HIS REVOLUTION

Yoan Capote's intimate connection with Cuba

By Michael Slenske

MICHAEL SLENSKE

Yoan Capote in Cuba, 2015.

"I want to do the piece of Fidel here,"

says Yoan Capote,

pointing across his rain-sheeted windshield as we drive by the marker for *kilometro* 27 off Havana's Carretera Central. One could practically detail a car with the city's recent afternoon microbursts, which is serendipitous for Capote because his wife has been asking him to clean his mud-caked SUV for weeks. According to a cartoonish concrete sign, we've just crossed over into the small agriculture and artists enclave of Bauta—40 minutes southwest of the capital—to visit the overgrown farm Capote has purchased just a few miles past the town of Punta Brava, where Fidel Castro once had a finca. It's early March, and there are just two months left before the 12th edition of the Havana Biennial gets under way—it now occurs every three years, despite the name—not to mention Capote's second solo show, "Collective Unconscious," at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery (on view through July 10). He's also preparing his first major monograph, with Skira Rizzoli, and mapping out a fall exhibition for the Hong Kong outpost of his London dealer, Ben Brown Fine Arts. The nonstop deadlines have the 38-year-old Cuban artist caught in a perpetual loop between the Queens-based Modern Art Foundry (where his idol, Louise Bourgeois, cast her pieces), his studios in Havana's centrally located Vedado neighborhood, and this new venture at the farm, which he's calling either La Base KM27, as a nod to the nearby military base, or Open Work, after the Umberto Eco book.

"When I'm dead, this could be an institution, a foundation, or maybe an art center like Storm King, though my real reference is Chinati," says Capote, invoking Donald Judd's live-work space in Marfa, Texas. If all goes according to plan—meaning the government approves his blueprints and the two-venue show with Shainman sells well—in a year or two he'll have an Alvar Aalto–inspired studio of his own design on the property, featuring two naves where he and his brother, Iván, can cast large works and store materials that are currently overcrowding the city locales. (The brothers share another studio called El Nukleo just across the street from El Bunker, Capote's primary space, which he carved out of a white 1940s industrial building and fortified with custom iron doors and gates.)

For now, the farm is just a wildly untamed folly, with knee-high thatch that puts off a sauna-worthy heat after a downpour. Capote is dressed for the affair in work boots, green cargo pants, and a green polo shirt. As we exit the SUV, a small pack of dogs greets us, joined by a chorus of pigs from a series of makeshift pens, and a prickly rooster. His mother-in-law is giving her husband a haircut under a sheet-metal veranda, next to a small cinder block home where they reside while overseeing Capote's property. Across from the house, beside a derelict aboveground concrete swimming pool, is a heavily patinated space loosely constructed from corrugated aluminum panels. It is here the artist is planning to create an epic Fidel sculpture, which he has talked about showing behind a veil, spotlit from the floor, projecting Platonic allegories of the revolutionary leader at Shainman's 20th Street space in Chelsea. When completed, the piece will rise like a giant rusted Erector set from a steel stand as the visage of the octogenarian former dictator—whose likeness was taken from a bust made by the Russian sculptor Lev Kerbel in the early 1980s—rotates in respectful if interrogative reflection.

Dubbed *Inmanencia*, the work is meant to be the exhibition's pièce de résistance, constructed from some 3,000 welded hinges that were donated or exchanged from old Havana homes. (It will even be shown with photos that document his assistants changing out the old hardware.) But right now those hinges are in Vedado, piled high in five-gallon paint buckets in the foyer of the El Bunker studio on Calle 23. "It could be seen as a very political piece, but I felt I had to do it because it deals with life before and after Fidel," says Capote of this post-détente crossroads where Cubans and Americans are both at a hinge moment, trying to assess which foreign-relations moves come next. "The hinge is a symbol of mobility, but Fidel can't be removed from Cuban history. The Cuban revolution created a new independent country but at the same time divided society in two different groups, so the image of a revolutionary who proposes unchangeable ideas is an interesting paradox."

It's certainly a fraught sculpture at a fraught time in Cuba's history. However, it's just one of 25 challenging works that Capote will show with Shainman. As the exhibition title suggests, each piece taps into Jungian psychology, international relations, and the sociopolitical divide between those who've stayed and those who've fled the island since the revolution. Like the majority of his oeuvre, the work filters the lingua franca of Minimalism, Surrealism, and geopolitics through the symbols and signifiers unique to the Cuban experience that Capote has mined for the past two decades via politically charged icons—microphones, podiums, handcuffs, the sea, islands, speakers, nails binding crowbars (in a Cuban hat tip to Günther Uecker), fishhooks, human remains—and a mix of high and low materials including oil, bronze, concrete, marble, steel, fire, even thousands of human teeth (collected from clinics and battlefields over years for his seminal concrete-and-wood sculpture *Stress*, 2004–12).

