

Con la Puerta Abierta: A Wastescape of the Future

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Tomás Sánchez is one of the most well known contemporary Cuban artists. Following his first recognition in 1980 with the XIX Joan Miró International Drawing Prize, Sánchez took his place in the international art scene. Although he followed the traditional medium of landscape artists using acrylic and oil on canvas, Sánchez made a name for himself by creating paintings that commented on ecological awareness and humans' hurtful relationship with nature. Sánchez, a long time practitioner of Siddha Yoga, claims that his artistic inspiration comes from meditative sessions where he contemplates nature and how humans interact with it. A well-known piece influenced by his meditations is *Con la Puerta Abierta* (2015), which depicts an expansive waste landscape referred to by Francisco J. Hernández Adrián as a *wastescape*. In *Con la Puerta Abierta*, Sánchez invites the viewer to become a tourist of a dystopia with no presence of human or natural life. Moreover, this plunging of the audience into the environment forces viewers to consider their responsibility for the current ecological state of the world and its immediate consequences.

Tomás Sánchez is one of the most collected Cuban painters alive. He was born on May 22, 1948 in Aguada de Pasajeros, Cienfuegos, Cuba. At sixteen, he began his artistic journey in Havana, Cuba, studying at the San Alejandro National Academy of Fine Arts. However, he transferred in 1967 to the National School of the Arts (ENA) to train in more contemporary painting styles. He received his first recognition from the National Young Artists' Salon following his graduation from ENA. Sánchez's first international career exposure occurred in 1980, following his receipt of the XIX Joan Miró International Drawing Prize for his work *Desde las Aguas Blancas*. Since then, Sánchez's exposure as a world-renowned artist has continued to increase. Evidence of this can be seen in his most recent individual exposition at the Museum of Costa Rican Art in 2016 (Sullivan "Biography").

The greatest influence in Sánchez's work is his practice of Siddha Yoga and meditation. In his artist's statement, Sánchez writes, "When I paint, I experience meditative states; through meditation I achieve a union with nature, and nature, in turn, leads me to meditation" (Sánchez "Artist's Statement"). He claims that it has led him to greater awareness of human existence, nature, and the relationship between the two. The images Sánchez usually paints connect picturesque landscapes with dejected ruins of garbage. According to the artist, he was initially inspired to create such pieces by mounds of trash out in Havana's streets and huge fields of waste he encountered during his travels in Mexico City. Regarding Sánchez's landscapes of waste, author and art historian Edward J. Sullivan states, "The defilement of the landscape is a

metaphor of both humans' fall from grace and our denigration of the gifts the nature has provided" (Tomás Sánchez 11).

Sánchez entered the international art scene in the 1980s, a time in Cuban art that heavily focused on experimental art forms. In 1981, the *Volumen I* exhibition, which featured artists such as José Bedia, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, and Gustavo Pérez Monzón, furthered the advancement of experimental form in Cuban art. Landscape art is typically associated with traditional art. Sánchez stood out from other landscape painters because of the underlying social messages about ecological awareness in his works (Sullivan Tomás Sánchez 10). At first glance, Sánchez's early landscapes appear to follow the traditional landscape art methodology of a wide composition of a natural setting. While consistent with this technique, Sánchez's content is where he differentiates himself from conventional landscapes. In many of his landscapes, Sánchez includes a small figure of a man, which may be interpreted as a representation of humankind in the painting (Márquez 8). He describes his painted images as "... idealized mixes of different landscapes" (Sánchez Christie's). No painting is of a specific place; each one is created from Sánchez's imagination and memories from his childhood. While the landscapes initially appear to be hyper-realistic in nature, at a closer look, a more ethereal, imaginative image emerges through Sánchez's use of light in creating a serene atmosphere in the paintings (Atwood). When asked about the connections between his landscapes and urban landfill paintings, Sánchez stated, "I believe it's through nature that man finds freedom, achieving

unity between himself and the world around him. When he starts to think he needs something more, however, and starts buying things ... problems come. There's no lasting satisfaction that way: the mountain of things we throw out as garbage are the ultimate proof of that" (Sánchez *Christie's*). Even though Sánchez worked with the traditional medium of acrylic and oil on canvas, his use of yoga as a method of artistic inspiration marked his own disobedience both against traditional landscape painting and Cuba's repressive government (Sullivan *Tomás Sánchez* 11).

In his oil and acrylic on canvas piece, *Con la Puerta Abierta*, Sánchez depicts, according to Francisco J. Hernández Adrián, a vast *wastescape* of debris in a landfill that stretches as far as the eye can see (2012). In the foreground, a blue door frame lays open in front of the viewers, alluding to an invitation for the spectators to become a subject of the piece and to attempt to understand the painting's purpose. Sánchez incorporates wide varieties of color but mutes them with grey-colored tones to contrast and draw attention to the bright blue door frame. This encourages the viewer to contemplate the emphasis on the door.

