

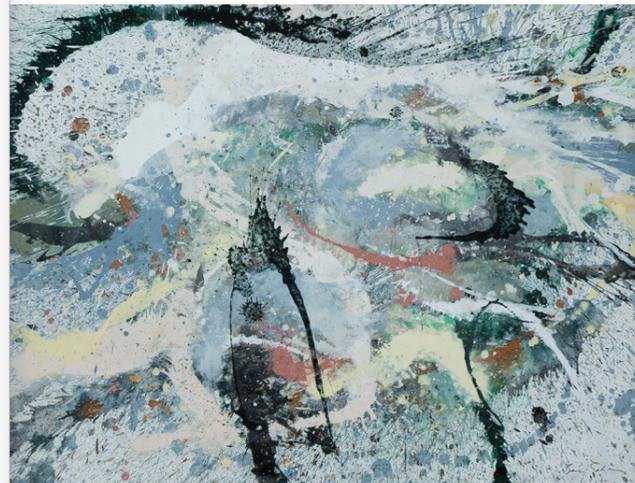
BARUJ SALINAS 1972–2022

Housed at the National Historic Landmark Freedom Tower, the **Cuban Legacy Gallery** is part of MDC Special Collections, which also include the Kislak Center. MDC Special Collections celebrate the communities of South Florida, and promote fresh perspectives on the ongoing processes of culture and change in the Americas. The Cuban Legacy Gallery honors the Cuban exile experience and the Freedom Tower's significant role as "El Refugio," a welcoming place for the early Cuban exile community during the 1960s. Tens of thousands of Cubans passed through this building when the federal government used it as a center to process, document, and provide medical and social services for the new arrivals.

The **American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora** is a culturally-specific museum of memory, dedicated to showcasing and documenting the history, culture, and contributions of the Cuban exile community through exhibitions and programming in the arts and the humanities. Its mission is to tell the story of the Cuban Diaspora, through the eyes of its greatest artists, thinkers, and creators. These artists, born outside or exiled from Cuba, have emerged in distant landscapes, and become some of the most important artists of our time. It is located in the heart of Miami, minutes from Little Havana, and aims to give this story a home away from homeland.

Baruj Salinas was born in 1935 in Havana, Cuba, and received a degree in Architecture from Kent State University in Ohio in 1958. He was exiled from Cuba in 1959, and, in Miami during the 1960s, he co-founded the Grupo de Artistas Latinoamericanos (GALA) with other abstract artists, including Rafael Soriano and José Mijares. He was awarded the Cintas Foundation Fellowship in Visual Arts in 1969 and 1970, and moved to Barcelona, Spain, in 1974. Salinas began exhibiting in the United States at galleries in Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Detroit, as well as in Spain, Mexico, Israel, and Switzerland. He held exhibitions of his paintings at Galerie Editart in Geneva, where he also began collaborating with poets and philosophers such as José Ángel Valente and María Zambrano on interdisciplinary artist books. These experiences influenced the incorporation of ancestral and unknown alphabets in his cosmic-themed abstractions. One-person exhibitions of his work were held at the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, Florida, in 1969; Palacio de Bellas Artes, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, in Mexico City in 1971; Galería Joan Prats in Barcelona, Spain, in 1982; Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City in 1982; Museo Rayo in Roldanillo, Colombia, in 1992; Villa du Parc in Annemasse, France, in 1993; Fundación María Zambrano in Vélez-Málaga, Spain, in 1997; Centro Cultural Español Miami in Coral Gables, Florida, in 2003; The Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies (ICCAS), University of Miami, in 2007; and Salas del Centro Cultural Provincial Diputación de Málaga, Spain, in 2007. He was awarded the Amelia Peláez Prize in 2021. Salinas has lived in Miami since 1992 and taught at Miami Dade College since 1995.

Baruj Salinas: 1972–2022 is produced by the Cuban Legacy Gallery, MDC Special Collections at Miami Dade College, in collaboration with the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora, and is curated by Adriana Herrera of the Aluna Art Foundation. Exhibitions of the Cuban Legacy Gallery are made possible by the generous support of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners; and the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture. Programs of the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora are made possible by the generous support of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners. MDC Special Collections wishes to thank Carmen Valdivia, Marcell Felipe, and Jesus Rosado of the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora for their generous collaboration in making this exhibition possible.