To tease out these highly conceptual works Capote starts by writing a single command, sketches a form, then crafts a sculpture around that imperative. "I prefer to maintain myself as a worker and as a person connected to society, so when I walk in the street, I can analyze not just what is going on with

Abstinencia (Política), 2011. Bronze, etching on paper. Dimensions variable.

OPPOSITE: Detail of *The Thinker*, 2014–15. Bronze.

Cubans but all of human society," says Capote. "I prefer the psychological analysis of the collective experience. I analyze my personality from the collective that surrounds me."

For a new work, *The Thinker*, Capote is fabricating a pile of bronze dumbbells and kettlebells with brains attached to the handles—all forged from old Russian shell casings. "I always call attention to the fact that all human behavior is influenced by the body. That's why I'm interested in Louise Bourgeois and Robert Gober, but Gober is so private. In my case, it's the opposite," says Capote, who previously fashioned a brain in place of a scrotum on a sculpted torso called *Racional*, 2004, and for the 2009 Biennial, created a sandbox version (inside Havana's Morro Castle) of his as yet unrealized underground maze-in-the-shape-of-a-brain project, *Open Mind*. Last fall, he re-created the work in Toronto with police barricades that formed an overhead vivisection of a brain. For Shainman, Capote is also producing a series of six *Link* paintings (black canvases with white Play buttons in the middle whose titles are actual URLs to videos, blogs, and web pages questioning the official versions of historical events, espousing conspiracy theories, or simply dead websites that function as "a threshold to the investigation of something evocative"). He'll show works called *Cold Memorie* (massive Cold War–era landscapes from his "Temperatura" series, made by scratching reliefs into a "canvas" of functional A/C compressors that will frost over in areas to tease out formal depths and political metaphors), *Skepticism* (a bronze microphone that functions as a torch), and more of his now iconic impasto-laden "Isla" paintings of seascapes punctuated by thousands of fishhooks nailed to the panels. In his previous show with Shainman, 2010's "Mental States," Capote also employed these symbols of seduction in his "American Appeal" series of postcard landscapes, including one of the Manhattan skyline illuminating the barbed obsessions of the immigrant experience.

"NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING ABOUT ME IN CUBA."

