



## **FELIPE JESUS CONSALVOS**

CUBA / USA (1891 – 1960)

When an enormous body of material was unearthed at a garage sale in West Philadelphia in 1980, Felipe Jesus Consalvos was suddenly catapulted into the cultural canon 20 years after his death. In this unassuming backyard, approximately 750 objects – everything from furniture to photographs, guitars to violins – revealed a life's work spun from a life's labour: collages made from the cigar labels of Consalvos's day job, rolling cigars.

Consalvos straddled two cultures throughout his life: having emigrated to Miami from Havana around 1920, he eventually settled in Philadelphia. In the fertile territory between the American cliché of Cuban cigars and the tropes plastered on their packaging, a ferociously funny practice sprung up. Although Consalvos was far from the first to repurpose the bright colours and cheerful designs of cigar labels for folk art, he used the vernacular art form as a starting point rather than an end in its own right – less tourist tat than searing socio-political cartoon.

Sex, religion, consumerism; Consalvos's satirical collages used clippings of American clichés to hoist the culture on its own petard. Besides cigar labels, his practice incorporated postage stamps; magazine cuttings; currency. Here is Benjamin Franklin's face on a flamenco dancer's whirling body; lines of text from advertisements are pasted next to floating heads, ventriloquising their rictus grins with nonsense as in *Uncle Sam Wants Your Surplus Fat*. Undated and untitled by the artist, many of Consalvos's works are unofficially known by their striking lines of collaged copy: *How Ya Gonna Keep Your Mind*; *Nothing Rolls Like A Ball*; *Life Goes On In The Backyard*.

Consalvos' work is full of biting humour, but also beauty. Applied to three dimensional objects – like the instruments here – his cigar labels take on a repetitive, meditative quality, their distinctive geometries tracing the circumference of a tambourine; the neck of a ukelele. Central visages absorb the emphasis of the bands, radiating out like rays of sun with all the visual cues of sainthood. *Who do you worship, America?* Consalvos seems to ask. *Is it Benjamin Franklin, emblazoned on your money?*

Transforming everyday objects into poignant missives, Consalvos's work can be read as the output of a man who saw value in unlikely places. Certainly, he is a master of reappropriation – but he is at his most arresting when he's playing with meaning as well as aesthetics. In America, land of commodities, identity and consumerism are almost impossible to unravel; in this context, the cigar bands in Consalvos's collages are emblematic of his heritage, but also of how that heritage is packaged for sale. If 50s America is a dollar bill, then what is Cuba but a cigar?

# THE GALLERY OF EVERYTHING



More than sixty years since his death, Consalvos reflects very contemporary concerns about the role of both the legal and illegal immigrant in the US and beyond. Certainly, his relationship to America was decidedly ambiguous — to him and other immigrants, the country's stance seemed to swing between welcoming and profoundly othering. Rolling Cuban tobacco for Americans to smoke, Consalvos spent his working life processing his motherland for mass consumption – and in his artistic practice, he diligently did the same to his new homeland. Fair's fair. After all, tobacco rolling is easy to romanticise — but in reality the labour would have been repetitive, backbreaking and poorly paid. If American capitalism is a pyramid, it was built on the shoulders of men like Consalvos: after a long day of holding it up, he must have found huge satisfaction in dismantling it.

Consalvos — in the grand tradition of the American *outsider* — died without fanfare or even notice of his visual legacy. This exhibition, and his inclusion in museum collections like Philadelphia Museum of Art and The Art Institute Chicago, position him at the vanguard of 20th century image-making: a diaspora artist rightly inducted into an ever-expanding canon of satire, surrealism and delight. Yet, he never exhibited in his lifetime; his image-crafting, meaning-meddling, was a quiet pursuit. It seems fair to assume that such a time-consuming endeavour scratched some deep spiritual itch. Perhaps, like all private makers, his practice balanced the scales of his life. There is an undeniable symmetry between Consalvos's day job and his secret vocation: his work and his work, his craft and his craft. Does the repetitive, poorly paid labour of one influence how we value the other – also repetitive, and never earning him a dime?

Satirising the hyper-capitalist system he serviced every day, Consalvos understood that value is in the eye of the beholder. Put that in your cigar and smoke it.

The Gallery of **Everything**, November 2024

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