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LUIS CRUZ AZACETA

ALEJANDRO ANREUS

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Luis Cruz Azaceta, *The Crossing*, 1991. Lithograph, 29½ × 41¾ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Photograph by Will Drescher.

FOREWORD

CHON A. NORIEGA

Luis Cruz Azaceta was born in Cuba in 1942 and immigrated to the United States at the age of eighteen in 1960. The decision to go into exile was a familial one made in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban Revolution. Cruz Azaceta first lived with his uncle in Hoboken, New Jersey, and later with his aunt in Queens, New York, and there he would be reunited with his sister in 1962 and parents in 1966. His recurring dreams of flying over Cuba ended once his parents joined him in New York, but his sense of exile continued and became a critical aspect as he turned from a life as a factory worker to that of an artist.

Coming of age in the greater New York area, Cruz Azaceta experienced exile in a way that was considerably different from the experiences of the Cuban diaspora in Miami, Florida. Starting in the 1960s, “the ‘reality’ of Miami became Cuban, and the geographic base of the Cuban exile became Miami,” as author Alejandro Anreus writes. In New York, Cruz Azaceta lived in the midst of an ascendant art capital, and he took classes with contemporary artists such as Leon Golub and Mel Bochner and with art historian Dore Ashton. The metropolis provided a context in which his sense of exile was at once exceedingly particular and also a point of identification with what Anreus calls the “wounds and screams” of the human condition.

Cruz Azaceta often turns to self-portraiture to figure an everyman at the center of state violence, political exile, and national crises. In *The Crossing* (1991), the artist depicts his own decapitated head, screaming in agony as the boat in which it rides is tossed by an undulating ocean. This image—repeated and varied in numerous works—serves as an icon of Cuban exile, capturing the violent transition from wholeness to loss. That transition, a crossing over from one state to another, works on two levels: geopolitical (from Cuba to the United States), and subjective (from belonging to exile). It also serves as a metaphor for contemporary political being: *The Crossing* narrates a severing not only of the body from itself but also of the self from the body politic. This violent act is centered within the frame, and our focus is held by the artist’s anguished face. Cruz Azaceta

imbues himself—and the human figure generally—with an everyman status, establishing the exile as the archetypal subject for the modern era. This maneuver is a critical one. If states are defined by their claim to the “legitimate” use of violence within their territorial boundaries, to be the object of that violence is precisely to lose subject status, whether as a citizen, as a human being, or as an everyman.

And yet, *The Crossing* subtly undercuts the contrast between figure (the everyman) and ground (geopolitics), between the red and yellow of boat and head and the blue and green of ocean and sky. Dashes and patches of red and yellow accent the ocean waves, while the screaming head’s expression is conveyed in part through the blue-green lines around the face. The figure’s peaked hairline and thatch of white, black, blue, and green hair suggests the artist’s similar rendering of the waves. The exile that Cruz Azaceta situates at the center of this work (and of the viewer’s attention) is marked by the contradiction of his social and political marginality: the exile is at once the work’s screaming subject and an echo of the colors and violence of the background. In Cruz Azaceta’s work the exile is often depicted within an expansive stateless space that is both geographical and psychological: it is the physical and built environment; it is also the state of being in which the everyman exile exists, a condition that he carries inside and that trails behind him. Cruz Azaceta proposes neither cogito nor will-to-power to explain this condition; his subject, as an outcast, occupies something on the order of a space of abjection.

In this book Anreus discusses how the artist’s experience of exile has guided his ongoing concern with human rights and shaped a visual language that over the past fifty years has moved from the pop style of his early canvases to the abstraction of his latest works. In contrast to an exilic identity grounded in a tropical nostalgia, Cruz Azaceta has mobilized a topical expressionism that mixes narrative, visceral imagery, figurative and abstract styles, and absurdist humor. He has responded to national crises, such as the AIDS epidemic, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, with graphically powerful paintings, mixed-media pieces, and installations. Although Cruz Azaceta has continued to experiment with his visual vocabulary, his commentary on humanity has not changed. As Anreus notes, he