BEN BROWN FINE ARTS. OPPOSITE, LEFT: MICHAEL SLENSKE

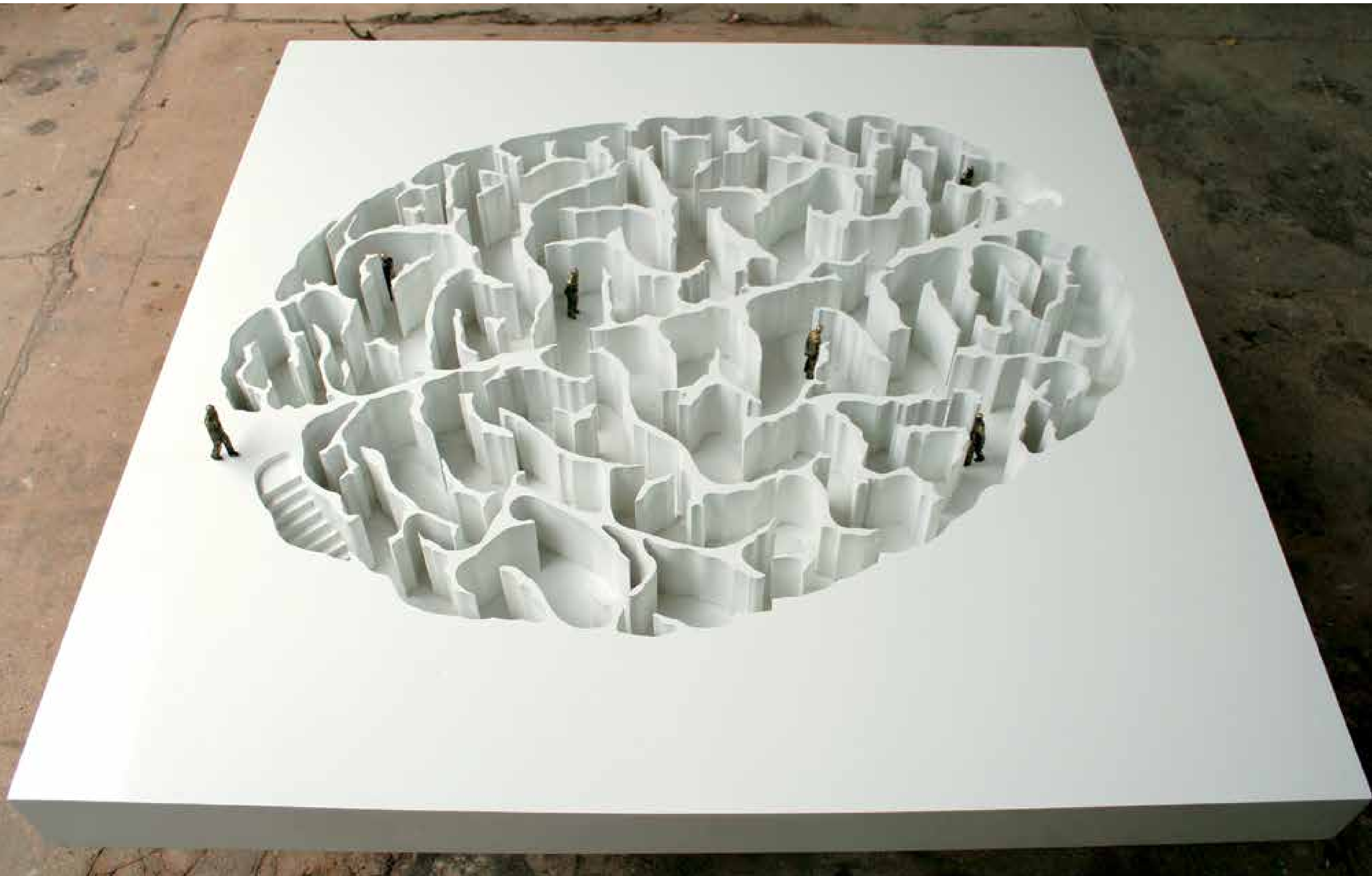
"The fishhook is one of those ancient objects that never changed its design and function, and I'm interested in its direct relation with the water and as a metaphor with the seascape, which represents a political limit and the place where a lot of Cubans died," says Capote, who plans to show 15 of these paintings, along with sculptures and works on paper, in Hong Kong with Ben Brown. The salon-style hang will feature different-size panels in varying color schemes (including one red version to represent the island's period of Russian occupation) whose waves will align around the gallery to form a single, continuous horizon. "I like the idea of surrounding the gallery with water so you feel isolated by these metal structures," says Capote. "You're surrounded by water; you have the sense there's no exit and you are the island."

