

# *O Sole Mio*

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Marco A. Castillo  
Adrian Esparza  
Nathaniel Rackowe  
Canan Tolon

**Parasol unit**  
foundation for contemporary art

## *The Sun as Doorway to a World Within*

**W**e have time to think, we have time to observe and we have time to reflect. The world, our surroundings, work and family responsibilities, no longer clamour constantly for our undivided attention. We tell them to wait and they obey, how amazing! When was the last time I experienced such freedom for my mind

It is said that children grow during their summer holidays, and I do not disagree. But what is it that makes them grow, both physically and in independence? Is it purely the sun and warm weather or rather the carefree environment that encourages them to undertake unusual activities and unforeseen adventures?



to wander? Hmm, maybe in the early 1960s, some years before the people of planet Earth sent astronauts to the moon, long before the mass protests of 1968, over fifty years ago. At the time, I thought that was how the world would behave forever.

For the sake of this conversation, I am asking myself whether childhood is a passage towards adult life or is it an experience that stays with us all through our life, through the many years and well into our older age? Dreaming about the past, our childhood, our youth,

bygone eras, and even yesterday, is now not only possible but generally encouraged. Reviewing the past is not necessarily nostalgic or romantic, rather it can allow us to rethink and reposition other situations throughout life and ultimately help us to put things into greater perspective later in life. When I was a schoolgirl, I had the impression that time was passing very, very slowly. I loved my schooldays routine, but I also looked forward to the one day off we had in the week. Those were celebratory days to see my countless cousins, uncles and aunts and whoever else in the family would come along. In those days, family was the most important thing, friends were secondary to them and our trust was purely centred on the family, every member of which somehow contributed to our overall education, happiness, sense of security and confidence – I thank them all. Also, in those days, love, humanity and human support were infinitely more important than the apparently inextinguishable greed to possess limitless objects and the never-ending consumerism of recent years. We could perhaps say that the animate world of those earlier days was far more important than the inanimate one. Family gave us the strength and support which for me has been the backbone of my life, the force which gave me the resilience to maintain my positive attitude during all the years when I moved from one country to another, from one language to another and from one field of study to another. It always kept me keen and curious to go from one chapter of life to another, even decades later when I embarked on establishing an art

foundation in a mega city like London, which I barely knew and had absolutely no contacts in. I think a full, busy, adventure-laden and happy childhood is when the seeds of a satisfying and productive life are planted. The more curious and adventurous a childhood is, the easier one finds the path to all kinds of possibilities and undertakings at later stages.

In each one of the works contributed to this eleventh issue of *O Sole Mio* by the artists Nathaniel Rackowe, Canan Tolon, Adrian Esparza and Marco Castillo, the vision or remnant of another world is vividly present. Whether the world within belongs to childhood memories, or a time past now envisioned as a remembrance of lapsed time, it is probably a time encapsulated and stored somewhere deep within us that may affect us throughout our life. I therefore offer these artists my grateful thanks for their thoughts, for having recognised in themselves the vision of a world beyond and for having shared it with us. The sensitivity and heightened feelings in each of these works has enriched me, but above all has revived my own thoughts of the past and the ensuing possibilities, something which I have probably neglected more than I should have, mainly due to an overloaded schedule in recent years.

In *Kitchen Window*, Nathaniel Rackowe offers his childhood recollection of a carefree summer evening, lying in the garden of his family home, watching the sun's reflection in the kitchen window. The very particular light expressed in his

painting seems to have been something which has remained with him to this day. Not only has such light affected his personal vision of happiness and perfection, but it has continued to inspire and encourage the direction of his work.

Reading Rackowe's explanation of his painting reminded me of my own earliest childhood memories, which I have carried like a treasure all my life and which have perhaps unconsciously influenced my decision to tackle the digital *O Sole Mio* exhibition as a way of exploring them during the stresses of the pandemic when we may all at times have felt trapped in the dark. My memory is of myself as an infant on a boat with my parents and siblings somewhere in the southern part of Iran. I clearly remember it was a warm day with afternoon-like sun in which we were all comfortably basking. This vision of sunshine has remained with me ever since and has surely kept my confidence high all through life.

Like Nathaniel Rackowe, Canan Tolon also dips into this other world to review some childhood memories. This time, though, it is not a lush and balmy summer evening scene in the family garden. Rather, it is from Tolon's bed in the early hours of a day in a hospital ward of a polio clinic in southern France. No matter how different the two scenes might be, the common denominator is the memory of observing the glory and beauty of rays of sunlight and the hope and optimism it generated for each of them. The two images that Tolon

provided for this issue have moved me to extremes. They do not speak only of light and darkness, hope and desperation in the face of life's reality, they also consider the current political climate and in a poignant way express our common pain about racial prejudice as well as our hope for better days. Tolon's concerns are not only personal, but rather and above all are collective and address the ills of our communities and of our world. Her concerns are also manifest in the volunteering work she has been doing during the pandemic in her hometown in California.