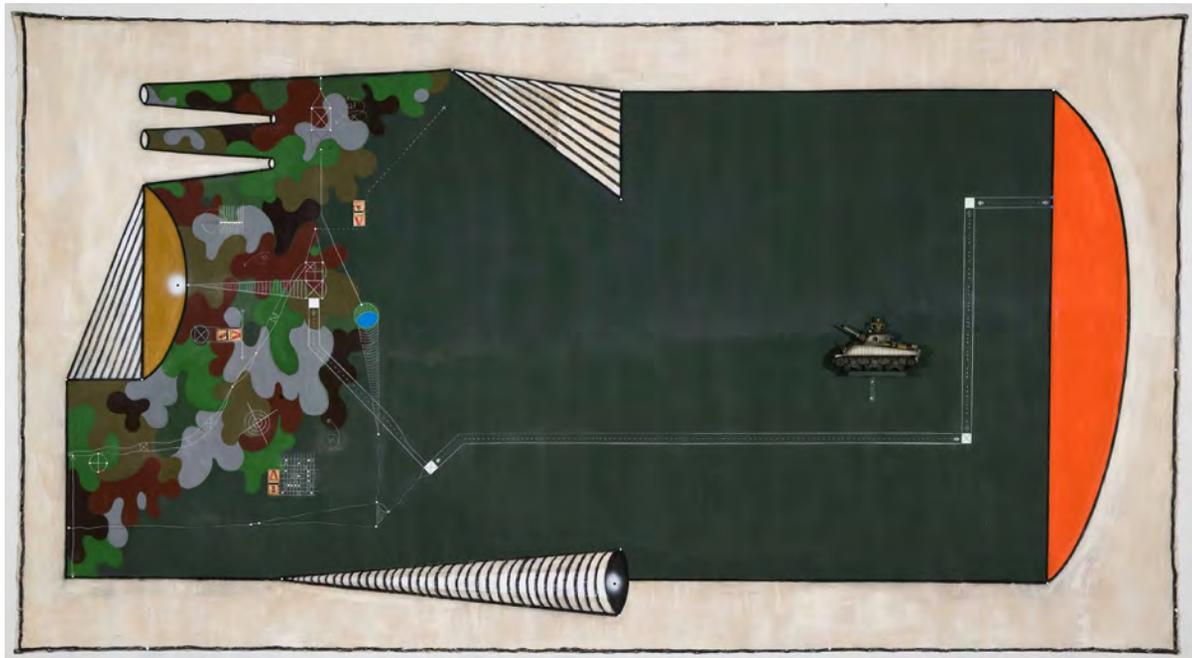
spurns sentiment and propaganda, remaining grounded in the “language of painting” and oriented toward a “sober reckoning.”

Recently Cruz Azaceta has undertaken two series that address the rapid political, economic, and environmental collapse taking place around the world: *Museum Plan* (2006–2008) and *Shifting States* (2011–2012). In contrast to earlier works and series with descriptive or metaphorical titles, these series are conceptually grounded in administrative strategies for creating and maintaining social order: museum and map. As Benedict Anderson argues, these two institutions of power, along with the census, “profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion—the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry.”¹

The title of the *Museum Plan* series suggests a conceit for cultural policy, but visually the paintings function more as map-based commentary on the nation-state. In *Strategic Museum Plan for Baghdad* (2006), a toy tank and mousetraps are placed on a “map” of Baghdad during the first years of the Iraq War (2003–2011). The scale of these objects establishes an equivalence between humans and mice, while the use of camouflage

Luis Cruz Azaceta, *Strategic Museum Plan for Baghdad*, 2006. Acrylic, enamel, shellac, mousetraps, toy tank, and shelf on canvas, 96 × 179 × 5¼ inches.

Photograph by Mike Smith.



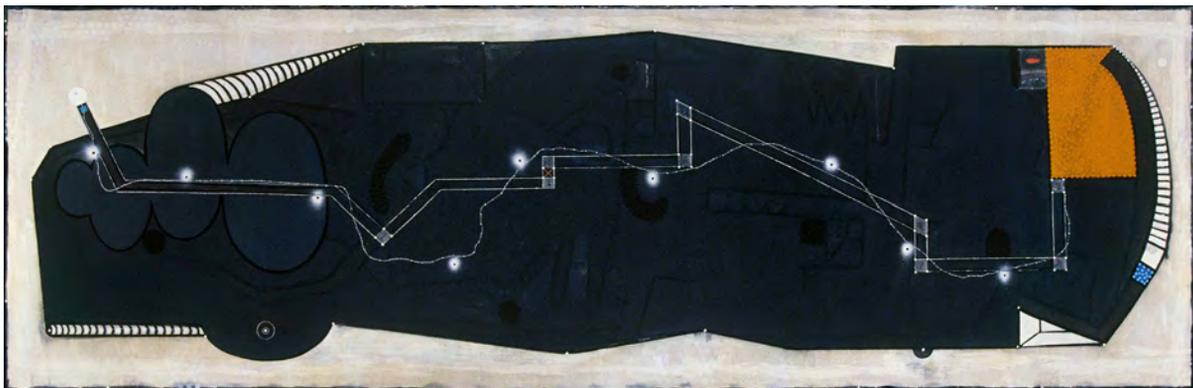
colors to depict the urban landscape signals both its “strategic” significance and the visible absence of a “plan” to protect the Baghdad Museum. Similarly, *Ambulatory Museum Plan* (2006) provides a visual metaphor for the evacuation of New Orleans (the artist’s hometown) during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The mostly black-on-black painting depicts a vehicle-like shape containing a narrow lighted pathway through the darkness. The use of “ambulatory” in the title suggests the failure of the highway-based evacuation plan for the over 100,000 residents who did not have access to a personal vehicle.