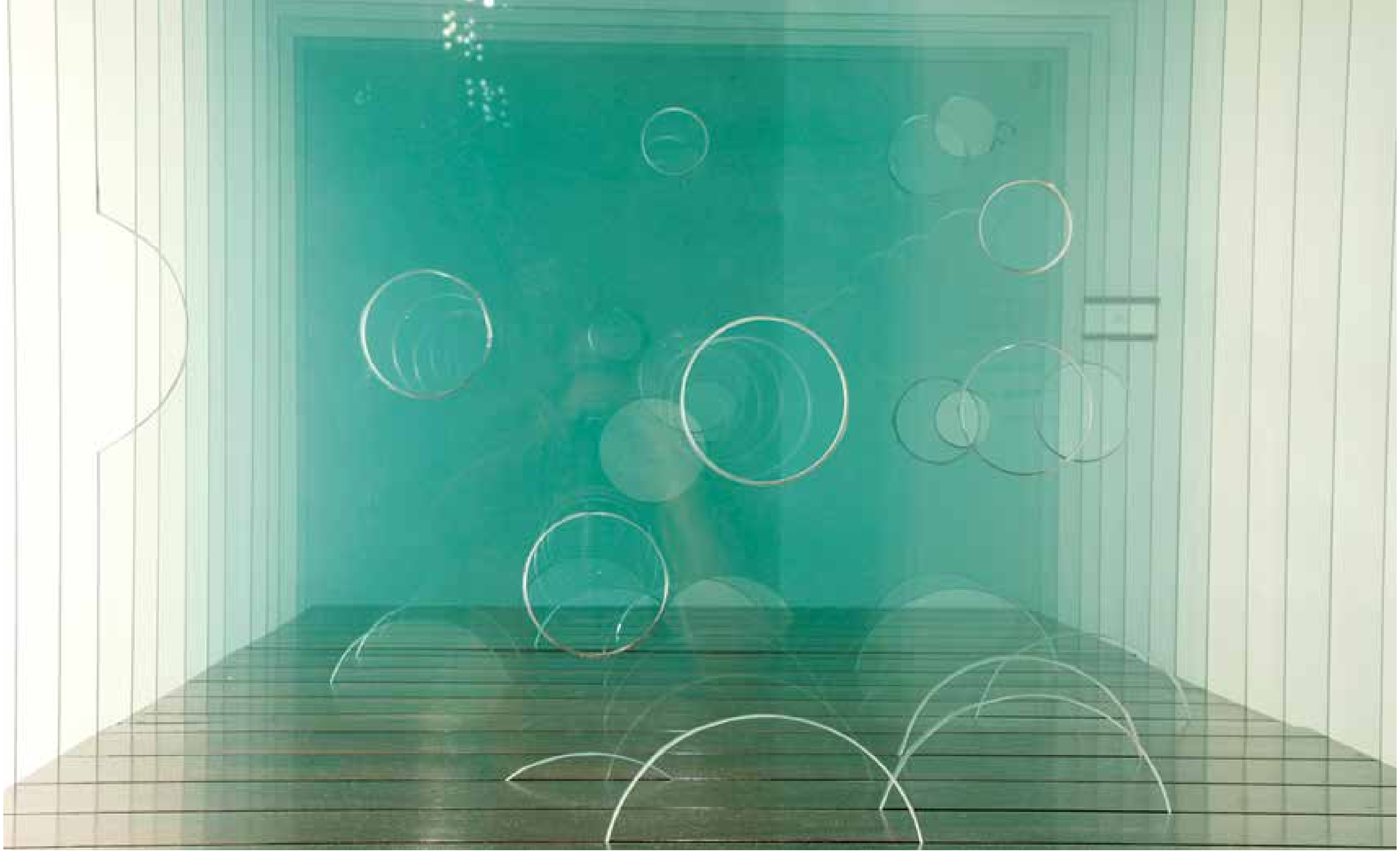
While Capote's star has been rising for some time, his practice is just one piece of the miasmic puzzle that is the contemporary Cuban art scene. When it debuted in 1984, La Bienal de la Habana was basically a market-free curatorial effort, with programming dedicated to Latin American and Caribbean artists (opening up to undeveloped African and Asian countries by its second iteration). May's Biennial is still very much on track to be the city's most international art affair to date, with talents such as Robin Rhode, Carlos Amorales, and Tino Sehgal on the official lineup. In February, nearly all Havana hotels, casas, and flights were sold out, according to tour operators. Some artists I met during my stay were even calling it *la última Bienal*, or the last real Cuban Biennial before all the moneyed international interests come in and turn it into the type of spectacle that pervades every other fair-hosting metropolis on the planet. All this despite the barrage of headlines over the imprisonment of Cuban-born expat artist Tania Bruguera for staging an unsanctioned reprise of a 2009 performance piece. While some equate her predicament with that of Ai Weiwei, other collectors and curators with deep ties to the Cuban scene summarized Bruguera's efforts as "grandstanding" and "beyond art." When asked about it, Capote simply says "no comment." Of course, Ai's status didn't slow the market. "I feel the market is going to embrace Cuban art more and more as it opens up," says Brown. "I think there's potential for a mini-China moment waiting to happen in Cuba."

During the Biennial, Capote's studio will take on the air of an embassy, with his laser pointer–driven slide-show presentations attended by a steady stream of collectors from trustees of the Tate to the American Friends of the Ludwig Foundation of Cuba (AFLFC). The Foundation's namesake practically invented the contemporary collector craze for Cuban art by opening a branch in Havana in the mid '90s.

"I think Yoan is a strong supporter of his community and an advocate for Cuba," says Carole Rosenberg, president of the AFLFC. Rosenberg and her husband, Alex, first became acquainted with Capote's work when they saw a concrete bench he'd made on the terrace of the foundation in 2001. She now calls his practice "the finest example of Conceptual art in Cuba during the last 50 years."

"He's doing such good work, and he somehow has a better life in Cuba than he would in New York," says Shainman, who first





Detail of *Burocrático*, 2006–11. Wooden office desk and glass, 40 x 41 x 71 in.

OPPOSITE: *Open Mind*, 2008. PVC, bronze, metal, and glass, 36 x 49½ x 49½ in.