*Sunroom* by Adrian Esparza is a totally different way of taking inspiration from the sun as a way of entering this other world, while in a world of immense socio and cultural extremes. In the context of this discussion, *Sunroom* could stand for everyday life differences, along with all their ensuing possibilities and diversities, here in the simple vernacular architecture of an American town like El Paso and a craft traditional to the nearby regions of Mexico. *Sunroom* is a colourful and composite work created as a result of Esparza's deep thinking. To create his work the artist employed a weaving technique specific to making serapes, the shawls or blankets worn in Mexico, using colourful threads from a serape, the other half of which hangs next to his work. In its current form, the complete work heralds a promise of renewal with fresh and new possibilities within the vision of an artist's inner thoughts. Esparza lives and works in El Paso, Texas, just over a bridge from Mexico. Having been interested in the



the weaving techniques of making serapes, he has continually striven to bring into dialogue the past with the present, and tradition with the contemporary. As its name suggests, *Sunroom* belongs to a concept of domestic and functional contemporary living, yet through Esparza's innovative and creative thinking, it is transformed into a poetic language with a conceptually far-reaching outcome with no function other than its own inherent beauty.

Marco Castillo's memories of this other world – the hidden world that somehow comes along with us – are well expressed in his contribution to this issue of *O Sole Mio*. His memories go back to the artist's birthplace, Cuba, with its uninterrupted tumult of history and artistic influences accumulated over many decades. Of particular interest to Castillo is Cuba's collective heritage of architecture and design from the 1960s and 70s – the first 20 years after Fidel Castro came into power. According to the artist, little remains of the creative output of the artists who had incorporated a great deal of historic and regional influences in their

work. Castillo's various works included here are entitled *Córdoba* in homage to Gonzalo Córdoba, one of the most important designers of that generation. This group of designers strove to create a modern living environment, albeit employing traditional materials such as rattan and mahogany, along with forms and shapes from earlier designs, such as the five-pointed star that became a symbol of communism. Castillo's piece is a sort of metamorphosis from a circle to a five-pointed star and vice versa.

From private and personal childhood memories in the work of Rackowe and Tolon to the more collective concerns in the works of Esparza and Castillo, the works of these artists have been enlightened by their memories of the past, which eventually shed light on how to understand the realities of today. Whichever direction they go in, it seems early experiences are critical to our present existence and vital to our understanding of where we stand today and possibly where we are heading for.

Ziba Ardalan

Founder, Artistic and Executive Director

Photograph by Ziba Ardalan.

# Nathaniel Rackowe

## *Kitchen Window*



**R**eading 'O Sole Mio' on a sunny lockdown afternoon in London, the line 'Your windowpanes shine' suddenly evoked a strong childhood memory. A summer sunset at the house where I grew up, being in the garden, lying on the grass, the sun striking the house and reflecting in the kitchen window, beautiful and blinding.

I have spent two decades attempting to capture the beauty of light, and its ability to transform structure, through sculpture, installation, performance and painting. And especially the transcendental effect it can have on overlooked parts of our city.

My most recent series of works on paper focused on Beirut and were abstracted views of petrol stations in and around the city. However, this new work on paper, titled *Kitchen Window*, naturally comes from a more personal place. It is an expression of light, of course, but also seems fitting for this challenging time, when we must all remain at home as much as possible, until effective ways to fight Covid-19 are developed and refined. Like many others, I'm sure, I'm using this time to reflect and connect different parts of my life. This work is an expression of that sunlight from many years ago, illuminating the path ahead.

Light and movement are crucial elements of Nathaniel Rackowe's practice. Inspired by the urban environment, the primary impetus of his work is the growth and shifting nature of a city. In his large-scale architectural structures and light sculptures, he often uses recognisable urban infrastructure and industrial products, such as scaffolding poles, corrugated plastics, concrete, breeze blocks and strip lights. After deconstructing the very notion of a structure, he rebuilds it tangibly and adds an element of light. By recreating the experience of navigating the urban landscape, he emphasises those often-overlooked in-between spaces, where light fluctuates from negative to positive. Each material he uses has specific associations that are reiterated through his distortion of their original function.

Inspired by constructivist and deconstructionist artists such as Vladimir Tatlin, Richard Serra, and Gordon Matta-Clark, Rackowe's works also pay homage to the artists Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. Similarly, Rackowe uses mass-produced industrial materials together with an element of light to create contemporary monuments that enliven our urban reality.

