

GUARDIAN HAVANA, 2009
José Manuel Noceda Fernández

At the Tenth Biennial of Havana in 2009, his second time at the Cuban event, Remy Jungerman presented *Guardian Havana* in one of the halls of the San Carlos de la Cabaña Fortress. The project, different from his previous presentation *Nobody is protected* (2000), is a continuation of the studies started with *Bakru* (2007), *Fodu composition 24* (2015), *Horizontal Obeah Golio* (2016–2018), *Horizontal Obeah Vodou Paati* (2017), and works that were brought together in the exhibition 'In Transit' in 2017.

At first glance, the work seems to have appropriated the rigid geometric abstraction formulated by Piet Mondriaan as a means of structural support. Designed to be attached to the wall, the grid of black laths contained a variety of materials such as textiles, photos and bottles. The iconographic interpretation of the work, however, acts on a much deeper level. Jungerman is part of the Surinamese diaspora. Based in the Netherlands since 1990, it would make sense to consider the whole of his production from a de-colonial and deconstructive perspective.

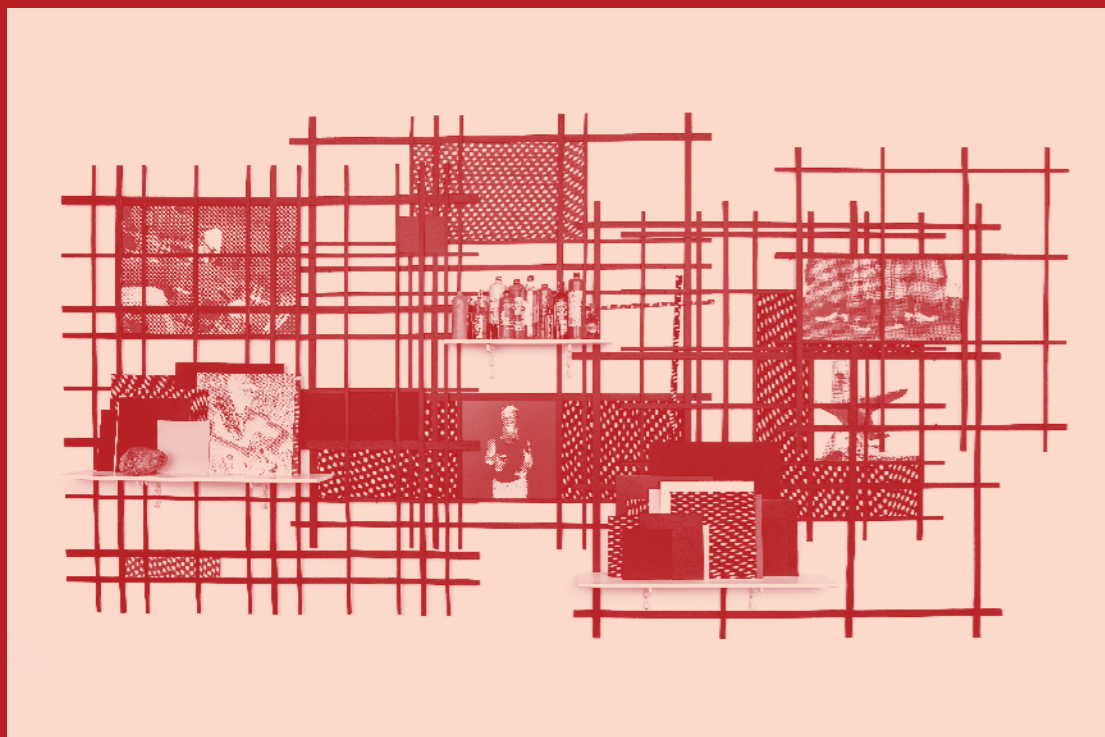
Guardian Havana responded to the theoretical approach of the biennial toward 'Integration and Resistance in the Global Era', its theme in

2009. Based on his origins and multicultural condition and with no intent to confront, the artist arranged symbolic contextualities and content, claiming sensitive territories of the indigenous with references to different signs and sources. He juxtaposed reference to Mondriaan with the distinctive checked designs of rugs from various rituals, such as that of the ancestral cult of the Afro-Caribbean Winti religion in his country, or disseminated materials and objects typical of the cultures and popular religions of Suriname in the grid.