An important aspect of this piece is the physical size of the painting. It measures 199.4 cm by 247.6 cm, or approximately 6.5 ft. by 8 ft. By taking up an entire wall, Sánchez immerses viewers in the art and encourages them to contemplate the large-scale environmental damage that has occurred. The depth perception in *Con la Puerta Abierta* also impacts the audience's perception. It emphasizes the gravity of the environmental situation at hand, one of inevitable doom demonstrated by the never-ending piles of trash. If worldwide lack of eco-consciousness is not immediately addressed, the painting shows what will be the world's demise.

The main focus of *Con la Puerta Abierta* is the blue door frame in the foreground. It begs the question; why did Sánchez choose that object specifically as the focal point of the piece? If the painting is understood as an allegory about tourism in Cuba and the waste that is produced from it, then the blue door frame suggests an introduction to the audience as a tourist in this landscape. Thus, the door frame functions as a doorway into another world. It is a world away from Cuba's perfect beaches and points to the reality of the current situation in Cuba and the global environmental crisis. The otherworldliness of the sky in the painting adds to this imagery. The dark grey sky without a sun, except for the little bit of light peeking out near the horizon, seems to

suggest an unearthly atmosphere. It appears almost as if the image depicts a different planet because no signs of the natural earth, such as vegetation or water, are visible. No recognizable portrayal of the earth is depicted, except for the man-made objects, the trash. This is possibly an image conjured from Sánchez's memories of his time in Cuba and visits to Mexico (Sullivan *Tomás Sánchez* 11). In the refuse, a white bust of a person stands out within the confines of the door frame. The sculpture is partially stuck under the residues surrounding it, and its furrowed brow indicates distress. It is conceivable that the bust represents humanity's struggle with waste management and the impact of unsustainable lifestyles that contribute to the earth's destruction. The artist communicates that trash is swallowing humanity just as it engulfs the bust in the painting. Humans have brought about these horrible circumstances and humans will pay the price. In *Con la Puerta Abierta*, this is what the world has become; it is what Sánchez warns will happen if something is not done to deter the unhealthy state of humanity's relationship with the environment.

Tomás Sánchez's *wastescape* aims to increase environmental awareness. The image represents a future that is coming for the world if nothing is done. Surroundings and context are thus particularly important in Sánchez's *wastescapes*. Especially in Latin America, many landfills are near large cities. However, in Sánchez's paintings, such urban settings are nowhere to be seen. The debris is the entire focus of *Con la Puerta Abierta*, and it provokes conversations about the issue of waste management in Latin American countries. Trash piles up outside houses on the streets, and most of its disposal is organized through designated landfill areas that continue to grow and endanger those living around them. In his analysis of Sánchez's work, Hernández Adrián points out the paradox it presents. Cuba, where Sánchez is from, is considered a tropical getaway to many people; with pristine beaches, much of the consumerism that comes with tourism and its wasteful practices is often pushed out of mind. Sánchez's landfill paintings reveal precisely these desolate wastelands (Hernández Adrián *Tomás Sánchez on Exorbitance*). In a conversation with journalist Roger Atwood, Sánchez discussed his earlier forestry landscapes, which depict lush wildlife. He shared, "There haven't been any forests like [those] in Cuba for a couple of centuries ... The island has been almost totally deforested" (Atwood *Enchanting Forests*). These *wastescapes* seem to imagine the demise

of Cuba and other countries like it in the coming decades if steps are not taken to prevent such a dystopia.

Art such as Tomás Sánchez's *wastescapes* bring to light present-day issues facing the world. Without works like his, it would be difficult to envision the future results of present practices that affect the environment. An artist's interpretation of modern issues can force an audience to come to terms with necessary uncomfortable conversation; *Con la Puerta Abierta* provokes such dialogue. In this work, the artist envisions the prospective path the world is on by placing the image of great quantities of debris in the lower two thirds of the painting. The frame device, which limits the gaze to the center of the composition, forces the focus on the problem of waste management and challenges viewers to act. Art as social commentary pushes audiences to engage in difficult conversations and encourages people to create solutions to significant problems that may seem overwhelming. Earth's environmental catastrophe may loom, but provocative art like Sánchez's can drive positive change.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Dr. Agnese Codebò for her editing of previous drafts and guidance throughout the research project.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was supported by a 2019 Villanova Match Research Program for First Year Students grant.

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