

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Open" competition in 2006, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Open" was juried by Catherine D'Ignazio, (Co-Director, iKatun and Member of The Institute for Infinitely Small Things, Massachusetts); Omar Lopez-Chahoud, (Independent Curator, New York); and Rachel Berwick, (Artist, Connecticut).

"Open" was made possible by grants from the Roberts Foundation, Goldfarb Memorial Trust, Helen M. Saunders Trust, Bank of America, and the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign.

Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary arts organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community. Programs include visual arts and public art projects, music, performance, spoken word, film and video, and creative social events designed to connect people with each other. Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways is an alternative to mainstream museums and commercial culture; its programs are made possible by a diverse and growing audience, and support from a wide range of enlightened funders.

On the cover: *Entre Amigos (Friends Among Us)*, oil on canvas, 58" x 72", 2007 (detail).

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

Sabrina Marques



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Parlamento (Parliament), oil on canvas, 58" x 72", 2007.

The Dream of Cuba

By Nicholas Laughlin

The Caribbean is crowded with imaginary islands. Sun-struck Columbus imagined he had found the Indies. Antillia, an island imagined by cartographers, gave its name to the whole archipelago, the Antilles. European explorers and monarchs imagined islands of treasure, or verdant Edens. Tourists imagine palm-fringed playgrounds floating in warm seas, where it never rains. Daniel Defoe imagined an island where his *Crusoe* might be shipwrecked, and today's Caribbean writers too have imagined dozens of fictional islands, from V.S. Naipaul's *Isabella* to Robert Antoni's *Corpus Christi*.

Sabrina Marques has also imagined an island into being. This island is inhabited by green elephants and pink horses, blue owls and golden rabbits. Its landscapes have the technicolour hues of dreams, and its stories too are dream stories, unquestionable and incomplete. She calls this island *Mi Patria Querida* (My Beloved Homeland); she might also call it Cuba, even though there is a real island by the same name.

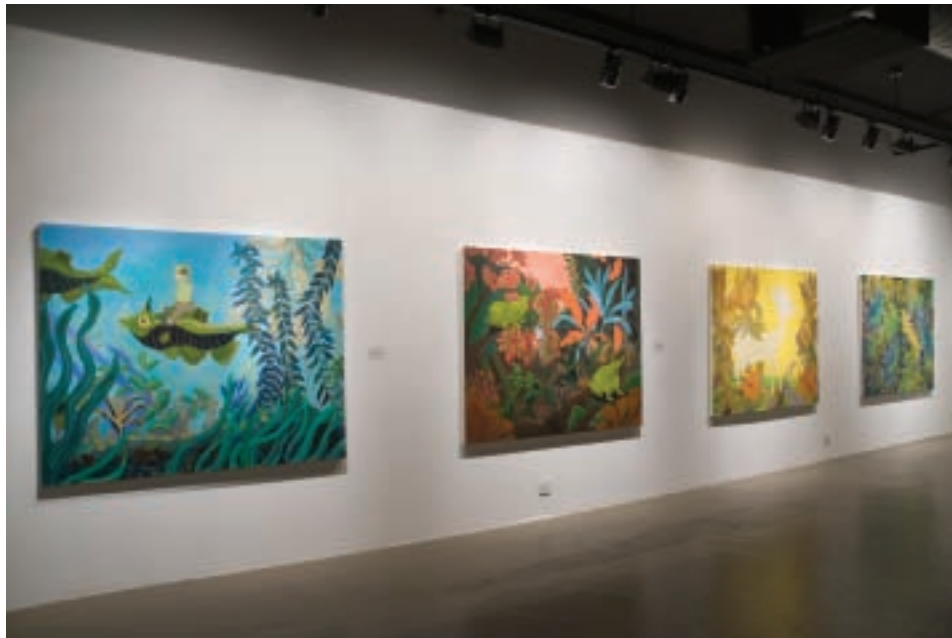
Like all imaginary places, Marques's island is composed of memories, desires, and anxieties. The memories are those of her mother and her mother's family, Cubans who left for the United

Sabrina Marques was born in Mount Vernon, New York and presently lives and works in New Haven, Connecticut. In 2000, Sabrina graduated from Columbia University with a BA in Visual Arts and then received an MFA in Painting and Printmaking from Yale University, School of Art in 2003. She has participated in group exhibitions at numerous venues including *WallSpace* in New York City and *Artspace* in New Haven. Her exhibition at Real Art Ways is her first solo show.

States in the years after Castro's Revolution. (Stories of the animals on her grandfather's ranch and in the courtyard of the family house in Camagüey inspired *Mi Patria Querida's* menagerie.) The desires are Marques's own: to know and understand this homeland cut off by the sea that is history. The anxieties are hers as well: that this homeland may never exist except as a dream.

And anyone looking at the sumptuous paintings of her *Patria* series is apt to feel a little anxious, for a different reason. At first glance, these paintings have the bright, untroubled charm of children's cartoons, but then perhaps you notice that the blue owls' staring eyes follow you around the room—you are ceaselessly under watch. You notice the heavy shadow of an airplane overhead—where is it going, what is its mission? Who is this strange stubble-cheeked child in *El Baño Oscuro* (The Dark Bathroom), and what is he doing? The lushly painted foliage of the large oil paintings begins to feel oppressive, and the speckles and hatchings of the small gouaches suggest a quivering paranoia. Is this island a sinister place, or does it just seem so because it is unfamiliar?

2007 installation view at Real Art Ways of works on canvas, 2007.