DAROS LATINAMERICA COLLECTION, ZURICH. OPPOSITE: YOAN CAPOTE AND KADIST ART FOUNDATION, PARIS AND SAN FRANCISCO

met Capote during the 2009 Biennial (after seeing photos of his work on the cell phone of an American critic). The next day, he bought a challenging sculptural self-portrait, *Autorretrato*, rendered from three Judd-like concrete blocks supported by bronze casts of human bones. "He's an artist's artist—who is working every day. That's what he does. He's so serious and so bright."

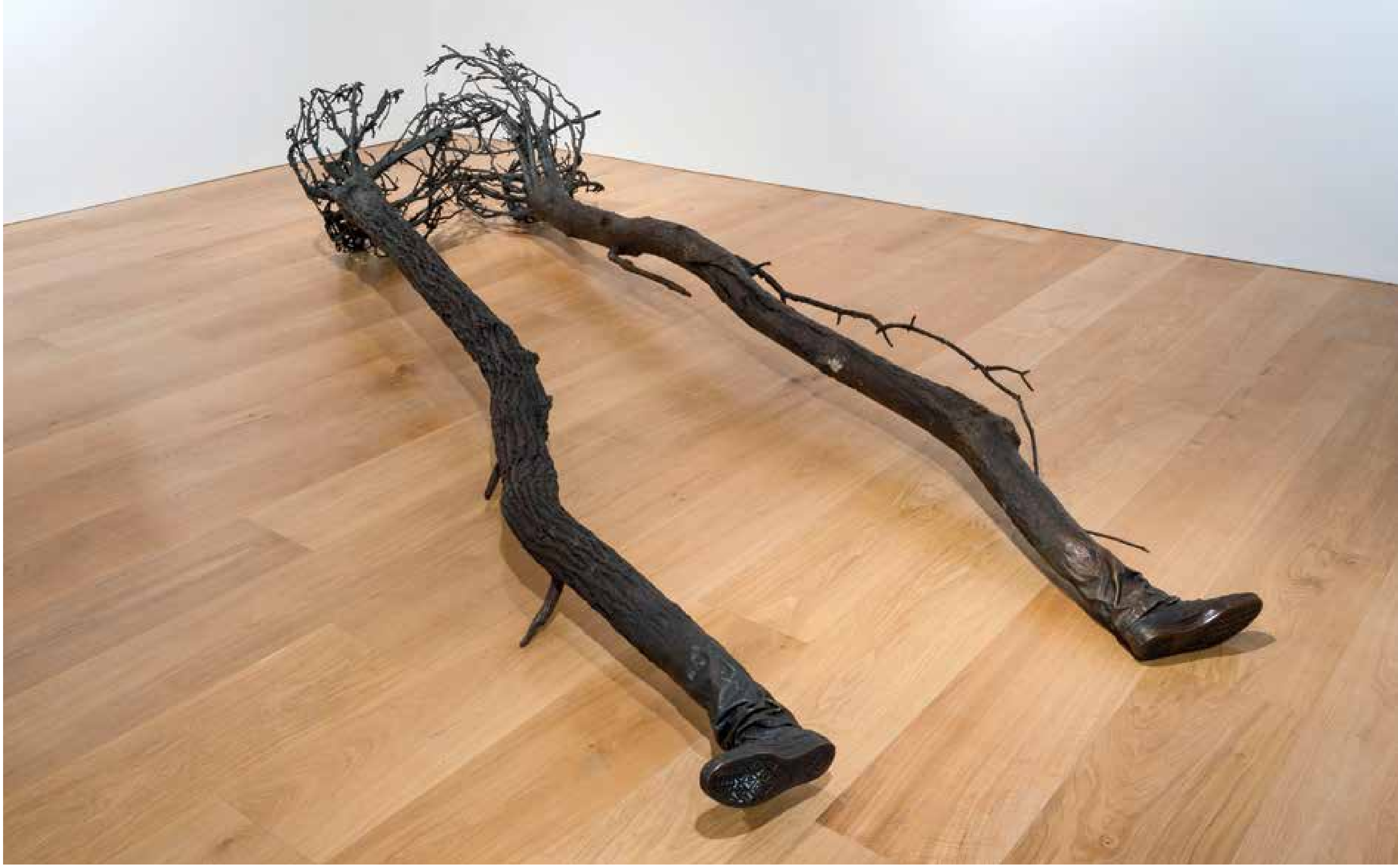
To achieve this, Capote often acts as an island unto himself. At the moment, he is "on sabbatical from human relationships," he says, adding, "nobody knows anything about me in Cuba. All people know is that I'm working hard. I'm always in my studio."

