

Art in Cuba Now, Part I: Capitalism and Battista Redux

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Susan N Platt reports from a Communist state on America's doorstep

During one week in Cuba, all the artists I met with my 'cultural exchange' tour group were well established internationally and living comfortably in Cuba. On my own, I also met with two young artists, Celia/Yunior, a collaborative team, who, with a group of friends, are mainly working within Cuba. I also met Sandra Ceballos, artist and co-founder in 1994 of Espacio Aglutinador, an independent space in her private home. There was a striking disparity between the officially sanctioned artists and the second group of artists, both economically and conceptually. Artists with international connections (and bank accounts) exist in a completely different world from that of artists who are confined within Cuba and its restrictions (little access to the Internet and email for example) and just manage to support themselves with multiple jobs.

In Part I of this article I will look at a few themes in the work of the established Cuban artists that I met in their home/studios in the beautiful Miramar area of Havana. The less established artists gave me their work in the form of 50 short video pieces. Sandra Ceballos is in a unique position. In every small room of her private home in the Vedado part of Havana, she and her collaborators have shown many artists who have gone on to establish international reputations, and she herself has shown abroad, but her work is rarely seen in Cuba because of her defiance of the official art scene. All public galleries in Cuba are run by the government.

In Cuba the government entirely pays for the training of qualifying art students at both 'San Alejandro', the original art academy founded in 1818, now the art high school, and the university-level Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA). The ISA, an extraordinary architectural complex deliberately built on the exclusive grounds of the former Havana country

club, began as a utopian school for all the arts. It stands as the best example of the early cultural ideals of the revolution in Cuba. Although parts of the complex were never completed, the Visual Art School, designed by Cuban Ricardo Porro, has been in use since 1976. The brick complex was designed to evoke a female body, with long corridors connecting distinctive domed spaces for different media.

Once art students complete their education many work as teachers but, even with full-time work, salaries are the equivalent of about 20 US dollars a month. Supplementing their income is essential. Selling art to art groups visiting Cuba is one way to ensure survival. One professor at ISA, Gustavo della Valle, sold several of his large drawings to members of our group. A professor at San Alejandro sold three oil paintings.

One of the more surprising subjects in the work of several of these official artists was a return to imagery of the Battista era (Batista, a dictator, was overthrown in the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro). Juan Moreira made his living as a billboard painter before the revolution, and he kept a photographic record of his work. After the revolution he retrained as a painter and produced Wifredo Lam-influenced work for decades. For our visit he displayed newly reprinted, large-scale photographs of his early billboards advertising Camel cigarettes and portable motor boats.

The brothers Kelvin and Kadir Lopez also recycle pre-revolutionary images and sources. Kelvin uses old lithography stones and cigar labels to create evocative collages. Kadir overlays 1950s enamelled signs with photographs from the Battista era. The works did not feel like nostalgic evocations of the past, but rather like contemporary statements on Cuba, in both their sophisticated execution and their conceptual acuteness. They obviously also appeal to an international audience who identify Cuba with a 1950s time warp.

In addition to the visual art, much of our programmed evening entertainment was based on lavish performances that evoked decadent bourgeois culture more than anything remotely Socialist. This recovery of Battista-era culture tells a lot about contemporary Cuba. Art and tourism are two important sources of foreign currency, but these revenues feed inequities and economic hierarchies. Those disparities began emerging in the early 1990s after the withdrawal of the Soviets, and in desperation the government legalized the dollar (today there are two Cuban currencies, one for foreigners, one for Cubans). This hierarchy was obvious to us as privileged tourists staying in the iconic Hotel Nacional, as we observed that the people of Cuba lived in crumbling buildings with erratic utilities and inadequate transportation.

Cuba is about contradictions, such as the government's serendipitous approach to censorship: a perceived critique of the Communist Party and the revolution, or any its related procedures, is not tolerated but there is no problem with representations of the nude female body, eroticism and sensuality. Cirenaica Moreira, Juan Moreira's daughter, explicitly represents themes about women's bodies in her striking large-scale photographs. In *Lobotomy* (1996) the artist wears extreme appendages that suggest suffocation and entrapment. In another series, *Sueños Humedos* (Wet Dreams) 2004, she poses as a 15-year-old girl wearing sultry outfits or assuming personas such as Marilyn Monroe, actual traditions in Cuba for the 'quinceanera' coming-of-age ceremony.

The well-known Sandra Ramos, in the work that we saw at her house, relied instead on a pre-adolescent girl in a school uniform, a 'pioneer', and a type of Alice in Wonderland character. She represents, we were told, the innocence of future generations. The young pioneer confronts situations ranging from complex games to star gazing, from shipwrecks to a visit to New York City, with an equally detached demeanour. Nothing seems to daunt her, but equally, she seems entrapped in a post-utopian world beyond her control. In contrast, schoolgirls as represented in a film premiered while we were there, *Seven Days in Havana*, were anything but innocent or detached: they were emphatically sensuous and bravely taking chances to pursue dangerous paths to their future.

These contradictions in the representations of contemporary women in Cuba, as well as the references to Battista culture, are all part of the sanctioned tourist face of Cuba. Equally acceptable is the wonderful mosaic art of Jose Fuster, and the various forms of music played for us at every meal. By way of contrast, in the work of Celia/Yunior and their friends, I glimpsed the world of ordinary Cubans and the negotiations necessary to simply survive day-to-day. In Part II I will look at their art.

Credits