



## Strange Sort of Poetry

A PAINTER'S WHIMSICAL MIND CAPTURES THE SURREALISM OF THE QUOTIDIAN.

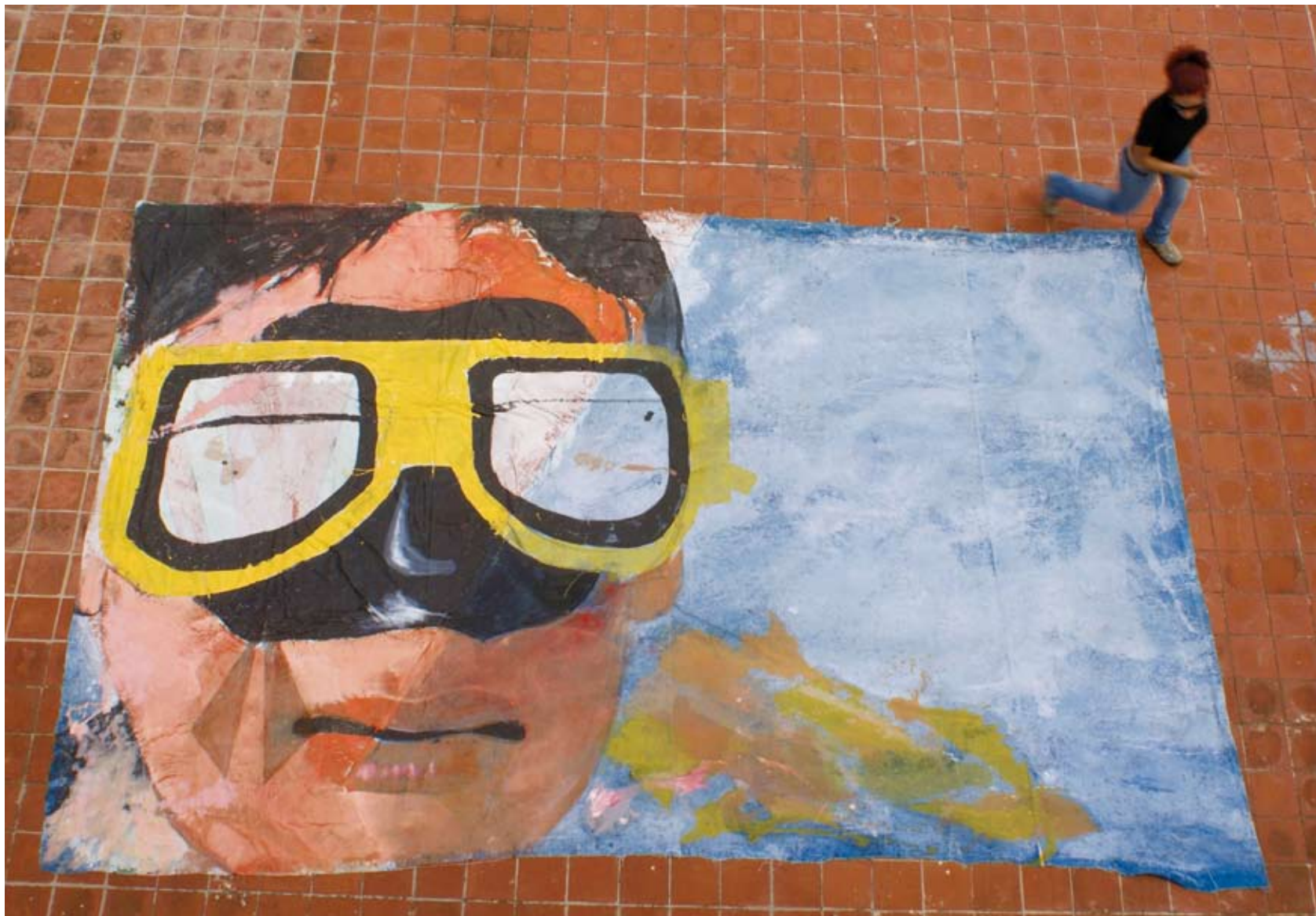
JULIA COOKE words ALEJANDRO GONZALEZ portraits

Alejandro Campins is living these days in his studio in downtown Havana, Cuba, amid stretched canvases propped against all available vertical surfaces. The one-room space, divided by drywall, with double-height ceilings and ornate moldings that bespeak the building's early 20th-century provenance, is filled with art paraphernalia in semiorderly piles and stacks. The only area free of clutter is in front of the floor-to-ceiling French doors that open onto two small balconies. These doors mark the tenuous border between interior and exterior, letting in the sounds of shouting children, of new motorcycles and old engines; the smells of acrid diesel and of sweet, fresh coffee; and framing a view of the elderly trees in the front yard of the 1950s apartment complex opposite. The scene is bordered by the ornate metalwork of the balcony's railing, shedding paint by the day.