In fact, if Ezequiel Suarez's declaration—*El arte cubano son muchas mafias* ("Cuban art is many mafias")—is true, then the Los Capotes mafia is one of the tighter cliques in Havana. Aside from a handful of assistants and his wife and two daughters, Capote now limits his interactions to his self-described "community of three people," which consists of his brother, Iván, and his mechanic father, Jesus, who helps him create prototypes—such as a pair of hand-filed scissors with shears in the shapes of Florida and Cuba for a piece called *Surgery*. "He's an artist, a craftsman, and he makes his own tools," says Capote, showing me a crossbow his father crafted from tires, a symbol of an unfulfilled dream to go hunting with his sons. "In Cuba there is nobody doing that. Everyone is doing everything by laser cut, but this is all done by hand, and the energy of the works done by him is totally different, you can feel the human touch. Everything will be super-polished chrome when it's finished, but you will always see the traces of his file."

"I would like to help with the art until I'm 100," says Jesus.

At 41, Iván Capote, the quieter sibling, is considered by many to be the more introspective artist, while Yoan plays the part of the affable, if brooding, front man. I first met Iván at the El Nukleo workspace, a blue exterior, blue-glass Art Deco affair that the renowned architect Emilio Vasconcelos built for himself in 1938. During the Biennial it will serve as a white-walled gallery for the brothers before they get down to the business of renovating it into a functional studio, and perhaps a stand-alone gallery for their work. Iván, who maintains a jolly mob boss air with his whispery voice and hefty frame, enjoys talking about the issues of (metaphorical, political, and art-world) value his works call into question—like a striped Op Art canvas made from the shavings of coins that reveals the words "Powder Is Power" from a distance—yet he was more than happy to have Yoan finish half of his sentences and expound on each of his text-based pieces. Expound he did, for both spaces are brimming with Iván's work, including a piece called *Origami*, composed of four steel plates that have been folded (and unfolded) with the creases left to form the letters f-a-t-e, and another called *Mantra occidental* hewn from metal letters made by Jesus that spell *own* and *om*. "It sits on incense and then falls down," Capote explains. "It's a spiritual work about the temporality of material things."

Raising their kids in a very poor section of Pinar del Río, the rural tobacco farming province of western Cuba, Capote's parents realized it would ease their financial hardships—and benefit their children—if their boys were chosen for secondary school. "In that time, the Cuban government had an incredibly good education system in arts and sports, and those schools supported the students with clothes, good food, and health care," recalls Capote, who trained in Greco-Roman wrestling and swimming while Iván studied art. Students had to apply to pursue the course of their choice. "I wanted to follow Iván because he and his teachers encouraged me," Capote says. "They said, if you can do a presentation of 100 works of art, you can



apply to the national school in Havana. So I got obsessed and did it. I remember it was classical things like portraits, still lifes, nudes, and landscapes. It took two years."

Getting selected, however, was only half the battle. Before going to the Instituto Superior de Arte, Capote completed a year of military service, which for him meant painting political propaganda around the country. "By the end of that year, I could paint Fidel's face by memory," he jokes. To make ends meet at ISA, he was involved in what he calls diverse activities, which included helping masons and blacksmiths with construction work, sourcing decorative-art pieces and vintage furniture for antiques dealers, and "et cetera" (a common Cuban refrain for questionably legal street enterprises). Capote has a great photo from that time taken by Stephen Wilkes, who captured the brothers at a pivotal moment, dressed in black: Iván looking svelte with dark flowing locks, while Yoan, now built more like a retired rugby player, has the countenance of a chiseled street thug with a shaved head and eyes radiating the intensity of a boxer. "I had to cut my hair like that because to make a living like I did, I had to look tough. I'm not a tough person, but in the street during that time it was tough," says Capote, who claims the construction work "inspired me to use concrete and fences in my art."

It definitely kept him scrappy. At ISA, he was part of the revered collective Galería DUPP (Desde Una Pragmática Pedagógica, or "based on pedagogic pragmatics") with Wilfredo Prieto, Glenda León, his brother, and 10 others. Enlisted by the renowned professor and Cuban artist René Francisco, DUPP was invited to present a group project at the 2000 Biennial titled *1, 2, 3, Testing*, which grew out of an idea of Capote's to have 100 cast-iron microphones on the city's border walls, facing and opposing the sea. For his thesis, Capote went rogue. He wanted to craft a bench from aluminum, *Forbidden Park*, in the form of a woman on bended knees. However, at the time he had only $100 for materials, so he pilfered aluminum scrap and old cracked plaster molds from foundries, and then bribed a factory worker to let him fire the piece after hours. "People thought I was crazy," says Capote.

