine Art Center, Dunedin, FL
2002 “Luisa Basnuevo: Arts Project,” Lake George, NY
2004 “Luisa Basnuevo: That Which is Unseen,” Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland, FL

2005 “Translations,” New World School of the Arts, Miami, FL
2003 “Recent Acquisitions of Contemporary Cuban Art from the Collection of the Lowe Art Museum,” Casa Bacardi, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL
2002 “Impulse,” Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art Gallery, Sarasota, FL
2002 “Florida Visual Arts Fellowship Exhibition,” Center for the Arts, Tequesta, FL; Miami Dade College, Kendall Campus Art Gallery, Miami, FL
2001 “Florida Visual Art Fellowships: 25th Anniversary,” Lowe Museum of Art, Miami, FL; Gulf Coast Museum of Art, Largo, FL; Pensacola Museum of Art, Pensacola, FL; Terrace Gallery, Orlando, FL, Vero Beach Museum of Art, Vero Beach, FL; The von Liebig Art Center,
**Naples, FL; The Art Gallery, Ft. Myers, FL; Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, FL**

“Intuitions,” The Armory Art Center, West Palm Beach, FL

2001 “A Few More Great, Big Pictures,” Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art Gallery, Sarasota, FL


“Down to Earth,” MIA Gallery, Miami International Airport, Miami, FL

“New American Paintings/Southeast: The Open Studios Competitions,” Needham, MA

“Florida Painting: A Spectrum of Expression,” Museum of Art, Tallahassee, FL

1999 “Venues,” Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland FL.; University of West Florida Gallery, Pensacola, FL; Selby Gallery, Ringling School of Art & Design, Sarasota, FL; Museum of Art, Tallahassee FL; Deland Museum of Art, Deland, FL

“Director’s Cut,” Art Center/South Florida, Miami Beach, FL


“Fresh Blood,” Art Center/South Florida, Miami Beach, FL

1997 “Breaking Barriers,” Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL

“Only Here/Solo Aqui,” The Cuban Museum of the Americas, Miami, FL

“Southern Arts Federation/National Endowment for the Arts Regional Visual Arts Fellowship Exhibition,” Southeastern Center of Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC

1996 “Featuring Florida Artists,” The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL

“Four,” St. Thomas University, Miami, FL

“Tuning Up,” Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland, FL

“Florida Drawing Invitational,” Center for the Arts, Vero Beach, FL

“South Florida Consortium Visual Artists Fellowship Recipients Exhibition,” Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, FL

1992 “All-Florida Biennial,” Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland, FL

“35th Hortt Exhibition,” Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL

“Selected Gallery Artists,” Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Coral Gables, FL

1991 “Five Painters,” Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT

“Emerging Summer,” Yale University, School of Art, New Haven, CT

“Post Miami Generation,” InterAmerican Art Gallery, Miami, FL

“Miami 90,” The Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture, Miami, FL

“Les Tres Ameriques a Paris,” Musée du Luxembourg, Paris, France

“Emerging Artists II,” Center of Contemporary Art, North Miami, FL

1989 “30th Annual Hortt Memorial Competition Exhibition,” Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL

“Espiritu Latino,” Museo San Pedrano, San Pedro Sula, Honduras

**COLLECTIONS**

Cambridge Technology Partners, Cambridge, MA

Florida International University, Miami, FL

John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL

Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Miami, FL

Metro-Dade Cultural Center, Miami, FL

Miami Art Museum, Miami, FL

Miami Dade College, Miami, FL

Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL

Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, FL

Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland, FL

Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, FL

U.S. Department of State, Art in Embassies Program, Washington D.C

Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington D.C

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY** (*Reviews*)


RESUME (CONTINUED)

*Rebecca Mahoney, “Drawing on Latin Heritage,” The Ledger, November 1, 2002
*Patti Croop, “Relationships apparent in Courthouse Gallery Exhibit,” The Saratoga Post, June 6, 2002
*Lou Anne Colodny, Down to Earth Catalog, Miami, FL, 2000
*Janis Karam Gallo, Florida Painting: A Spectrum of Expression Catalog, Tallahassee, FL, 2000
*Karen Valdes, Venues, Florida Visual Artists Fellowships Catalog, Tallahassee, FL, 1999
*Jorge Santis, Breaking Barriers Catalog, Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL, 1997

*Helen Kohen, Only Here/Solo Aqui Catalog, Cuban Museum of the Americas, Miami, FL, 1997
*Evelyn Garlington, NEA/Southern Arts Federation 1996 Fellowships Catalog, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC, 1996
*Thomas Sokolowsky, Featuring Florida Artists Catalog, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL, 1996
*Olga Viso, South Florida Cultural Consortium Visual Arts Fellowship Catalog, Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, FL, 1994
*Gary Schwan, “Artist Rise to the Top at Norton,” The Palm Beach Post, June 3, 1994
*Gail Meadows, “Seven Local Artists Awarded $15,000 Grants,” The Miami Herald, January 30, 1994
*Giulio Blanc, “Cuban Art Arrives,” Art & Antiques, December 1993

**AWARDS**

2007 Creative Capital Professional Development Grant, New York, NY
2006 Florida Individual Artist Fellowship, Florida Department of State, Tallahassee, FL
1997 Florida Individual Artist Fellowship, Florida Department of State, Tallahassee, FL
1996 National Endowment for the Arts / Southern Arts Federation Fellowship Recipient
1994 South Florida Consortium, Visual Artist Fellowship, Miami Cultural Affairs, Miami, FL
1993 Award of Merit, Hortt Exhibition, Fort Lauderdale, FL
1989 Betty Laird Perry Award in Painting, Florida International University, Miami, FL
1989 Prix d’Excellence, Les 3 Ameriques, Paris, France
List of Exhibition Works

*Procession in Red*, 2005
Oil on canvas
66 x 80 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

*The Gate*, 2008
Oil on canvas
84 x 108 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

*Crimson Tide*, 2007
Oil on Canvas
84 x 108 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

*Pradera Oscura (Dark Meadow)*, 2005
Oil on Canvas
66 x 80 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

*The Other Side of The River*, 2006
Oil on canvas
66 x 80 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

*Untitled 1*, 2007
Oil on canvas
72 x 66 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

*Untitled 2*, 2008
Oil on canvas
80 x 66 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Work Referenced in Essay

*Dos Peones*
Oil on canvas
58 x 52 inches
Collection of the Artist

*Omnia*
Oil on canvas
58 x 52 inches
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Arturo Mosquera

*Celorio*
Oil on canvas
66 x 80 inches
Collection of the Artist

*Red Seeds*
Oil on canvas
58 x 52 inches
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Gus Vidaurreta
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The Frost Art Museum at Florida International University is an AAM accredited university museum and Smithsonian affiliate. Admission is free. The Frost is located at 10975 SW 17th Street on the University Park campus. For more information, visit www.frostartmuseum.org or call 305-348-2890.

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