The final result of this and other works of his reconciles the old tensions between the national and the foreign-international, the local-regional and the global-transoceanic. It juxtaposes content and various referents within a multidimensional articulation that diffuses the distinctions between scholarly or specialized traditions, knowledge and arguments and those of indigenous or popular origin. It is one way of emphasizing both the understanding of the individual and the world without exclusions, limits or boundaries, to defend truly universal values.

As a broad-spectrum artist, with a strong emphasis on installation and mixed media, he is part of a profound transformation in the way of making art in the Caribbean. Engaging

with historical, artistic-aesthetic arguments considered as less important, he vindicates cultural issues of his native context and the Caribbean space within the global narrative.



GUARDIAN HAVANA, cotton textile, coconut, shelves, photo prints, bottles, gin bottles, wood (pine, plywood), 197 × 98 × 12 in. (500 × 250 × 30 cm) 2009

Threads That Connect Us Charlotta Kotik

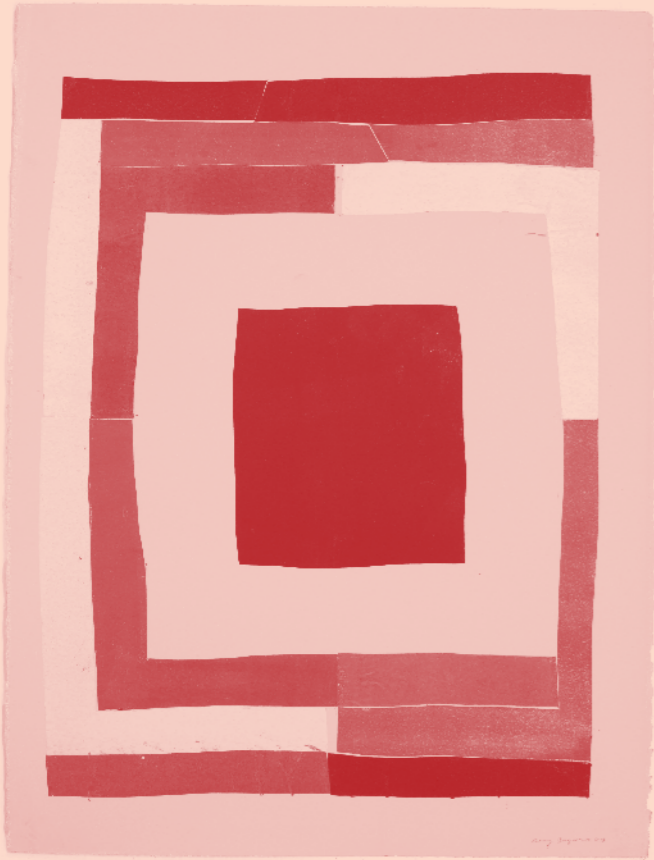
In 2013, Remy Jungerman created a number of horizontal assemblages in a simple studio space—a portion of the subdivided former barn at Art OMI, an international artist's residency in Ghent, NY. Constructed from wooden sticks and planks of various lengths and thickness, these were partially painted with an array of colors or covered with strips of fabric. Alongside the rectangles of stretched fabric, also integrated into the compositions, the works projected the feeling of weightlessness and gravity simultaneously. Titled *OPETE I, II, III*, the works' use of fabric asserted its importance as a vital element of Jungerman's visual vocabulary.

The works seemed to transport the ordinary environment into the realm of the spiritual—a space that induced concentrated introspection and feelings of entering a non-denominational shrine. This was well in keeping with Jungerman's practice of incorporating references to Winti, the Afro-Surinamese religion practiced in the interior of the country, as a spiritual underpinning of the work. In this religious system there are four pantheons. The first one, *OPETE*, stands for Air and is symbolized by the vulture. Wall-bound yet extending into space, the OMI works induced the feeling they were floating freely in space. These works could certainly be seen as the harbingers of three monumental suspended compositions in *Visiting Deities*, 2018–2019, in command of the Dutch Rietveld Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale.