Nathaniel Rackowe (1975–) was born in Cambridge, UK, and is currently based in London.

Nathaniel Rackowe, *Kitchen Window*, May 2020.  
Aerosol paint and bitumen on Arches oil paper.  
21 x 30 cm (8¼ x 11¼ in). Courtesy the artist.



# Canan Tolon

*Mon soleil à moi*



*'Mais pourquoi il pleur le monsieur? Il est triste d'être tout seul?'* The sad face of a grown-up man appeared on our brand-new black-and-white TV and we all went quiet to hear the sound of this strangely beautiful lamenting voice. French was the only language I spoke then, and *O Sole Mio*, in my three-year-old head, meant *moi, seul*. As for me, I was never alone. I shared a very large noisy room of the children's hospital with many other kids who, like me, recovered from the scourge inflicted upon us during the polio epidemic. Together, we filled the whitewashed spaces with strident screams and laughter, banging about for attention.

And life was another play-day in our world, as we imagined and fashioned it between the many rows of tiny hospital beds. I remember the immense room very well with its large naked windows, which went all the way up to the ceiling. We were too small to reach the windowsills to see what was outside, although this did not concern us at all.

Our indifference may have been to do with the strangeness that came through the large swinging doors every now and then. Strange smells, strange colours, strange outfits, all clashed with the bright, whitewashed, antiseptic environment in which we lived, in slow



motion. But from the windows every morning came a ray of light, incandescing everything in its course. It visited each of our beds, in which we lay every night strapped into the plaster moulds that supposedly corrected our bodies while we slept. Each of us would wait our turn to be in the blinding light, to be transported elsewhere. We seized our brief moments in the sun, dancing in our beds, paralyzed from the waist down, screaming with joy, and doing silly things, imagining we were on stage. When the light passed and everything went dark again, we could, for a little while longer, enjoy the brightest moment of the day captured and glowing still on our retinas, until it slowly faded away. We giggled, eyes closed.

When I turned 5, I was to be moved to a room on the other side of the building with the older children. I was quite excited about it, until I was told that the sun would not be able to visit the new room, that I would miss my daily ray of sunshine and would have to learn to live without it. I was inconsolable, until someone told me, 'But you can take it with you in your pocket!'

By then, I knew what the song really meant. It meant that sunshine is something you have, and that you can take it with you everywhere you go. Mine was in the right-hand pocket of my overalls. And whenever things turned too dark for me, I would put my hand in my pocket to find it there ... I could feel it at the tip of my fingers.

More than sixty years later, the world is once again going through a crisis ... once again we are reminded that the enemy is invisible ... that it has infected our planet. And when we look at pictures of our beautiful planet to better comprehend what is happening to us, we are again reminded that, in the greater scheme of things, we are as invisible as the virus.

These days, more often than usual, I find my hand in my pocket ... and it makes me smile to find it is still there, secretly shining.

Canan Tolon, *Looking in*, 2020.  
Photograph courtesy the artist.



Space is central to Canan Tolon's work, especially in the way it is visualised, politicised, imagined and remembered. Tolon is known for her seemingly abstract paintings made using geometric motifs and a limited colour palette, yet her technique for creating space with oil painted on canvas, lends itself to painstaking investigation, premeditation and control. Formally precise, rhythmic and structured, her works are at the same time elusive, transient and contain an element of surprise, which prompts viewers to re-evaluate the illusionistic composition of architectural structures and landscapes. Although her paintings

are informed by her own photographic experience and skill, she uses no collage or printing techniques. Rather, she uses straight edges and knives to produce an effect of 'instant reality'.

Born in Istanbul, Canan Tolon (1955-) now lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, USA, and in Istanbul, Turkey. In 2014, Parasol unit presented *Sidesteps*, Canan Tolon's first major solo exhibition in a London institution.

Canan Tolon, *Sunshine on work stacked in the studio*, 2020. Photograph courtesy the artist.

# Adrian Esparza

## *Sunroom*



Inspired by his borderland experiences and his own Mexican-American heritage, the artist Adrian Esparza comments on political divides and explores material culture by 're-instilling lost value in found objects'. He first gained international recognition with his deconstruction of the Mexican serape, which he often uses as the source material for much of his large-scale wall installations. Influenced by modern architecture, physical landscapes and mid-century minimalist artists, Esparza creates dramatic geometric drawings and structures of extraordinary volume, depth and perspective. By weaving the unravelled cotton thread of the serape

through a grid of nails, the artist diffuses colour and expands space to form a vibrant optical experience.

