

Adrift no more: A young Cuban artist leaves behind everything he knows to begin again.

By Katy Torralbas
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A woman's body fills the page, sketched in cool blues and purples with dashes of red. She is turned to her side, and it looks like she is falling or floating. Her eyes are closed and her hair and dress flow around her.

Reynier Llanes kneels on the gallery floor beside her. He was flipping quickly through the drawings in his sketchbook, but when he sees her, he pauses.

Her nickname was Juli, he says in Spanish, his words quiet and slow. She was a friend and, like him, she tried to leave Cuba three times. Each time, she was captured and sent back home.

On her fourth trip, her boat was lost in the waves.

"To think about what happened to her is like trying to imagine something that doesn't fit inside my head," he says. "I tried three times, also, and I am here. But millions of people have died trying to leave Cuba. It makes you wonder, 'Why have we lived for so many years under a system that we don't agree with?' This is the load that we carry inside, and that an artist must bring to light."

She haunts him, as do other memories of Cuba and his journey to the United States. They are images that demand he translate them to canvas. Someday, he will tackle other themes, Llanes says, but not yet.

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This is how he tells it.

It was evening, and they gathered in a sugar cane field about four miles inland from the Cuban coast: men and women, kids and grandparents. About 25 people in all. They slept in the field that night, in the canes, and then lay low the next day. When night fell, they hiked to the ocean, hiding in the darkness.

Llanes barely breathed as he walked along the sand — watching, waiting, heart pounding. A boat approached slowly, and the hull echoed on the waves with a resonant "toon, toon, toon." He was the second-to-last person to climb into the open boat, and he felt like he was sleepwalking, losing himself between reality and dreams.

They settled onto the floor, and the boat sped across the waves, bouncing them with bone-jarring bumps. The Cuban coast guard pursued them for about 20 minutes, but when they reached international waters, suddenly, they were alone.

They talked a little, shared what food they had and helped to change the boat's fuel. But then, the sky darkened and the ocean beneath the boat turned even blacker. Storms like that swallow refugee boats.

Terror.

A man sitting in front of Llanes started to sob, shoulders shaking. Lightning split the sky and rain pummelled their bodies. Waves crashed over the sides of the boat, and they were drenched, shivering, petrified.

"It's a drastic experience, an experience that lasts for one day, or more than one day, but that you could write a book about," Llanes says now as he sits in his Naples studio. "I opened my eyes, looked up at the dark sky and I wondered inside if it was worth it, if the sacrifice was worth it."

The storm cleared. The sun rose and set, and finally, 19 hours after leaving Cuba, they landed on a beach in the Florida Keys. Under a full moon, they huddled there, cold, wet and exhausted, until people in uniforms came the next morning to take them to the mainland.

They made it to land, so U.S. law allowed them to stay. If they'd been caught in the boat even three feet from the beach, they could have been sent back to Cuba.

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Rain drops tap on the roof of the building at the Boardwalk on Naples Bay, but inside, the gallery is quiet. Llanes' paintings surround him, hanging on the gallery's caramel-colored walls. The lights on the ceiling illuminate the images, all done in oil on canvas.

"I was afraid to throw myself into art at times, because I knew that painting, art, is a difficult world," he says, leaning back in a chair with his ankle crossed over his knee. His dark curly hair brushes the collar of his black T-shirt as he talks. "You have to overcome so many barriers to achieve your goals in this profession. But since I was little, there was always something that motivated me to pursue it."

He never planned to leave his country, Llanes says. But last summer, just before he turned 22 years old, he realized that his dreams would be limited in Cuba. He used to hope for a gallery or a studio of his own there, but that was impossibly expensive, he says. So, instead, he taught art by day and painted at night and on weekends for himself.

He lived in Havana for a time, but in the year before he left Cuba, Llanes returned to his hometown, Pinar del Rio, and lived with his mother and sister in the small apartment where he grew up. Before the revolution, the big, dilapidated mansion was home to just one family, he says. Now, it is divided into many apartments for many families and its rooms are filled to bursting.

The living room of the family's apartment was his studio. He spent many sleepless nights in that living room studio, painting. The electricity in Cuba is unreliable, but most nights, two fluorescent bulbs washed his canvas in harsh white light. His easel was handmade, a gift from a friend.

His mom protested a little when he took over the room, but she gave in. There wasn't anywhere else he could go.

"She said, 'You're going to drip paint on the floor,' and 'Where am I going to bring guests when they visit?'" he remembers, smiling. "But she knew that I needed to paint, so she let me move some furniture and the television to the dining room."

That summer, he started to date a girl who had lived in Miami for a time, he says, and he points to a portrait of her that hangs on the gallery wall. They're not together anymore, but she was the one who planted the idea to leave.

"At first I rejected the idea, but then I said to myself, 'Why not confront this?'" he says. "In Cuba I can't make anything for my paintings. I can't be who I want to be. Every artist, every professional, has goals in life and you can't just stay static, you always want to improve yourself, your opportunities."