At OMI, brimming with all possible forms of visual expression, Jungerman's pieces exuded almost serene resolve and self-assurance. Their tranquility, however, belied the artist's intense analysis of his previous artistic practice and his search for a more diversified expressive means. When surveying Jungerman's earlier oeuvre, one has to acknowledge certain post-OMI changes, primarily in the preponderance of horizontally oriented and more densely composed works, in contrast to earlier more open-latticed multimedia wall-bound reliefs where neither horizontal nor vertical orientation seemed to be particularly favored.

The artist also introduced the use of kaolin into his composition and the use of fabric, always a staple of Jungerman's work, intensified, now with a greater purpose. It became more directed toward the explorations of particular patterns that in turn became an important compositional device. While there were large pieces of clothing and household textiles incorporated into larger installation works from the 1990s and early 2000s, after his 2007 stay in the CCA Trinidad residency Jungerman 'first started making wooden grid frames from grid textile patterns'.¹

Creating prints and monotypes is an integral part of Jungerman's practice. In them, he again reflected on compositional structures of Surinamese traditional textile works, such as the patchwork quilts and shoulder capes. While at OMI, Jungerman also created a number of prints. Within these the two-dimensional pieces, there was a shift toward a more painterly interpretation. The clearly defined geometry of many earlier prints pointed toward principles formulated in Jungerman's 1988 mural *PEEPINA* on the garden wall of the Academy for Higher Arts and Cultural Studies of Fine Arts in Paramaribo. This work and the subsequent series of prints, also called *PEEPINA*, identified by different letters of the alphabet, were tributes to the early twentieth century Maroon woman artist Peepina. She had distinguished herself by creating many extraordinary examples of patchwork quilts and shoulder capes with highly organized geometric patterns. These were to affect Jungerman deeply and their principles were translated into many future works.



Peepina NY, monotype (Ltd Ed. of 1) 22 × 30 in. (56 × 76 cm)
2013, photography Jeongbae Lee

The artist's interest in use of fabric in various cultures led to his discovery of another patchwork tradition—that of the Gee's Bend quilts created in the African American community in Alabama. A number of publications on the quilters and the 2002 exhibition of their work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City brought renewed recognition of the significance of folk traditions. For Jungerman, the Gee's Bend quilts led toward more unstructured compositions in a number of the two-dimensional works and ultimately loosened his attachment to strict geometry. The OMI prints presented more fluid handling of colors and shapes, Junger-

man's tribute to the patchwork tradition of Gee's Bend. A well-worn book on the history and significance of these quilts is one of Jungerman's prized possessions.

It is necessary to digress now and at least briefly address the sources at the core of Jungerman's aesthetic. Born and raised in Suriname, Jungerman fully embraced its rich cultural heritage. A Dutch colony since the seventeenth century, Suriname became a melting pot of various local indigenous and African traditions as colonizers continued to direct slave ships to its plantations for centuries. In spite of the brutal plantation conditions and the mortal dangers of escaping, a number of runaway slaves established Maroon communities in the rainforest interior of the land through persistent determination and bravery and with the help of native population. After years of fierce struggle they ultimately obtained a degree of self-governance from the colonial power.

Through the hostilities and subsequent peace treaties of the 1760s,² the Maroons of Suriname were given the inland territory of the country and a degree of self-governing independence from their European colonizer. The diversity of African cultural traditions brought to the colony, alongside those of its indigenous groups, produced a unique and independent visual, spiritual and religious expression. The country's complex cultural heritage alongside the Winti religion was thus preserved and has survived to inspire generations, in spite of the fact that Winti rituals were officially forbidden by law until 1971. Jungerman himself is well versed in the history and customs of Suriname, as his mother was descendant of the Maroons. So it is with pride and respect that Jungerman acknowledges the distinct visual culture and traditions of Suriname, a culture that absorbed and transformed the forms and materials brought many generations ago from various African ancestral lands.

Pangi fabric largely derived from the Central and West African *Kente* cloth is now entrenched in the culture of Suriname where it established itself as an integral part of ceremonies, religious rites and clothing. Its geometric patterns became an inspiration for many of Jungerman's pieces and attained an exceptional degree of prominence in several works executed during the summer of 2015, when Jungerman worked in a Lower East Side walkup studio. When entering the space, one encountered a great abundance of fabric swatches and larger remnants—many found their place in the series of works done during that residency.