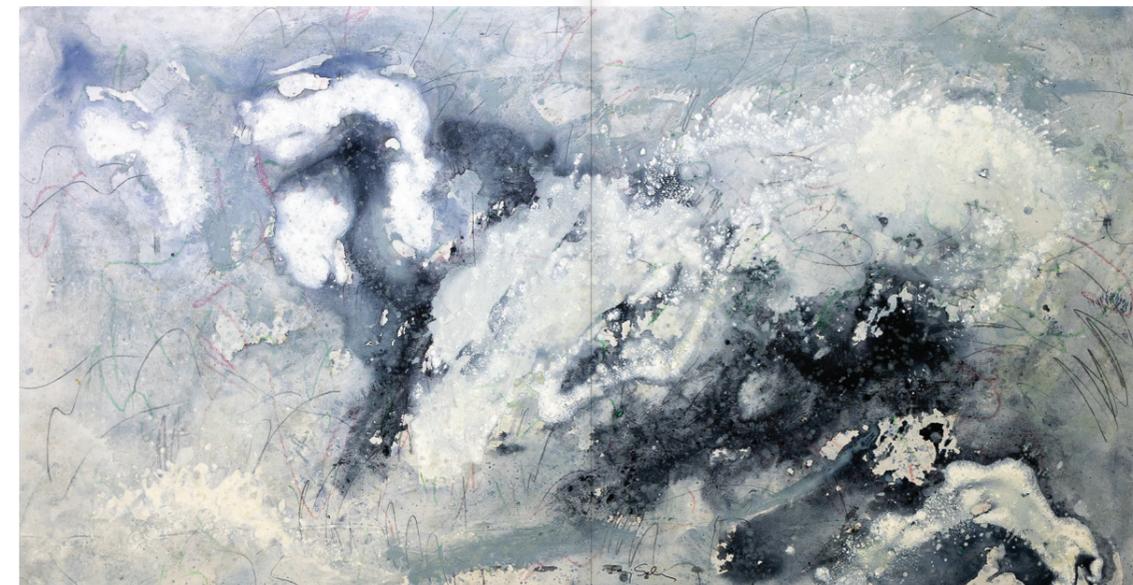
Space Tapestry II, 2021
Mixed media on paper
36×50 inches (91.4×127 cm)
Marilyn and Baruj Salinas Collection

Nocturnal Emission, 1999
Acrylic, crayon,
and pencil on canvas
53½ × 75⅞ inches (135.9×192.7 cm)
Liza and Dr. Arturo F. Mosquera Collection



El primer mar (The First Sea), 2012
Acrylic on amate paper
47×93 inches (119.4×236.2 cm)
Marilyn and Baruj Salinas Collection

Cloudscape: To Life, 2021–22
Acrylic, crayon,
and pencil on canvas
40×70 inches (101.6×177.8 cm)
Marilyn and Baruj Salinas Collection



CUBAN LEGACY GALLERY
MDC SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Freedom Tower
600 Biscayne Boulevard
First Floor
Miami, FL 33132

For updates and a full schedule of events,
please visit <http://www.mdcmoad.org>

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE CUBAN DIASPORA
1200 Coral Way
Miami, FL 33145
<http://www.thecuban.org>

Hours are Wednesday–Friday 10:00AM–5:00PM;
Saturday 10:00AM–4:00PM; Sunday 12:00–4:00PM

(305) 529-5400 info@thecuban.org



BARUJ SALINAS 1972–2022 MAY 14 – AUGUST 14, 2022

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE CUBAN DIASPORA

Baruj Salinas: 1972–2022

“Attempting to create the origin,”¹ to picture the beginning of the universe, Baruj Salinas has painted cosmogonic abstractions for half a century, and has left a distinct mark upon the history of Cuban and Latin American art. Salinas trained as an architect at Kent State University during the late 1950s, but he has produced his art under the influence of cosmology and philosophy, music and literature. His abstract landscapes incessantly rehearse the formation of the cosmos; his vision suggests the continuous transformation of physical elements, combined with the vestiges of ancient alphabets or graphemes of an imaginary language. Like the pre-Socratic philosophers in ancient Greece, he investigates the primordial mystery of matter, the nature of water and fire, of telluric forces, and of air—Anaximenes’ *pneuma*—in works linked to sidereal space or to the nearer “language of the clouds.” The critic José Corredor-Matheos rightly situated his painting “between the originary Chaos and the intuition of the Spirit.”²

