

Sergio Lastres

My name is Sergio Lastres. As an artist, I didn't have any opportunity in Cuba. I didn't tell my family I was leaving Cuba. I didn't want to worry them that I was going to take this journey on a raft. And so I went to my house, I said farewell to my father, but not to my mother. We were three days at sea, and a big storm caught us. The raft almost flipped over at night. It was like a big storm or a hurricane. It lasted three days while I was at sea. Then I heard a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter that saw us and detected us. Later on, they alerted the U.S. Coast Guard, and their boats spotted us as well. Then they rescued us. I saw people that had drowned at sea. Dead people were floating in the water. The U.S. Coast Guard intercepted us at sea and took us to Guantanamo. All of a sudden, there were a lot of people. More than 30,000 people were at the base. The first day was very hard. The base of Guantanamo wasn't ready to accommodate so many people. At the beginning, they treated us poorly. They treated us in a very tyrannical way. It felt like a prison. A place that keeps you against your will seems like a prison. I thought they were jailing us. I thought they wanted to make us go back. When you're there, the feeling of uncertainty, not knowing what was going to happen to you, you become affected mentally and start thinking many things. There were people who escaped Guantanamo and returned to Cuba. Secretly, people made rafts in Guantanamo to return to Cuba. Can you imagine? Rafts made in Guantanamo in order to return. They felt anxious because they didn't know what was going to happen to them. There were people who told me: "I left my family in order to help them, and being here for months doesn't help them." I knew people that crossed the minefield between Cuba and the base, and blew up. One died and another was taken to the hospital. Physically Guantanamo was horrible. It was a place that wasn't prepared to have people living there. I believe it used to be an airport. I was living in tents, then they changed it into a golf course. It was a polluted land. A lot of dirt. The kids got sore throats from it. The adults also got sick, but the kids were more sensitive to the dirt and they were always sick. The living conditions and the dust affected their throats. At the beginning, the water was a problem. There were trucks with water; people would try to get water to take a shower. Then they made some bathrooms without roofs. The water was cold. The conditions were horrible. I was in Guantanamo for a few winters. It was really hard in that sense. There was no privacy in any aspect. I lived in a tent that would hold 11 to 14 people, but I can't remember exactly. We were locked in, we were kept in with all the barbed wire. The camp limits were the barbed wire. Like if it were a concentration camp, and we could not get out. As the months passed we became desperate. I don't think about it anymore, everything just comes out on its own. It is something that is inside of me, and those feelings just come out. Even if I use color and try to make my paintings happy, or more poetic, in some way, the idea remains. It's always there. The experience has marked me, and I haven't been able to take it out, and I don't want to. If someone has something to say in their work, and if they bring that story to their work, it will have more meaning. There is something to say to others through your work. That's why I paint the empty boats in my paintings. That's why I always paint the sea, and you can see it in my work.