In the Shifting States series, Cruz Azaceta creates a visual map for sudden political change. The “states” that shift are at once political entities, the national Zeitgeist, and individual states of mind. In *Shifting States—Egypt* (2011) and *Shifting States—Iraq* (2011), the elongated paintings are suggestive of computer imaging, seismographs, and Rorschach tests—that is, visualizing techniques for what cannot be seen: relations among data points, shifting plates, and psychological states. In this way, the paintings morph imagery for tradition and technology into a meaningful display of change within the nation-state.

The works in the Museum Plan and Shifting States series are large in scale, ranging from about five to seven feet tall and thirteen to seventeen feet long. The irony here is that museums and maps are designed to help contain, manage, and comprehend their object: culture and territory, respectively. Instead of offering a fantasy of mastery through a diagrammatic representation—as does a plan or map—Cruz Azaceta’s paintings dwarf, confound, and bedazzle the viewer who stands in front of them. As in all his

Luis Cruz Azaceta, *Ambulatory Museum Plan*, 2006.
Acrylic, charcoal, enamel, and shellac on canvas,
60 × 190 inches.

Photograph by Mike Smith.



art, here Cruz Azaceta exposes the limits of a diagrammatic or programmatic understanding of violence and cruelty, exile and dislocation, and solitude and isolation, thus making clear that there are no easy solutions to their presence. The human condition, as suggested by *Grey Zone* (2003), is an overwhelming visual and material field within which figure and ground compete, and dissonance offers its own beauty, insight, and reckoning.

Luis Cruz Azaceta, *Shifting States—Egypt*, 2011. Acrylic, charcoal, and shellac on canvas, 84 × 204 inches.

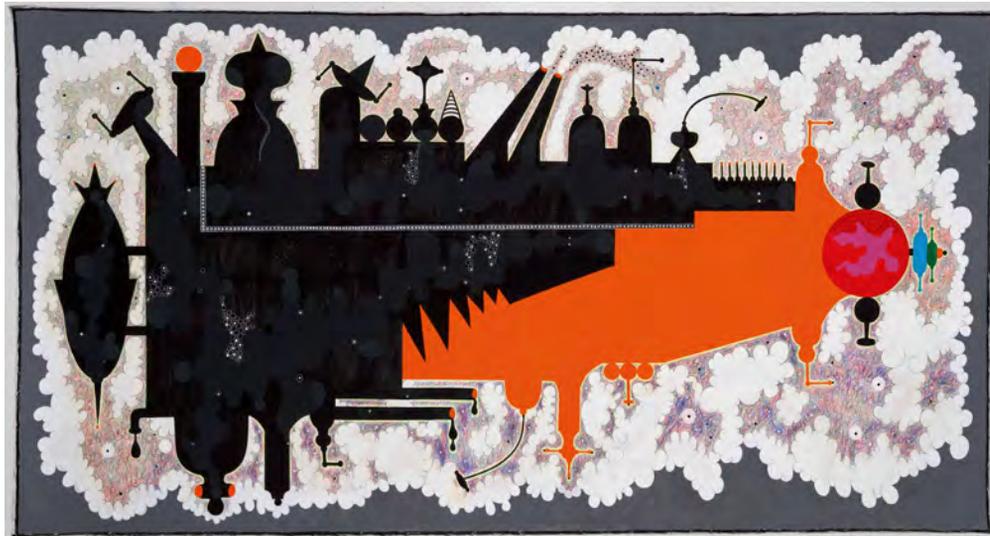
Photograph by Mike Smith.

