

**L**uis Azaceta left Cuba when he was 18, in 1960, forced into exile by Fidel Castro's military draft. He joined family in Hoboken, at first, and then the working-class community of Cuban exiles in Queens. He started to draw and paint, and soon he was enrolled at the School of Visual Arts, doing abstractions mostly, with a minimalist twist.

One of his teachers asked students to make art that in some way related to their personal experience, and Azaceta did a few drawings about his exile from Cuba, and more generally about the "strong man" legacy in Latin-American politics.

Azaceta graduated, still doing his abstract art, but those drawings for an SVA class preyed on his memory. After school, he traveled to Europe, saw Francisco Goya's famous "Black Paintings" and came back determined to develop a style that could express the way he felt about being an exile — and that style centered on the human figure.

"Luis Cruz Azaceta: Dictators, Terrorism, War and Exiles" at Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art in downtown Newark, is part of the gallery's "Bending the Grid" series, devoted to artists older than 65 whose work deserves more attention.

But the choice of Azaceta's work, in an exhibit curated by Alejandro Anreus, himself a Cuban exile and a professor of art history and Latin-American/Latino studies at William Paterson University, suggests a more general revival of politically charged artwork.

After all, we do see it everywhere, at least by the standards of the artworld of the past couple decades.

# The works of an EXILE

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This week, the LAPD — that's the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a performance art group — filled a gallery at the Queens Museum with prison bunks, invited an audience, and then staged a reminiscence of life on the streets with a few once-homeless people salted throughout the room. That is so far from the jokey, ironic art that still rules the market that the art press accused Queens of engaging in "activist art."

"I don't know if it's a trend, but it's beyond fashionable," says Anreus of Azaceta's art. "I see it in Mel Edwards, in Juan Sanchez. This kind of art is going to last because it is formally grounded, like the early Ben Shahn, and unlike the self-involved art you see everywhere, it has a meaning and purpose that won't go away."

In a way, this sort of art never left us, it just went underground.

Azaceta's retrospective extends back to work from 1980 but it makes references to art from the 1960s, and you can detect anarchic West Coast antecedents (like ceramicist Robert Arneson) throughout.

There are obvious protest paintings, like the acrylic "Latin American Victims of Dictators, Oppression and Death" (1987), a simple horizontal picture of a nude man laid on his side and perforated by a row of stakes, his eyes blindfolded and his footless body loosely wrapped in wire. Azaceta worked with the late Leon Golub of Rutgers University, whose large-scale paintings of Latin-American thugs torturing captives made a huge impact in the 1980s, and there's a similar emotional note in Azaceta. He has a drawing line that seems stiffened by outrage.

## A BIT LIGHTER

By the 1990s, Azaceta had adopted a bright, color-and pattern-dominated painting style that was kind of pop, though it's punctuated by little self-portraits showing him with huge sticks of dynamite tied to his chest — a symbol for the way every immigrant is viewed as a potential terrorist. He responds to the bombing of the federal office building in Oklahoma and to 9/11, and his most recent paintings have an almost Philip Guston-like cartoon gruesomeness. "Slaughter" (2010) shows human limbs stacked like cordwood and loaded onto logging trucks for transport.

Two themes predominate throughout: Images of the strongman, in a high-peaked military cap and sometimes with a porcine nose, and self-portraits as a Latino forced to abandon his birth culture for freedom in a non-Catholic world. His mixed-media installations, beginning in the 1990s,

are quite good at this, particularly "Drifting" (1998).

"Drifting" consists of a couple of square feet of rusting corrugated tin sailed by a small boat with a faded Polaroid of Azaceta as its sail.

Behind the boat a pair of plastic sharks swim. Azaceta ponders the studies that say as few as 2 out of 5 Cubans who try to escape by water make it to Florida; the art reference is to Winslow Homer's "The Gulf Stream," and the suggestion is that braving such risks to come here should guarantee respect, not suspicion.

"Luis Azaceta" is a big show, with 29 pieces, including mural-sized paintings on unstretched canvas and installations that tower over the viewer.

Anreus is preparing a big book on Azaceta's career, and there's an excellent foretaste in the catalog to this show produced by the Newark gallery.

This is Aljira's 30th anniversary, and the gallery is planning a tour for this show, one of the first Aljira exhibits to do so. One of the four stops on the tour is slated to be the Freedom Tower in Miami, where so many of the Cuban exiles entered this country.

"He is a Cuban of the northeast, raised working class but in a much more progressive political culture than you find in Florida," Anreus says. "I think that's highly appropriate, even necessary — Azaceta's humanist commitment is the real deal."