In the early 1960s, inspired by New York School action painting, Salinas increasingly deployed gestural expressionism, but in the service of recreating the origins of the world, of the *arche*—the first principle of the universe of Greek philosophy. His poetic exploration of the four Classical elements—earth, air, water, and fire—attempted to capture the restlessness of human inquiry into the origins and meaning of the universe. After humans landed on the moon and influenced by science fiction writers such as Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, or astronomer Fred Hoyle, Salinas began to paint visionary images of space beyond the confines of the Earth, a space to which he has persistently returned. He has linked this endeavor to Jewish tradition in the recent *Torah Project* (2015), which

includes a series of abstractions that envision foundational moments of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Salinas translated these images into seriolithographic prints used to illustrate a limited-edition artist book in the form of a Pentateuch or *Chumash* (the Hebrew name for the text of the Torah printed in book form) in 2017, and they show diverse versions of creation: the emergence of seas and nebulae, and, as in the Pentateuch itself, sacred forms related to the elements, including the bush that burns without being consumed, the plague that advances in the night sky, the shofar or trumpet made of a ram’s horn and the Hebrew letters of the word “Torah” itself. Salinas pictures the latter two subjects in the clouds, as if suggesting that the forms—and thus human notions of the sacred and of ritual—exist in a state of timelessness.

During a crucial early phase (1979–80) of Salinas’s largest series, the ongoing *El lenguaje de las nubes* (The Language of the Clouds), two critical developments emerged in the artist’s work. One is the use of white as a defining color, a formal device related to ideas about emptiness—in his work and in the universe—that he discussed with the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano. The other is the appearance of vestigial ancestral alphabets or of his own “asemic” writing, or writing without meaning, itself empty of the attachment of words to things. Zambrano saw the white in Salinas’s work “crossing spaces, deserts, among unknown stars, moving without a figure yet, musically.”³ And she wrote that “signs appear in some of his paintings that, more than an enigma, are a mystery. Signs of the mystery of creation; lyrics perhaps. Everything moves in a stillness that is only reached by maximum velocity.”⁴

The calligraphic appeared in Salinas’s work in 1979 in the first of many collaborations with the poet and humanist José Ángel Valente

for the Festa de la Lletra (Festival of Letters) in Barcelona. The following year, inspired by the *Officium Tenebrarum*, the musical liturgy sung before Easter, Valente published *Tres lecciones de tinieblas* (Three Lessons of Darkness), illustrated by Salinas. Each poem begins with the transliteration of a Hebrew letter in the title.⁵ Since then, the act of writing, as a graphic trace that multiplies meanings, has marked the artist’s work. Clouds, for example, transmute into letters, so that the abstraction contains a coded language as a guiding thread: *Aleph* (1979), Salinas has specified, was inspired by “the first letter of creation, the beginning,” and *Ayin Letter Landscape* (1980) by the sixteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which symbolically alludes to perceiving the invisible with the inner eye.

Not all signs are alphabetical and recognizable. Some clouds, as in *Dolmen* (1979), form megalithic structures; others coalesce into elements of architectures, such as *Laced Arch* (1980), or forces in tension, as in *Open-Closed* (1979). But, above all, there are graphemes of his own, in pencil and crayon, which Salinas always traces with his vertiginous gestures, leaning over the canvas lying on the floor to mark it, even before colors or their white and dark volumes begin to appear. First, there is not the word, but the graphic sign that contains the unpronounceable, and then the elements of the world appear in his painting. Although some strokes evoke languages such as Greek, and the Hebrew and Turkish spoken by his grandmother, or refer to Paleolithic Iberian pictograms he saw in Peratallada, Spain, or to other ideograms, the invention of his own signs predominates, a non-linear and indecipherable writing nonetheless capable of bringing us closer to another understanding. Salinas’s painting occupies a zone between art and visual poetry, evoking Henri Michaux’s

“wandering lines,” with their “hypothetical and imaginary languages,”⁶ which, being illegible, illuminate us. *Cloudscape: To Life* (2021–22) reiterates the vision of Salinas, this “inhabitant of the clouds,” who inscribed his “asemic” writing in them, with the awareness that there is no definitive or precise language that can pronounce the enigma of the universe. The variations on a theme that Edward Elgar used in his famous composition *Enigma Variations* inspired Salinas’s mixed media work *Enigma VI* (2012), the perfect randomness of variations in its splash of a black line suggesting the origins of matter. In other works, Salinas pictures the earth as a primordial element and envisions the space of the forest, infinite in its own way. His *Claros del bosque* (Clearings in the Forest) series borrows the title of a book by Zambrano and evokes the philosopher with whom he shared many affinities and poetic-pictorial collaborations.⁷ Exiled in Geneva after the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, Zambrano had missed the stillness of a space next to her former house in Spain, a “forest clearing that has, unfortunately, been destroyed.”⁸ Salinas’s forests have multiplied themselves, perhaps as a poetic restitution of Zambrano’s lost one. Among the series, painted between 2003 and 2008, are slight and very white forests, “created in homage to María,” the artist says, and nocturnal and dense ones, with a predominance of ochers, grays, and blacks. But all of them constitute imaginary landscapes, interior places in which to take refuge and meditate, not only on the confrontations of history, but also on the “memory of the origin” of the *kosmos* (the universe in ancient Greek), for which, in different ways, they both searched.⁹

