

# ILLUMINATING WOMEN



REPRESENTATIONS AND NARRATIVES  
FROM EDICIONES VICÍA



CUBAN  
HERITAGE  
COLLECTION



FALL 2018 - SPRING 2019

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Roberto C. Goizueta Pavilion | Otto G. Richter Library



*Illuminating Women* is an exploration of gender through textual and artistic representations and narratives by the Cuban artist book collective Ediciones Vigía. We have delved into the more than 500 rich, handmade Vigía examples at the Cuban Heritage Collection, considered the largest held anywhere, to explore female subjectivity in the covers and pages of

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# INTRO DUCTION

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these creative works in concert with historical, cultural, artistic, and literary ways of knowing. Ediciones Vigía occupies a space at the zenith of Cuban book arts, and those displayed here reveal far more than their materiality and craft.

The Vigías on view signal substantive themes pertinent to broader discussions in women's studies, tropes, notions of power, and the complexities of inhabiting and representing multiple forms and ideas of both the maker(s) and the subjects. The exhibition is further inspired and arranged according to distinct curatorial facets: creativity and ingenuity in Cuba's post-Soviet era, known as the Special Period; transnational collaborations; representations of the feminine ideal; and the intersectional approaches to understanding gender. Vigía's artists and authors have orchestrated a cornucopia of textual and tactile devices, and each edition consists of two hundred handmade examples. Along with paper, there are a surprising array of materials incorporated into the bookmaking; tipped in mimeographed images and text are elevated with meticulous hand-painted details, photographs, line drawings, and decoupage. Scrolls are untied, boxes are unlatched, and fans are unfurled revealing colorful and convivial Vigías with character, creating delicate things that beautifully play with the notion of the art book. Despite their painstaking construction and seeming fragility, the collection is designed to be handled, their whimsical components discovered, and ultimately to be "read" in multiple ways.





MATERIALS DISPLAYED ON THE GALLERY WALLS AND VITRINES HAVE BEEN CURATED BASED ON THE FOLLOWING THEMES:



## THE FORMATIVE YEARS AND THE SPECIAL PERIOD

The Vigías assembled in these cases represent the inception of the independent, small press and signify the work created in the ensuing years that were to be known as *el período especial*, or the Special Period, an era of economic crisis and severe material shortage in Cuba that began in 1989 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

On display is the earliest example in the collection, *Drama del unicornio; Elegía de las conversaciones* by Nancy Morejón (b. 1944), dated from 1985, Vigía's founding year. Also, in this case are other examples, whose small initial circulation and fragile construction mean that there are very few extant copies in existence.

These cases represent the distilled essence of Vigía using and experimenting with bookmaking techniques, fashioning a conscious aesthetic of the austere. These examples require us to think again about the choice of materials used, and the intentionality in using and elevating materials often considered disposable; creating exciting uses of matter of daily life. From the onset, Ediciones Vigía has sought to emphasize the materiality of their books, often connecting them in some way with nature, and pushing the boundaries in terms of the functionality of paper that ultimately coalesce to "*enriquecer la visualidad del libro*."<sup>1</sup> This era

of the publisher's production is marked with paper made from *bagazo de caña*, a cellulose by-product of the sugar industry that was used heavily in the construction of these examples. The book structures appear simple and serve to direct our attention to their fragile beauty and intellectual narratives, in particular, the exploration of the poetic culture of Matanzas.

## TRANSNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

Throughout its existence, Ediciones Vigía has used its editorial platform to publish the work of local Cuban authors, eventually expanding its outreach to include the writings of more established literary figures on and off the island. The selections in these cases demonstrate some of the varied currents of female authorship fostered by Vigía from its inception to the present.





The work of Cuban authors Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui (b. 1934), Digdora Alonso (1921-2007), Nancy Morejón, and Adelaida Fernández de Juan (b. 1961) touch upon the historic and current relationship between Africa and Cuba. Morejón has said that Ediciones Vigía expresses a new artistic sensibility that has allowed its creators to “*crear un gusto por el libro ilustrado a partir de una estética que brota de la nada material, del requerimiento espiritual*.”<sup>2</sup> One example of international collaboration can be seen in Vigía’s interpretation of Wislawa Szymborska’s (1923-2012) poem *Fin y principio* (1999). The Polish Nobel Prize winner’s work was translated into four languages for the Vigía edition: Spanish, English, French, and Polish.

Cuban-American authors such as Cristina García (b. 1958) and Ruth Behar (b. 1956) have been frequent contributors to Vigía projects. Behar, whose family left the island in the 1960s, has worked extensively with Ediciones Vigía after meeting Rolando Estévez Jordán on a return trip to Cuba in 1994. Their subsequent collaboration began with a request by Estévez Jordán to Behar that she translate her work to Spanish. That way, Estévez Jordán could read and learn about Behar’s personal experience with reconnecting to Cuba as an adult, a dominant theme in Behar’s writing.



## REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FEMININE IDEAL

Variations of the female form can be seen throughout the artwork of Ediciones Vigía. The examples featured in these cases echo tropes of femininity and ideals of beauty that are historically Eurocentric. These include the light-skinned blonde with flowing hair often depicted in poses that play off of the classic Botticellian model or other normative standards of beauty as in European portraits of women from the late 19th century. The stylistic choices of Vigía’s writers, artists, and designers, who have been mostly men, reinforce the specter and influence of the male gaze in defining “feminine ideals” inherent in Western visual registers.



The historically situated graphic figuring of women finds new avenues to further define and separate Cuban women as static subjects. These examples point to the ways in which the female body is stereotyped, commoditized, and eroticized for consumption against the thick contours of colonialism, slavery, indenture, racism, and the mechanisms of the polity that determine social status, mobility, and citizenship. Thus, European aesthetic traditions are complicated and contrasted by specific instances of exoticized beauty in which

the female form is marked by and distilled into racialized and sexualized conjurations, as evidenced in the rumbera protagonist in Nancy Grasso González’s *Rumba: toques y cantos* (2001) and the saint-whore dichotomy of Zaida del Río’s (b. 1954) *País mágico | Magic*



Country (2009). This religious imagery can be seen throughout the artistic production of the publishing house, with particular emphasis on the figure of the Virgin in various Vigía pieces, as depicted in Gabriela Mistral's (1889-1957) *El ruego* | *The Prayer* (2014) and evoked in Rolando Estévez Jordán's (b. 1953) *Mar mediante* (2007).

The selections in this particular grouping intentionally exposé an inherent tension in the exhibition: that while the male founders of Vigía have provided a platform for the work of female authors and included female illustrators and designers as collaborators, their representations of women also reinforce dominant narratives about gender (read women) that correspond to historical male constructions of the "feminine."

## GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND NON-BINARISM

The arts, anywhere and everywhere, deal directly or indirectly with notions of gender structures, sexualities, and interrelationships and identities. Assembled here are books issued by Vigía that make us think about the ideas and conventions of what it means to be male or female and the development of non-binary understandings of gender.

While improbable and sometimes outrightly forbidden, discourses centered on LGBTQ+ persons and experiences are concealed and revealed in a wide array of vernaculars and cues that help to smooth religious, cultural, and political conventions. For example, Miguel Barnet's (b. 1940) short story *Fátima, o, el Parque de la Fraternidad* | *Fatima of Fraternity Park* (2011) underscores tense themes of transgender identities, homosexuality, love, and economies of desire using fictional characters and comic relief. Barnet's work has been adapted for the screen and the two handmade copies of *Fátima* displayed here subtly play on difference and similarity in terms of subject and form. Ultimately, discussions and studies of gender, sexuality, and the body reflect power structures of race, class, and nation that are ideologically filtered through local and global political perspectives. These Vigías are notable for their commentary, whether purposeful or not, in the fields of gender, sexuality, and queer studies.

<sup>1</sup> "...enrich the visuality of the book." Interview with Rolando Estévez Jordán from the documentary *Vigía: entre la palabra y la imagen* [Between the Word and the Image], directed by Juanamaria Cordones-Cook and published by the University of Missouri, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> "...develop an appreciation for the art book that springs from material nothingness, from the requirement of the spirit." Nancy Morejón as quoted in the article "El arte de convertir un libro en luz," written by Jessica Mesa Duarte for Radio26 | CMGW, 2016.





## EXHIBITION CURATED BY CUBAN HERITAGE COLLECTION FACULTY

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## ABOUT THE CUBAN HERITAGE COLLECTION

The Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami Libraries collects, preserves, and provides access to primary and secondary sources of enduring historical, research, and artifactual value that relate to Cuba and the Cuban diaspora from colonial times to the present. The Collection supports the teaching, learning, and research needs of the University of Miami and the broader scholarly community.

## ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI LIBRARIES

The University of Miami Libraries provide faculty, students, researchers, and staff with the highest quality access to collections and information resources in support of the University's mission to transform lives through research, teaching, and service.

Cover: *País mágico / Magic Country*, 2009, by Zaida del Río Castro; introductory panel: detail from *La ronda*, ca. 2005, by Mae Roque, and detail (background) from *Mar mediante*, 2007, by Rolando Estévez Jordán; interior left panel: *Diálogos bajo la llovizna*, 1999, by Derbys Domínguez; interior center panel: *Ana Mendieta*, ca. 2000-2009, by Nancy Morejón, and *Nina Simone*, 2018, by Nina Simone; interior right panel: *Fátima, o, el Parque de la Fraternidad / Fatima of Fraternity Park*, 2011, by Miguel Barnet.

Cuban Heritage Collection

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