**Bending the Grid: Luis Cruz Azaceta: Dictators, Terrorism, War and Exiles**

**Where:** Aljira, A Center For Contemporary Art, at 591 Broad St., Newark

**When:** Through April 26. Regular hours are 12-6 p.m. Wednesdays to Fridays and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays

**How much:** Free. Call (973) 622-1600 or visit [aljira.org](http://aljira.org).

# ART



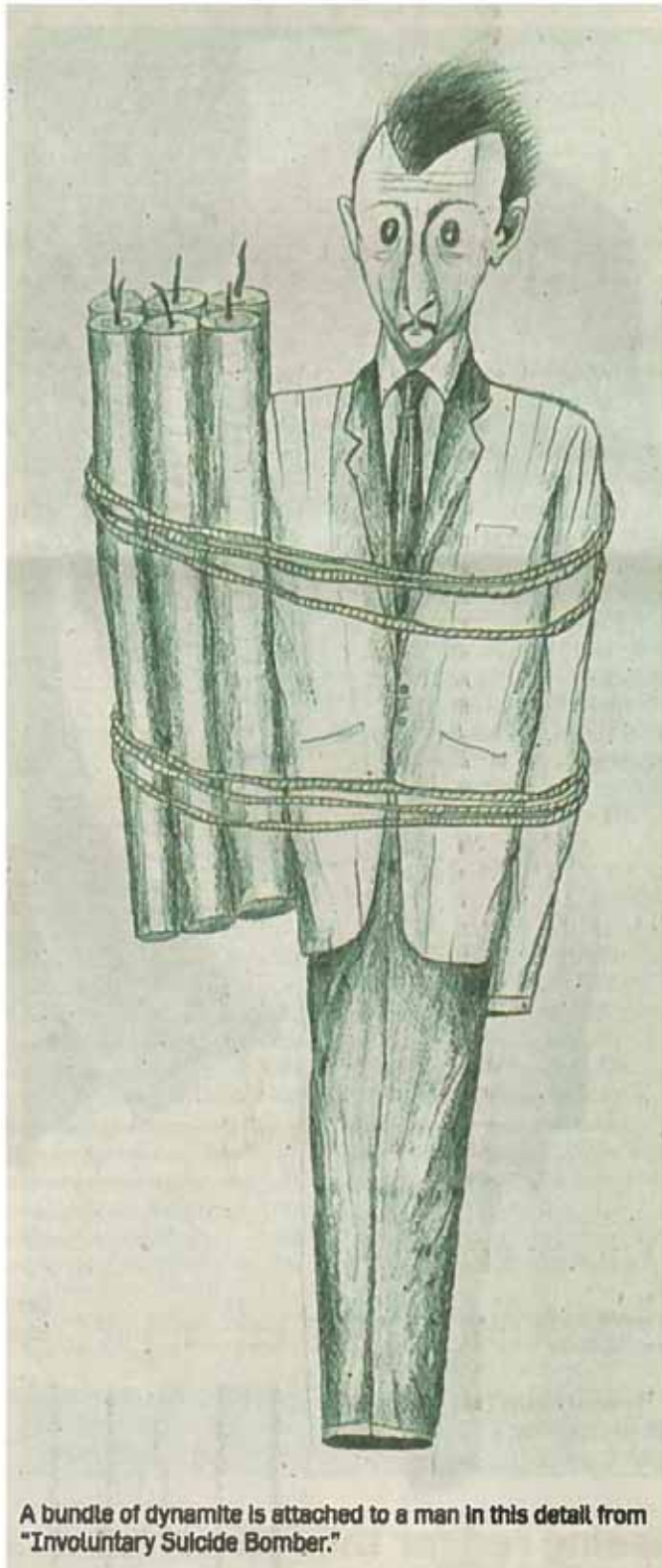
"Latin American Victims of Dictators, Oppression and Death" (1987) is a protest painting featured in "Bending the Grid: Luis Cruz Azaceta: Dictators, Terrorism, War and Exiles" at Aljira, A Center For Contemporary Art in Newark. The victim's nude, bound and blindfolded body is pierced by a row of sharp stakes.

Exhibit reflects immigrants' struggle with oppression throughout the artist's lifetime



Azaceta's "Slaughter" (2010) shows human limbs stacked like wood that is ready for transport on the backs of logging trucks, depicted in the middle of the composition.





A bundle of dynamite is attached to a man in this detail from "Involuntary Suicide Bomber."



"Drifting" (1998) is a mixed-media installation consisting of rusting tin, which represents water, with a small boat and a faded photo of the artist sailing across.