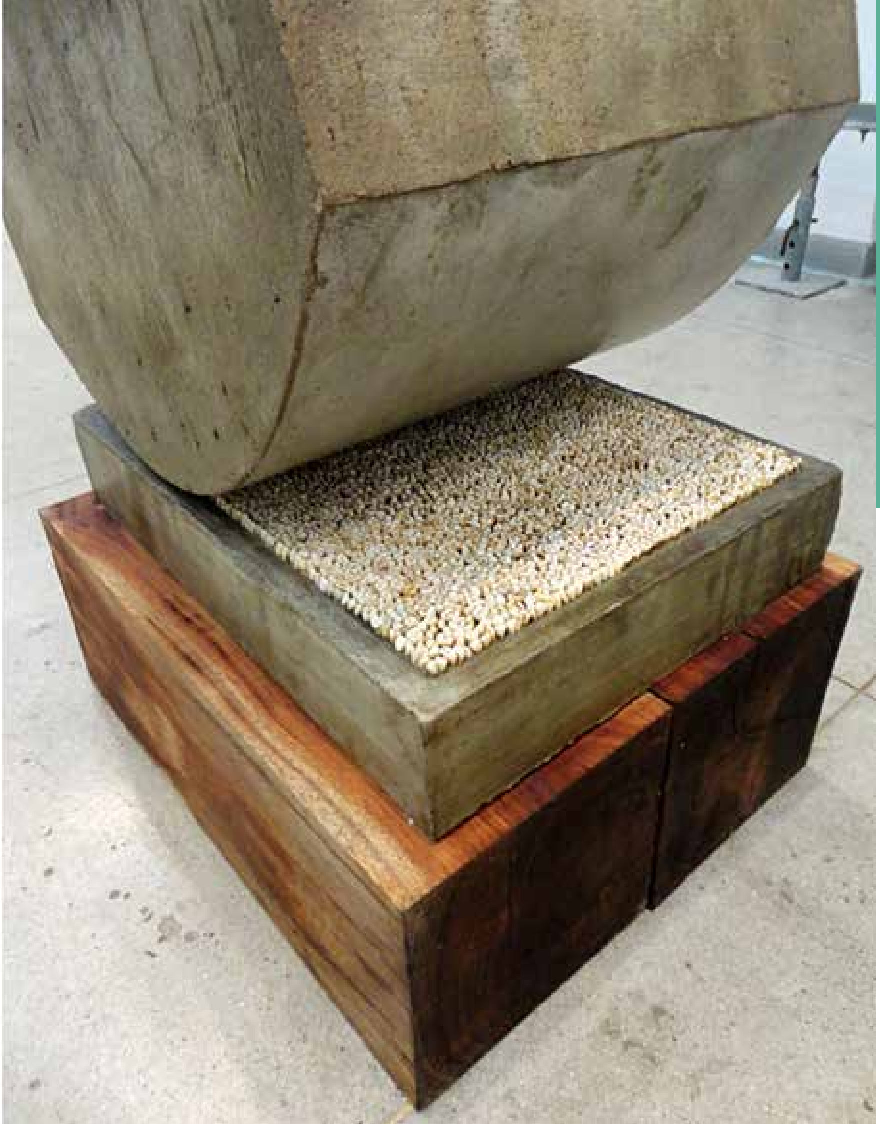
The scheme paid off, though, and the work was noticed by an American collector who offered to sponsor Capote's 2002 fellowship at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson. En route to the institution, he stopped off at a flea market and found some suitcases that inspired him to create another bench, which he made by casting concrete forms of the luggage. The sculpture, *In tran/sit*, was later accepted for the 2004 "Benchmark" exhibition at LongHouse Foundation in East Hampton, New York. Last year, after the Rosenbergs introduced him to Modern Art Foundry, Capote created a bronze version of the work. The Rosenbergs have since assumed the role of Capote's American family; he even named his oldest daughter after Carole. In fact, they introduced him to Bourgeois in 2002.

"Louise was very polite and gave me good advice on classical training. When I went to school it was a very anti-object time, so I told her that Conceptualists tried to force you to abandon all classical training. Before I met her, I was very conflicted because nobody was using bronze in the Cuban art scene, except official artists who created monuments for the government," Capote recalls en route to ISA. There, he shows me around his old studio, a skylit red brick dome where he first aspired to become "the Agustín Cárdenas of this moment," referring to Cuba's mid-century analogue to Henry Moore and Constantin Brancusi. In the studio at ISA, Capote once saw the preeminent Cuban art star Kcho prepare for a solo show and met Leonardo DiCaprio. "He was preparing for a role as an artist, and he says, 'Hi, I'm Leonardo DiCaprio.' And I said, 'Hi, I'm Leonardo da Vinci.' He was so happy I didn't know who he was that he invited me out that night," recalls Capote. "But I didn't have a phone at the time for him to call me."