Over the years, Jungerman's inherent feeling for the proportions of space and the relationships of objects to given space and to each other became almost infallible. This sensibility, developed in his career as an engineer in Suriname before leaving to study art at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, has deepened through the years, manifesting

itself in every installation, in every placement of his work and its creation as well. While OMI's spacious architecture suggested horizontality and allowed for three-dimensional wall-bound objects, the overall dimensions of his 2015 New York studio were more restrictive. The artist responded by concentrating on a number two-dimensional works as well as a number of smaller freestanding cubes that could be shown in different configurations or superimposed on the flat works.

The pieces began with stretching selected, primarily gingham patterned cotton fabric, over wooden supports that function as a stretcher. The sides of the cubes were treated the same way. The two-dimensional works display fully the painterly tendencies that might have been apparent in Jungerman's prints and monotypes but could not have been made so distinctly visible in the wall reliefs or freestanding sculptures. Upon stretching, the fabric was either fully or partially covered with kaolin mixed with water. The use of kaolin powder, an essential material for many African sculptural traditions, survived the Middle Passage and became part of rites, exerting its magic in artifacts created in the African diaspora. It found an ingenious use in Jungerman's artwork and became especially prominent in his two-dimensional *paintings*.³

When the selected fabric is prepared, the artist applies the kaolin mixture by hand. This process is an almost expressionistic gesture that leaves distinct traces of the artist's energy in its wake. The subsequent tracing of lines of the initial pattern by carving into the dried kaolin layer, exposes the fabric's original design that, to a large part, determines the overall structure of the work. Additionally, certain sections of the panels or cubes are painted over by acrylic paint. Resulting compositions that combine parts of the initial pattern of the fabric with the free painterly gesture of the artist stand up to those created by the masters of non-objective painting of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Not only those often-mentioned famous protagonists of Russian Constructivism or Dutch De Stijl movement but also Abstract Expressionists such as Barnett Newman or Minimalists such as Robert Ryman and early works of Frank Stella.

When pondering the *FODU Composition 24, 2015*, as installed at the Kunstmuseum Den Haag during Jungerman's 2016 exhibition, one is filled with renewed trust in the possibilities of painting. That the basis for this visual feast is a simple gingham patterned fabric testifies to Jungerman's adventurous imagination.

Hung in a grid, the relationship of the works changes with each configuration of the parts. Naturally, the grid arrangement in a number of works acknowledges an essential part of Modernism, most notably in the large cube-like shaped modular structure that anchors *Promise IV, 2018–19*. Created by the multiplication of horizontal and vertical rows of iden-

tical skeletal open cubes, it holds an array of long decorated sticks as well as a number of enclosed cubes in its interior. Fabric, paint, twine and nails symbolizing features of African sculptures and artifacts decorate long rods and planks. These various materials are applied in specific intervals corresponding to body measurements of the influential Dutch-Suriname conceptualist Stanley Brouwn, supplemented by those of Remy Jungerman himself.⁴ There is an implication of rhythm radiating from this piece, as if the repeated measurements were noting the duration of musical intervals.

Jungerman's use of textile patterns illuminates the universality of certain geometric designs that are part of the cultural heritage of peoples in very different parts of the globe. When pondering Jungerman's compositions and his use of geometrically decorated fabric I was struck by the resemblance to the *kanafas*, a type of cloth documented since late middle ages in Central Europe, in the area that is now mostly within borders of the Czech Republic. The name is said to have been derived from the Latin *Cannabis*—hemp—that was at first used to produce rather coarse utilitarian fabric for household, agriculture and commerce. Sometimes the patterns identify the family business as well as the weavers. What is interesting is that the patterns of these *Kanafas* are practically identical to the patterns found on Suriname's *Pangi* cloth, the essential material of many of Jungerman's compositions and an indispensable element in his construction.

In Jungerman's installation at the 2019 Venice Biennale, large kaolin-covered sections of black and white *Pangi* cloth cover the whole expanse of the *kabra tafra*, the ancestral table. Following the *Winti* custom of using black and white to honor ancestors, the surface is adorned with the sharply delineated boundaries suggesting the imagery of plantations as well as Dutch agricultural landscape.

