

# The Court of the King and the Jester

## CUBAN ARTIST ORESTES GAULHIAC

required science, history, and other general education classes. Determined, he moved over 500 miles away to Havana where he camped outside of the Escuela Nacional de Diseno (National School of Design) to speak with the school's director. The gentleman took a liking to Gaulhiac and empathized with his story. If Gaulhiac could pass the rigorous aptitude test, which required showing proficiency in painting, drawing, sculpture, and more, then he

by Steve Desroches

On a moonlit night as the animals lazily roam the fields, the king and his jester steal a kiss in the shadows. The crown and the jester's cap hovering over the stolen kiss in the dark lend themselves as clues that this is a forbidden kiss for many reasons. But the playful geometric shapes, the depth of field from the applied textures to the painting, and the use of light on the witnessing mules give enough playfulness that this is also a moment of joy. The image is from a work titled *Oculto Relacion De Amor, Entre Un Rey Y Su Bufon* (A Secret Love Between the King and the Jester) by world-renowned Cuban artist Orestes Gaulhiac, who adeptly mixes whimsy with social satire, great skill with fairytale-like guidance.

"Part of the dialogue is that love is mutual between two people," says Gaulhiac through translator Fermín Rojas. "And that the king may spend more time with the jester than the queen."

Gaulhiac's work has been shown in Europe and North America, as well as in his native Cuba. His show at Galeria Cubana marks his first Provincetown exhibition, and through a last-minute visa approval by the United States government, Gaulhiac was able to attend his July 5 opening at the Commercial Street gallery. Galeria Cubana provides a connection to an artistic world that, due to complicated politics between Cuba and the United States, often is not considered outside of cities with large Cuban populations, like Miami. But indeed Cuba has a world-class art scene, and for the past 20 years Gaulhiac has been a major force in Cuba's art world, and is one of the country's leading contemporary artists.

Born in the city of Santiago de Cuba in 1960, Gaulhiac had his first exhibition in Havana in 1978. His road to being a professional, independent artist took a few twists and turns. He was asked to leave art school in his hometown, not because he wasn't very talented, but rather because he skipped



*El Ojo del Amo*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 29 1/4 x 62 5/8"

could enroll in the prestigious school. He succeeded and was graduated from the school in 1980. He spent the next 11 years as a set designer for Cuban television, primarily for children's programs, an experience that still influences his work today.

"It has the features of images that are played with like dolls and marionette puppets," says Gaulhiac. "It adds a bit of magic."

While there is a touch of social commentary on class divisions in his work, by placing royalty intimately with their subjects, his work captures everyday moments; snapshots of a moment in time where two people share a kiss, or just a glance at each other. It's an interpretation of the social mythology created by cultural and class structures humans keep in place. The paintings are larger than life and give magic to the mundane.

In technique, Gaulhiac's paintings are intricate diagrams of brush strokes, layers of paint, scrapes, and gouges that create texture and shading as well as highlighting color choice that is captivating because of what it features and hides.

"I like playing with fields of light," says Gaulhiac. "Sometimes I'm interested in elevating a field of light not just for the light, but to lift the color to its highest point. Taking broad points of light orchestrates a magnetic point."

While Gaulhiac's work is not political, being a Cuban artist visiting the United States comes with the inevitable questions about the political state



*Coversacion  
Intima, Entre  
Mujeres, 2013, acrylic  
on canvas, 29 x 63"*

between the two countries, as well as the situation for artists in Cuba. Artists in Cuba have had the freedom to travel longer than most citizens in the Caribbean country have, says gallery director Michelle Wojcik, whose gallery is one of only 30 institutions that holds a U.S. Treasury Department license to legally import artwork from Cuba. Gaulhiac is a member of the Union Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC), an artistic union that, among other things, assists Cuban artists to travel around the world with their work. He first left Cuba in 1991, visiting and working in the Dominican Republic for eight months, an experience that motivated him to become an artist full time.

"They didn't want me to leave. They asked me to stay," says Gaulhiac of his employers at the television studio. "But I said no. I was done."

Things are changing in Cuba. Free enterprise is expanding, allowing artists to open their own private galleries. And in January of this year Cuba lifted travel bans on its citizens, allowing them to go wherever they want without the government's permission. However, as with any international travel, getting the required visa for the destination can be a challenge, as was the case with Gaulhiac's cliff-hanging wait for his own paperwork to be approved by the U.S. to come to Provincetown. As Cuba and the United States have no official diplomatic relations and the U.S. has kept a lonely embargo on the country since 1960, politics can overshadow Cuban art, even if the work has no political overtones (which, when it does, there is no censorship, says Gaulhiac.) However, the mystique of the chilly relations and the distance placed between the two countries by diplomatic tensions give a certain cache to Cuban art as far as Americans are concerned, says Gaulhiac.

"Cuba is a very curious topic for a lot of people," says Gaulhiac. "Part of the fascination with Cuban art is that it is taboo, a mystery."

*Orestes Gaulhiac's work is being shown with fellow Cuban artist Edel Bordon in the Moments of the Soul exhibition at Galeria Cubana, 357 Commercial St., Provincetown, through Thursday, July 25. For more information call 508.487.2822 or visit [www.lagaleriacubana.com](http://www.lagaleriacubana.com).*