Migrants, 2013. Bronze, 3¼ x 6½ x 11¾ ft.

OPPOSITE: *Stress (in memoriam)*, 2004–12. Concrete, wood, and human teeth, 33½ x 25½ x 20¾ in.

GAR POWELL-EVANS AND BEN BROWN FINE ARTS



YOAN CAPOTE AND THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

Back at Capote's office in the back of the El Bunker studio,

he's showing me old photos of him and Iván, and with various heroes like Ilya Kabakov, Bourgeois, and Ai Weiwei (holding a copy of the monograph for the brothers' back-to-back shows—"Fonemas" and "Morfemas"—at Galería Habana in 2011). There's a carved wood Kcho sculpture of sharks circling one another, which he obtained from a collector in a trade. "No matter his political position, he is a real artist," says Capote, while handling a piece of his own, a functional gold-leafed door closer in the shape of a Soviet hammer and sickle—which he plans either to install inside a glass box at Jack Shainman or on a door suspended from the ceiling—and a prototype for a steel cube cut with reliefs that would project silhouettes of the Cuban flag around the Chelsea gallery.

During the course of my trip, various people in the jet-setting *farándula* scene, all of whom were inquisitive about and somewhat mystified by the fact that I was doing a story on the elusive Capote, had asked me hypothetically whether I thought his work would be as powerful if he hadn't remained in Cuba. "I think part of the charm is that it feels extremely genuine and extremely Cuban, and if he moved abroad, I don't know if he would lose some of his power, but I think at the moment his work is very powerful and he's getting better and better," says Brown. "I think the power comes from the fact that he's a genuine man, who has this innate ability to make work that comes from his heart, that has surprisingly subtle, humorous political overtones." In his office, Capote and I speculate about what might have happened had he stayed on in New York or Miami after his fellowship in Vermont, and how different his art might be today as a result.

"If I had stayed in the U.S., I would never have been an artist. You know why? Because I didn't have any friends or any family there. I didn't have anyone who really wanted me or loved me, and I realized I would have had to rely on several jobs to survive," says Capote, who talked to the Rosenbergs toward the end of that inaugural trip to the U.S. They were interested in the bench he'd made in Vermont and offered him $9,000 for it. Capote told them he didn't want their money but instead wanted advice. They urged him to return to Cuba because, despite his talent, he was too young and ill equipped to handle life as a New York artist.

The decision to stay—as is the case with any Cuban-based artist—has not made his work with international partners any easier. Brown met Capote in 2011, offered him a show, and asked him when he would be ready. "He said 'one year,'" the dealer recalls. "Two years later we opened." But when they did, with Capote's 2013 London debut, "Emotional Objects," the show featured some of the artist's finest work to date, including *Abstinencia*, casts of bronze hands spelling out emotionally and politically charged words; *Consensus (Collective Feeling)*, poetic strands of stethoscopes leading to one earpiece; and *Casados*, pairs of lovers' leather shoes grafted into one another. "It was really powerful and emotional, and you felt it the minute you walked into the room," says Brown. "It's really hot, that work; there's no way a Scandinavian could have made it."

"In Cuba, I find my confirmation about myself," Capote explains. "I go to my roots, to the people. The history [between the U.S. and Cuba] is not my fault. I love my country, and it's not my fault I have a responsibility in my context. It's like the decision to have a family. There are several moments that push you in search of duality, or into the middle of a question, like: To be or not to be? And you have to decide what you want for yourself, what do you want from your art, why are you doing what you do? This is a life decision. One day, a friend of mine said, 'Art is not a profession, it's a way of living—it's an attitude.' This is a very pure way of thinking because you have a responsibility.

"My first responsibility is to my family, and I want to be good at what I do in order to help them, help my mother, my father, my kids. But also, my other responsibility is to my country, my history. I always said to myself that when time passed I would like my art first to be a good testimony for a moment in this country and, second, a timeless, meaningful object about human essence and human behavior."

Should you ever find yourself wandering the subterranean tunnels of a brain-shaped maze off *kilometro* 27 in Bauta, you'll know Capote fulfilled those responsibilities. MP