

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Post Script: Cuban Art in Canada”

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Cuba is starting to recover from the severe economic crises and deprivation brought on by the departure of the Soviet Union and sustained by the US embargo. Tourism is rapidly expanding, gold has been discovered, and the island is garnering support from countries as far apart as Zambia and China. All of this support is in spite of the recently re-affirmed and expanded Helms Burton Act which declares that countries assisting Cuba will not receive United States assistance.

Surprisingly, art has been exempted from the US embargo on Cuba. A recent Supreme Court decision allowed the exhibition, purchase and sale of Cuban art in New York. Nonetheless, the recent seven venue exhibition in Vancouver Canada, "New Art from Cuba: Utopian Territories", was developed over a period of two years against the background of the embargo's pervasive presence. In spite of the waiver on art, there were endless logistical dramas for the organizers of the exhibition as a result of the ban in the US on doing business with Cuba. At the same time the exhibition, financed in part by the Canada Council, participates in this resistance to US policy.

Although I did not see all seven venues, I found the works at the Contemporary Art gallery and the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia refreshingly provocative. Some artists used traditional political media like black and white graphics and installations. Abel Bourassa's prints presented a history of the revolution in Cuba. The installation by Sandro Ramos' Uterus addressed the migrations out of Cuba by using baby furniture and parts of dolls embedded in sand in an underwater (blue) room.

Eighties' artists were represented by such people as Tonel, Rene Francisco, Eduardo Ponjuan, and Sandra Ceballos, all of whom still work in Cuba. Francisco had Smithsonian homage, Drawings Ideas from the Well. 1997, but the well was a huge tire, emphasizing the absolute necessity of using recycled materials in impoverished Cuba. Sandra Caballos' installation The Psychogenic Expression, as well as Tonel's homage to Gramsci in his Self Portrait of an Inorganic Intellectual participate in an international postmodern discourse.

Cuban critic/curator Eugenio Valdes saw the art as in tension between ideology (politics) and utopia (aesthetics). Juan Antonio Molina spoke of the move from public to domestic art. These concepts appear, most obviously, in the new emphasis among many of the artists in the Vancouver exhibition on the materiality of art and the production of aesthetic objects that can be bought and sold for much needed hard currency in Cuba. Silk-screened posters and public art, the landmark of Cuban political art of the past, now takes second place to paintings and sculpture, even as engagement with political and social issues continues to be both subtle and unequivocal.

For example, Estero Segura's *A Sleigh Passed Through My Havana* has a life-size figure of a woman in Russian dress being propelled on a sleigh pulled by alligators. The improbably juxtaposition makes perfect sense in terms of recent Cuban history. Osterio Yero, *To the Rescue of the Fauna*, has an alligator, shaped like Cuba, suspended on a cloudy sky. The alligator is pulled by two strings held by disembodied hands coming from opposite directions. Fernando Rodriguez has an alter identity Francisco de la Cal, a peasant artist who went blind in the 1960s during the early days of the Revolution. The images the "two" artists produce are based on folk art traditions of carving and writing, but they tell a tragic-comic political story. Pedro Alvarez parodies older Cuban painting styles and tourist kitsch, while Los Carpinteros combine extraordinary carpentry with academic-realist oil painting.

In no country is it more complicated to look at the relationship between art and politics than in Cuba. Since the Cuban Revolution artists have had constant government support within a wildly fluctuating economic base and changing political directives. The training that artists receive is lengthy (8 - 12 years) and the main dictum is to serve what is generally referred to as "the common good." Although not limited by a definition, this concept leads to a sense of morality and communal awareness, something that is almost completely absent from art training in the United States. Political art in Cuba is based on supporting the Revolution, not on opposing the government. But serving the Revolution has not constrained the artists with the usual dogmatism of socialist realism, although in the later sixties when the Russian influence peaked, ideological dogma was prevalent. Fidel Castro's famous 1961 "Words to the Intellectuals" - "Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing" meant that artists had "freedom of form" if they supported the Revolution. Castro declared in 1988 that "Socialism's reason for being is to elevate man's capabilities and possibilities to a maximum, to also elevate the freedom of creation to its highest degree, not only in form, but also in content."

The exhibition in Vancouver was one manifestation of that belief in the power of artists in the unique society that is Cuba. As Cuba resumes its place on the world stage, loyalty to the Revolution means that the artists are, paradoxically, positioning themselves for success within the capitalist art market and international art world. What comes through clearly in the exhibition, though, is their fierce commitment to Cuba and its particular history. It is that deep commitment that makes this art so compelling.