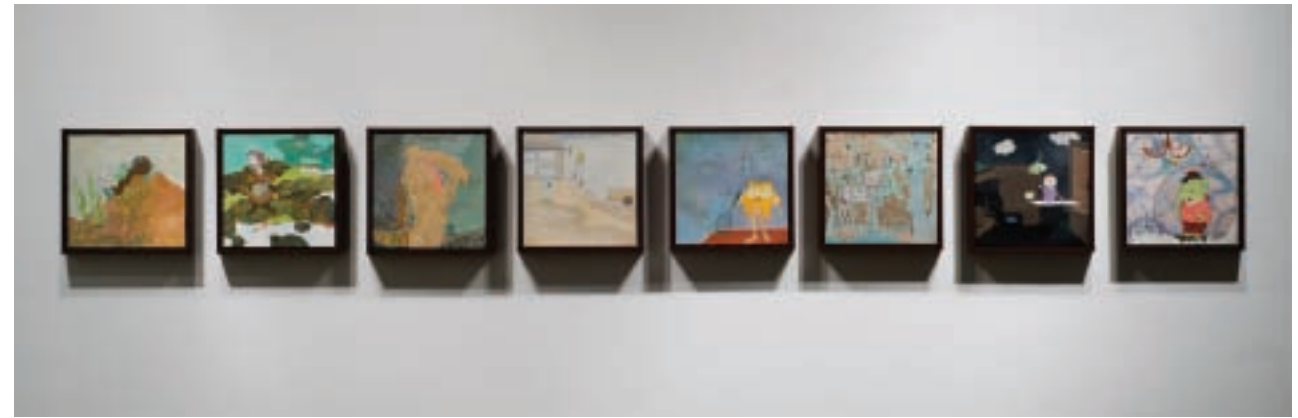


Sabrina Marques was born in Mt. Vernon, New York, and grew up in Westchester County. Now she lives in Connecticut. She has never set foot on the island of Cuba, though she has visited other places in the Caribbean—the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands—and she thinks of Miami, with its large population not just of Cubans but of Haitians, Jamaicans, and Trinidadians, as a “second home.” She doesn't look phenotypically Cuban or Caribbean—with her pale, freckled skin and red hair, she seems Irish or Scottish. Her mother tells her, “You are American,” but Marques insists that she thinks of herself, at least part of the time, as Cuban.

The title *Mi Patria Querida* suggests an exile's nostalgia, but Marques is not an exile, not exactly, and these paintings are anything but nostalgic. What they long for and obsess over is not something once known and then lost, but something—someplace—that may never be known and can therefore only be found through a leap of the imagination. Marques grew up with stories of a lost Cuba told by aunts and grandparents, and later heard stories of what Cuba has more recently

become from artists who left the island to settle in Miami. All these stories, together with accounts in books and newspaper reports and movie images, fed the curious imagination that produced these visual fantasies.

When asked, Marques can unravel her strange images and explain their constituent strands. The green pachyderm in *El Elefante*, posing on his hind legs, dressed in an elaborate suit and bow tie? A childhood reading of the Babar stories left Marques with the odd notion of the elephant as a Communist icon; the suit is her grandfather's; the chandelier recalls the lavish townhouses



2007 installation view at Real Art Ways of gouache on paper works, 2004–2006.

of the old Havana elite. *El Baño Oscuro* turns out to be a self-portrait of sorts. As a child, Marques would draw and paint in the family bathroom. She found it a comforting private space, she says, and she thought of herself as surrounded by “three bodies of water”: the sink, the toilet, and the tub. She is the child in the painting, the five-o'clock shadow a form of “disguise,” perched on a flying carpet suggesting the levitation of the creative act; but knowing this does not abate the sense of the sinister in this small dark room.

In *Me Voy Solo* (I Go Alone), another child appears, a boy who sits with arms tightly folded on the back of a giant fish, disappearing into a grove of underwater vegetation. It is a haunting image, rendered almost entirely in greens and blues. The boy looks like he wants to burst into tears. Does it matter that his face is modeled on Marques's father's (he was born in Portugal, and has never been to Cuba), or that when she made this painting she was thinking of the thousands of children sent away from Cuba in the Operation Peter Pan airlift of the 1960s? Is this historical or personal allegory? Perhaps, and this image of a submarine journey also recalls the many migrations and dislocations that have characterized the Caribbean, and every artist's journey into the murky depths where all images are born.

The Caribbean has an uncanny geography that defies topography. Our defining sea has currents that twist and curl their

way through the world's oceans to unlikely shores. The flotsam they carry—words, songs, rituals, names—makes (imaginary) Caribbean islands in places like Brooklyn and Brixton, Toronto and Leeds, Atlanta and Oakland and Miami—and Hartford. And the gravitational force that pulls these ever-restless tides is memory.

In *Mi Patria Querida*, to remember is to imagine. Here in the Caribbean—this Caribbean that reaches all over the world—it sometimes seems we are all trying to imagine our memories into existence, and our histories, and our homelands. Her mother says Sabrina Marques is American. But in these paintings—and maybe in her dreams—she is Cuban, and she is Caribbean, and she is home.

Nicholas Laughlin was born and has always lived in Trinidad. He is the editor of The Caribbean Review of Books, a quarterly magazine covering Caribbean literature, and the former editor of the arts and culture magazine Caribbean Beat. His reviews, essays, and other writing have appeared in the Trinidad and Tobago Review, Jamaica Observer, Stabroek News, Guyana Arts Journal, McSweeney's, Boston Review, Poetry Review (UK), Poetry Wales, and Modern Painters, among other periodicals. He is currently working on a book about Guyana, and he is the 2007 Rhodes Trust Rex Nettleford Fellow in Cultural Studies.