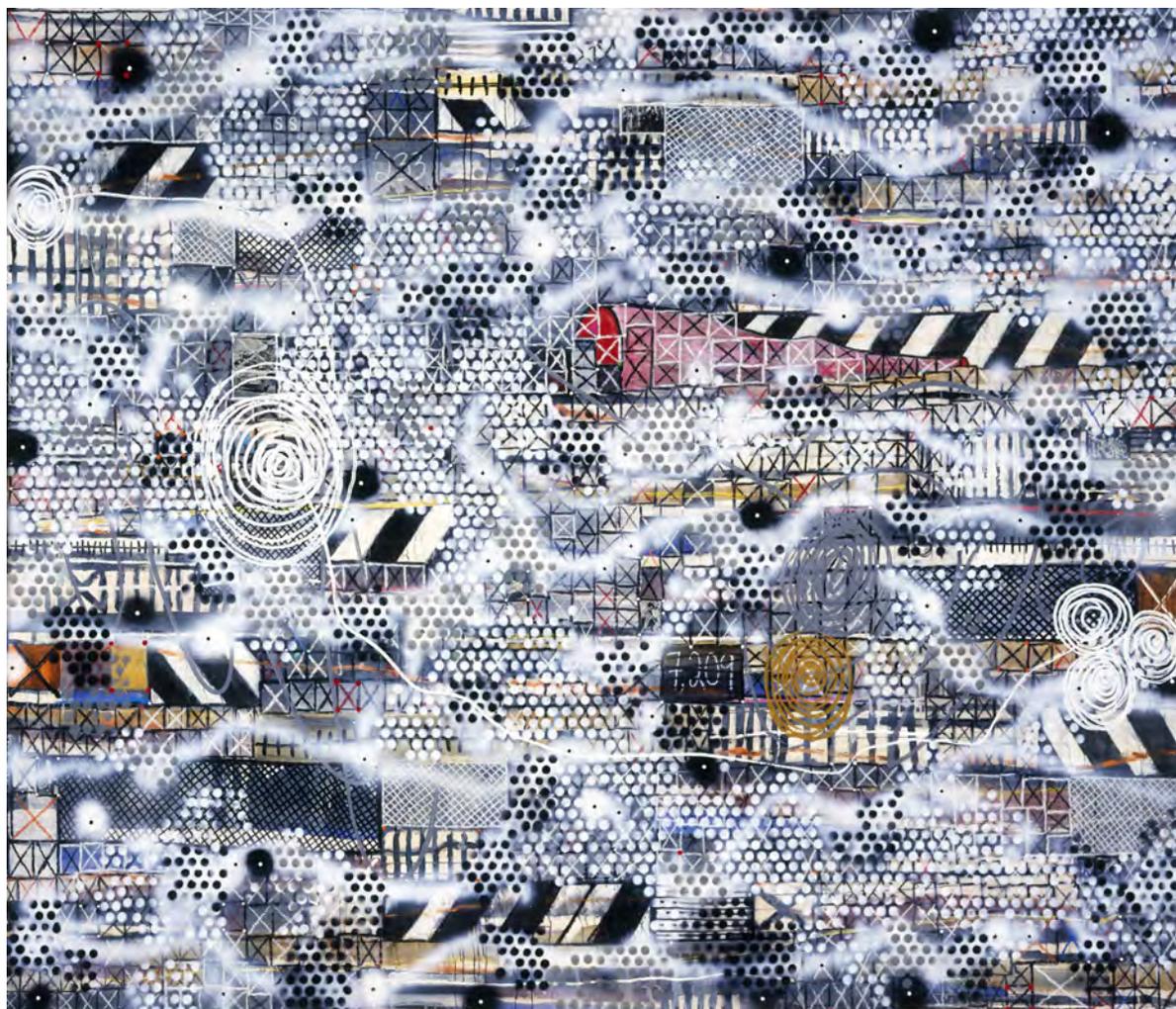
Luis Cruz Azaceta, *Shifting States—Iraq*, 2011. Acrylic, Prismacolor pencil, and shellac on canvas, 84 × 158 inches.

Photograph by Mike Smith.

NOTE

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 2006), 163–64.





Luis Cruz Azaceta, *Grey Zone*, 2003. Acrylic, charcoal, enamel, oil stick, and shellac on canvas, 98 × 117 inches.

Photograph by Will Drescher; digitally scanned by Cameron Wood.