Another material that occasionally presents itself in Jungerman's work is the Dutch *Vlisco* fabric. While the designs are often considered to be of African origin, they were actually developed from the patterns and technique of Indonesian wax batiks. Looking for a cheaper production of the popular Indonesian import Dutch textile manufacturers employed new roller printing technique in mid-nineteenth century. The profile of the colorful fabric grew exponentially, especially in Dutch Gold Coast, now Ghana, and in a number of West African Dutch trading posts. Eventually finding its way back to Europe from this region, the material became mistakenly perceived as being of African in origin.

No such cosmopolitan dimension was ever a part of the story of the humble Bohemian *kanafas*, the fabric of homegrown tradition based on the immediate needs of the local population. It is, however, still an integral part of the broad tapestry of the universal visual heritage. Wherever the ancestral land

is, whether in the vast reaches of Africa, carved out from the tropical rainforest of Suriname, the below sea level fields of the Netherlands or dense forests of Central Europe, these places allowed for cultivating plants that became essential components of homespun fabrics, where patterns and colors become symbolic of religious rites or popular celebrations. Over time, the basic patterns that appeared long ago on *pangi* textiles or Bohemian *kanafas*, or the elemental geometry of the quilts of Gee's Bend, remain essentially the same. It is a universal language connecting cultures and continents, and it inspires artists and artisans to create extraordinary works large and small.⁵

1 Email from Remy Jungerman, 14 June 2019.

2 <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/ndyuka-treaty-1760-conversation-granman-gazon>

3 I am using that term consciously since the number of properties of this old age medium is a distinct part of Jungerman's work exemplified by the *FODU Composition* of 2015.

4 Brouwn's measurements used his body as a tool for non-normative spatial division - an F was equivalent 36 cm, E (for elbow) was 47 cm, S (for the length of the artist's step) was 76 cm. Jungerman supplemented these with two of his own, an R (standing for Remy) which at 37.8 cm is half of a Brouwn's step and J (for Jungerman) which is half a Brouwn's forearm at 23 cm.

5 For more information, see 'Remy Jungerman: "To Say Without Saying": Abstraction and the Black Atlantic' by Allison K. Young in *The Measurement of Presence. Iris Kensil, Remy Jungerman*, catalogue for the Dutch participation at the 58th Venice Biennale 2019 (Veurne/Amsterdam: Publisher Hannibal/Mondriaan Fund 2019), p. 34.

OPETE DISGUISED I, II, III, 2014
Lilly Wei

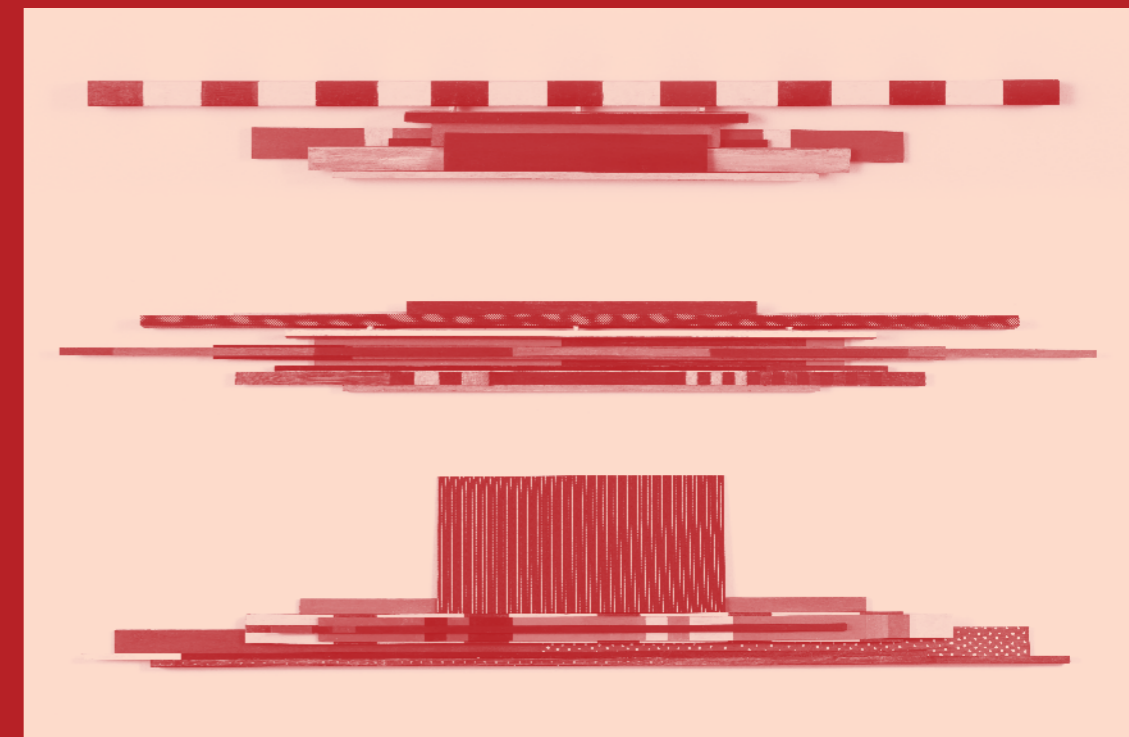
The title of Gauguin's celebrated painting, *D'ou venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? D'ou allons-nous?* [Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?] sounded a refrain that reverberated hauntingly throughout the exhibition 'Prospect 3: Notes for Now'. The same questions resound in Remy Jungerman's works, as he, too, discussed those and related inquiries in his contribution to 'Prospect 3', which opened in October, 2014 in New Orleans, Louisiana and was curated by Franklin Sirmans (now the director of the Pérez Art Museum in Miami).