In two mixed-media works on amate paper from 2012, *Arrecife* (Reef) and *Archipiélago* (Archipelago), the material is almost tactile. Salinas uses gel to adhere earth to the paint, like the

Informalists, whose influence also left a mark on his painting. These works invoke his native Cuba, the island he lost at the time of his voluntary exile. Nostalgia—from the Greek *nostos*, return (to one’s own homeland), and *algos*, pain—adheres to the surface in a way that seems inseparable from the telluric forces he paints. The planet’s geology had already appeared in *Nocturnal Emission* (1999), which captures the instant when a dormant volcano awakens. Like the novelist Malcom Lowry in 1947, Salinas, at the foot of Popocatepetl, experienced terror and fascination in the face of the furious emissions of lava.

The ocean is another leitmotif in his work, linked not only to the fact of his having grown up in an island surrounded by “water everywhere,”¹⁰—as we can see in *Bartlett Deep* (2013), a painting inspired by the deepest part of the Caribbean Sea—or to a subjective evocation of the various seas of the Earth, but also to an imagined water of origin. For Salinas, the ocean represents the primordial forces of both chaos and creation—much like Freud’s contrast of Eros and Thanatos, the creative and destructive drives of the human psyche—held in tension, which he suggests gesturally. The artist’s multiple and diverse explorations of the theme emphasize the parallel nature of the opposing forces. Thus, in *El primer mar* (The First Sea, 2012), he traced a sort of floating letter “a,” similar in its form to the Greek letter alpha or the Hebrew aleph, that spreads its white light over the darkness of the waters, while *Tsunami* (2016), he warns us, pictures the “terror of the uncontrolled, the unleashed power of the elements, and the uncertainty that lurks in the midst of the joy of existing.” (The *Torah Project*, similarly, included images of primeval seas and of the first appearance of light, but also visions of plagues.)

The memory of other myth-laden seas inspired abstract paintings such as *Mar Egeo II* (Aegean

Sea II, 2013) or *Red Sea* (2014); changing skies provided the impetus for the diptychs *Southern Glow* (2012) and *Space Tapestry* (2021); while the organic geometries of two large early paintings, *Núcleo* (Nucleus, 1972) and *Desfloración* (Deflowering, 1972), recall cellular processes and the beginning of human life. Each work represents a reiteration of Salinas’s vision of the unity between the micro and the macro, and the conviction that, in an ever-expanding universe, his art partakes in the great enigma of creation itself.

To paraphrase Vicente Huidobro, we could undoubtedly say of Salinas that the painter is a small god, determined to create, in the present moment, the origin, over and over again. After all, genesis is not only a remote event; myriads of worlds appear and disappear in every instant. In his art, Salinas argues that “the intermediate space between creation and incessant destruction is the one we humans occupy and it is full of fascination and beauty.”

Adriana Herrera

1. The insightful phrase comes from a characterization by the poet José Cozer. See José Cozer, “Trenzar Descentramientos,” in *Baruj Salinas: La mirada del que mira* (Málaga: Diputación de Málaga, Cultura y Educación, 2007), 31.

2. José Corredor-Matheos, “El universo en expansión de Baruj Salinas,” in *Baruj Salinas: La mirada del que mira*, 21.

3. María Zambrano, “En la pintura de Baruj Salinas,” in *Baruj Salinas: La mirada del que mira*, 25.

4. Ibid., 165.

5. See Francisco J. Escobar Borrego, “Tres lecciones de tinieblas, de José Ángel Valente: naturaleza musical, claves de poética e implicaciones simbólicas,” *Enthymema* 6 (2012), 119.

6. Julio Prieto, “La línea pseudoalfabética: apuntes sobre lo ilegible en Mirtha Dermisache y León Ferrari,” *Cuadernos Lírico* 21 (2020).

7. Orlando Blanco’s Geneva publishing house, Editart, crucially enabled these collaborations.

8. Claudio Rodríguez Fer, Tera Blanco de Saracho, and María Lopo, *Valente vital (Ginebra, Saboya, París)* (Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2014), 145.

9. Ibid., 165.

10. This line from the poem *La isla en peso* (1942) by Virgilio Piñeira is a constant reference in the definition of what it is to be Cuban.