Adrian Esparza (1970–) was born in El-Paso, Texas, USA, where he now lives and works. In 2012, Parasol unit presented his work, *So Fast and Slow*, 2012, in the group show *Lines of Thought*, an exhibition that explored the work of 15 contemporary artists whose practice has focused on using line in creatively challenging ways.

Adrian Esparza, *Sunroom*, 2017. Sarape, wood, nails, enamel, 208.3 x 416.5 cm (82 x 164 in). Private collection. Photo credit: Kevin Todora Photography. Image courtesy the artist and Cris Worley Fine Arts.



# Marco A. Castillo

*Córdoba*



The *Córdoba* works are inspired by the utopian movement of designers, interior designers and architects formed during the Modern Movement in the 1950s, who, in the early years of the Cuban Revolution, worked on a project that could be considered an aesthetic revolution. This group would assume responsibility for projecting and producing new spaces that would modulate the life of the supposed 'new man'. It was about more austere and more practical furniture and objects, with cutting-edge design, sometimes suggestive of Scandinavian and early Ikea designs. By the late 1970s, however,

the movement had been abandoned, primarily due to the inability of official institutions to comprehend it and their ensuing stigmatisation of the project, dismissing it as 'bourgeois taste'. With the *Córdoba* series, the artist splits in two and takes on the role of a designer of that era to revive a tradition that disappeared from Cuba in the early 1980s.

Marco Castillo's wood and rattan works are rooted in the designs of Cuban modernist practice, juxtaposing a colonial and traditional past with the more ideological and figurative influences of the 1960s and 70s. The pieces take on



Soviet-era designs and intertwine them with traditional elements of Cuban production, such as latticework and rattan. The artist explains that the work *Córdoba*, 2019, represents 'the metamorphosis of a circle into a five-pointed star, operating as a metaphor for the formal and ideological evolution, or involution. The piece can be read in both directions – cyclically – from the star to the circle and vice versa.' The works from this series bear the names of Cuban architects and designers of the time. Notably, *Córdoba*, 2019, refers to Gonzalo Córdoba who led the Design Department of the Cuban production company EMPROVA, and originally designed the offices and private residences for high government officials. By juxtaposing historical political emblems with woven rattan, Castillo establishes an artistic aesthetic and narrative procedure that entwines native, Nordic and African influences with Cuban tradition, including its interpretation of Modernism and the country's political, social and economic trajectories, striving to position Cuba within a global history of exchange and influence.

Marco A. Castillo (1971–) was born in Cuba and now lives and works between Havana and Mérida, Mexico. He is a founder member of the Cuban artist collective Los Carpinteros (The Carpenters). Much of his work is informed by the history of Cuba and its post-revolutionary, social and cultural changes. His knowledge of architecture, design and sculpture is fundamental to his installations, drawings and sculptures, which engage with space, conceptually fuse the functional and



non-functional, and make use of traditional artisan skills and humour.

Castillo's oeuvre is one of the most important and internationally influential to come out of Latin America in recent decades. In tandem with other global movements of historical revision, Castillo reflects on Cuba's modernisation in the 1960s and 70s and the works of its most respected artists, architects and designers. From a political standpoint, Castillo seeks to follow the historic trail of these artists, while positioning himself as an advocate and herald for Cuban artistic heritage. The sculptures and works on paper of his most recent project draw on elements of the modern design and socialist realism of Cuba's Soviet period, using traditional Cuban techniques and materials, such as mahogany wood and rattan.

In 2015, Parasol unit presented an exhibition of works by the Cuban art collective, Los Carpinteros (Marco Castillo and Dagoberto Rodríguez), the duo's first major show in a public London institution.

Page 12: Marco A. Castillo, *Córdoba (horizontal)*, 2020. Wood and rattan, 95 x 239 x 40 cm (37½ x 94 x 15¾ in). © Marco A. Castillo. Courtesy Nara Roesler Gallery, São Paulo.

Page 13: Marco A. Castillo, *Córdoba*, 2019. Wood and rattan, 190 x 99.5 x 30 cm (74¾ x 39¼ x 11¾ in). © Marco A. Castillo. Courtesy Haines Gallery, San Francisco.

Page 14: Marco A. Castillo, *Córdoba (vertical)*, 2020. Wood and rattan, 184 x 124.9 x 99.5 cm (72½ x 49¼ x 39¼ in). © Marco A. Castillo. Courtesy KOW, Berlin.



# Final Issue



**ISSUE 12** featuring works by

Jeronimo Elespe  
Paul Kneale  
Dominic and Shiva Palfreyman  
Ismini Samanidou

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