Those sounds, smells, and sights greet the 28-year-old painter every morning in this, his temporary home while he finishes some work on his house. And in spirit, if not in actual representation, they suffuse his art as well, an ebullient jumble of images and influences.

"We live a strange sort of anachronistic poetry in Cuba," says Campins. "Even if you don't want it to, this poetry influences what any artist here produces. You live in a house made in the 1950s, you wake up and turn on a brand-





new Chinese TV, you go to the street and hop in an American car from the '40s to get to your friend's 1920s house. As a result, my painting goes to many different places."

Campins's paintings are united not by any guiding principle, goal, or even overriding artistic technique but by the sensation evoked that they aren't as simple as they might appear. The brusque brushstrokes and promiscuous blending of materials—Campins tends to use oil, watercolor, and pencil in varying tones on the same stretched canvas or piece of parchment—create the vague texture of a daydream. In Havana the random, the unpredictable, and the surrealism of the quotidian have more weight, even in the art world, than cultural trends, commercial pressures, or the next art fair. Alejandro Campins and his work are a product of this environment.

Campins is also the product of the rigorous Cuban art schools, whose students are well versed in art history and practiced in different techniques and media. He attended a local middle school in his small hometown, Manzanillo, before being sent to Holguín, a provincial capital with a reputation as a Cuban cultural stronghold, to attend an art-oriented high school. After teaching elementary-school art classes in Manzanillo for two years, he moved to Havana and attended the Superior Arts Institute. By the



**FROM TOP:** *Not Yet*, 2009. OIL AND ENAMEL ON CANVAS, 9¾ x 16½ FT. *Retiro espiritual en Manhattan*, 2007. OIL ON LINEN, 118 x 78¾ IN. **OPPOSITE:** Three views of Alejandro Campins's studio.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:**  
*Mente clara y pecho apretado*, 2008. OIL ON LINEN, 47¼ x 59 in. *Noise*, 2009. OIL ON LINEN, 78¼ x 98½ in. Campins in his studio. *Demuéstrame que me quieres*, 2009. OIL ON LINEN, 47¼ x 59 in.



time he graduated, in 2009, Campins had shown in group exhibitions in Havana and Madrid.

Although video and performance art overshadowed painting in popularity during his school days, Campins stuck to brush and canvas, as did a cadre of other Cuban artists of his generation, among them the 15 featured with him in a recent show at Havana's Wilfredo Lam Contemporary Art Center. The choice carries a risk. "I could spend my whole life painting, and my work might pass by unnoticed," he remarks. "It's difficult to propose something new, something that hasn't already been seen."

What he paints and how he paints it on any given day depend on his mood. "There are days when I want to paint about, say, politics and other days when I want nothing to do with it. Sometimes I begin painting a lion and finish with a butterfly," he says. "I begin painting aggressively, and the finished painting turns out as something sweet." In consequence his studio is littered with half-finished canvases and pictures that he is painting over. The variety in form and content is enormous: Some paintings feel playful and experimental, others meticulously unfinished; some are contemplative, and others look like color-cloaked political statements.

His work is characterized by muscular brushstrokes, a flat, distorted perspective, whimsical figures, and dreamlike titles. It is popu-

lated by dinosaurs and ducks, fields of oversized poppies, bubble-blowing toddlers, Technicolor landscapes, and the vague outline of whatever was underneath his final painting. An upside-down 1950s pinup girl floats over a cartoonish man playing a guitar on what might or might not be a city street; a larger-than-life cat watches a skier schuss down a thickly impastoed mountain. Campins draws visual inspiration from the formidable piles of magazines and catalogues littering his studio as well as from photos taken with the digital camera he carries everywhere. "The magazines are full of images that I like. But more than liking them, they make me think I'd like to participate in what that image is doing," the artist says quietly.

The titles Campins gives his paintings and drawings contain nods to the sharp Cuban sense of humor as well as to his varied influences. These include Edward Hopper and Sol LeWitt, as well as literary figures such as Arthur Schopenhauer and the bard of Avon, as in *Shakespeare Visits Romeo and Juliet in the Red Light District*.

For now, Campins is content to work with little clear direction. "There are a thousand different things to do with a paintbrush and some paint," he says in a tone of wonder. What he and his imagination will produce next with those tools is anyone's guess. And that, one senses, is just how Campins likes it. **MP**