Three times he tried to leave the island and each time, he was captured by the Cuban coast guard before he even stepped onto a boat, he says. He relates the stories of being arrested, interrogated and thrown in jail in a matter-of-fact tone, but when he talks about the time the Cuban authorities tried to make him sign a false confession, he speaks faster, louder.

"'Sign. Sign here quick or we'll keep you here for a long time,' they told me," he says. "I said no, that I needed to read the statement. When I read it and saw that it was false, I was angry."

But then more police arrived with five more boatloads of people, about 125 in all. The jail was full and they let him go.

"Once you try, you have to try again," he says. "You have no choice. You are an undesirable, a person who does not agree, and you tried to leave illegally."

Every phone call could have been the one to start the next crossing. And talk about their experiences, their plans, their worries is dangerous. They are, in the starkest sense, alone.

One afternoon two months after his first attempt, he sat in the living room painting. Under his brushes a vise took shape, and in its closing mouth he painted an egg, cracking. The vise was the government, he says, and the egg, the people.

That's when the phone rang, he says.

It was time.

Again.

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Daniel Linehan takes a break from work to tell a story. In it, he and Llanes stop at a Naples strip shopping center for a hamburger.

The bacon on the burger stops Llanes, who looks at it, confused. Llanes, Linehan explains, had never seen a piece of bacon before.

"You know, that moment made me pause and realize how different things are in Cuba," Linehan says, sitting in his office just a few doors down from the gallery where Llanes is painting.

Linehan leans back in his chair and relates how, in February, he walked into an art store in Fort Myers and caught a glimpse of a painting on a roll of canvas. It was a classic still life, with two golden sunflowers in a glass of water sitting beside the wheel of a truck. The detail, colors and light of the work caught his eye, and he looked around the store for the artist.

"I was just magnetized to his work," says Linehan, 46, who studied architecture and drawing for a while in college. He gave it up. These days he lives in Fort Myers with his wife and two children and owns a commercial painting business in Naples.

"You know," he says, suddenly, "I'm a first-generation American. My mother came here on a boat from Ireland. My parents left Ireland looking for greater opportunities, and America was very good to them."

After meeting Llanes, the older entrepreneur decided to become the young artist's manager. Which means that eventually he'll take a cut of the sale of the artist's work. Right now, he's letting Llanes keep what he makes from sales.

For the first two months that they worked together, Linehan drove every morning from his home in Fort Myers to Lehigh Acres where Llanes was living, and then they rode together to the office in

downtown Naples. At night, they reversed the trip, and it was often very late before Linehan got home. He helped the younger man get his papers, find an apartment in Naples and get a car.

One day, Llanes opened his sketchbook and showed Linehan the image of Juli, the young woman who died trying to come to the United States. The older man was stunned.

"His work stands alone," Linehan says. "It's incredible for someone so young. ... When I heard his struggle and (that) he was thinking about working in a car wash — the chance that he could have gotten lost in the system was just very strong."

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On a Friday afternoon about two weeks ago, painter Jonathan Green walks into Llanes' studio-gallery.

"How are you, Jonathan?" Llanes says, speaking carefully in English.

Green, a nationally-known artist who has a studio and gallery in Naples, approaches a painting on a wrought-iron easel. In it, a naked woman leans over bent legs, her face cradled in her hands. A wooden boat sits behind her on the beach.

"I love it," Green says, bending forward to look closely at the canvas. "When you do hair, make sure your brush strokes follow the lines, the way that it's moving."

Green, who is known for images of the South Carolina low country of his upbringing, works with Llanes as well as a group of young artists. He has reached a point in his life and his career, Green says, when he has the time and the drive to teach young artists. Llanes' willingness to work hard, to study and his drive to translate his memories of Cuba into art caught Green's attention.

"People like Reynier are incredibly important, because they are interested in learning to paint the figure," Green says. Many young artists try to skip the time-honored basics of really learning to accurately reflect the world on paper or canvas.

"When he walked into my gallery and he showed his work I sensed in him that he was a rare individual."

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Llanes stands before an easel in the same gallery. A model sits and gazes past him, her legs folded to the side beneath a simple white dress.

Afternoon light spills in through the studio's open doors and picks up golden highlights in her hair. It feels, here, like you can breath.

He's only 270 miles away from his home in Pinar del Rio, Cuba, and unless the systems changes, he can never go back. He hasn't seen his family and friends since November. Phone calls are difficult and letter writing nearly impossible. Because his sister has access to a computer at work, he corresponds with her through e-mail.

He misses them, but they're proud, he says, of how much he's accomplished in his new life. He makes a living by painting, and he dreams of some day exhibiting his work in famous galleries and museums.

But he knows that he's not there yet.

"In painting, the work is to find your voice," Llanes says. "This is what is hardest at the beginning. ... I don't believe that I have found my own style of painting yet, but I am searching for it."

He sings a Cuban salsa song under his breath as his brush moves across the canvas. He shapes her head, shoulders, breasts, hips in caramel brown oils.

A friend comes in and the gallery fills with talk and laughter.

All the while, Llanes paints.