Jungerman, at the time, was becoming more engrossed by themes of cultural origination and heritage, by the global routes that abstract forms have traveled and the transformations they underwent in their journeys. That includes an exploration of what identity means today. He discusses the entangled knots of cultural and social history, aesthetics, and philosophy, of place and displacement, of race, community, cosmopolitanism and otherness. He ponders continuity and rupture. What he shows us is the fluidity of forms and ideologies as they respond to the countless interactions

and interventions that occur in reality and how inevitable, but not pre-determinable, transformations of construct and meaning are in the relocating, alchemized by a diasporic imagination that assimilates and resists, creates and destroys. In *Opete Disguised, I, II, III*, the title is taken from Winti, a syncretic Afro-Surinamese religion. Opete is Air, symbolized by the vulture, one of its four pantheons; the others are *Aisa* (Earth), *Apuku* (Forest), and *Watra-Wenu* (Water). The rituals of the Winti more and more absorb him (and often inspire the titles for his art), as does his Maroon heritage, the Maroons, the descendants of transported Africans who escaped bondage and formed their own independent communities. The three reliefs are made of narrow strips of painted wood of different lengths elegantly layered over each other, something of a hallmark. They are insistently horizontal in direction, the constructed stacks hung on the wall one above the other, suggesting architecture, bridges and ships, connectors that link Africa to the Caribbean, the Americas, to Europe and back, from the past into the future, tracing a shared history, in a *less fixed way*, the artist said, although he was referring to a later project. They are painted red, blue and yellow, with black and white,

Modernism's exemplary palette. But sections dotted with white dots or stripes could be read as characteristic Maroon polka dots or plaids, as textile designs. They are not only geometric abstractions but also patterns that are part of Maroon culture, the rich indigo blue, not only De Stijl blue, but also the color of a ritual cloth.

Jungerman's work is a composite of formalist and more narrative modes. De Stijl, Mondriaan and Rietveld are evident in its materials, palette and structure, the geometry and patterns to be read in a Western context but also through other lenses. He asked recently, in talking about his projects, how can all that be put in 'without saying it outright?' He grapples with representation by resorting to a mitigated abstraction, his method both open and coded, inflected, *disguised*. Preferring more nuanced ways of seeing, of discussing, of deconstructing and reconstructing identities, he knows that perception is always contingent and in a state of flux.



OPETE DISGUISED I, cotton textile, acrylic, wood (pine) 82.6 × 7 × 3 in. (210 × 18 × 7 cm), 2013
OPETE DISGUISED II, acrylic, wood (pine), 67 × 6.7 × 3 in. (170 × 17 × 8 cm) 2013
OPETE DISGUISED III, cotton textile, acrylic, wood (pine, plywood), 88.5 × 17 × 3 in. (225 × 44 × 7 cm) 2013

