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CUBA

Cuban artists in Los Angeles: No single voice

By Richard Feinberg / September 20, 2017

Six provocative Cuban visual artists are making their presence known in Los Angeles at the private Lois Lambert Gallery, located in Santa Monica's hip Bergamot Station arts facility. The exhibition is part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, an ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art, led by the J. Paul Getty Museum, taking place from September 2017 through January 2018 at more than 70 cultural institutions across Southern California.

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Pictured: Gallery owner Lois Lambert (standing), and the Cuban artists (seated from left to right): Alejandro Gómez Cangas, Eduardo Rubén, Darwin Estacio Martinez, Luis Rodriguez Noa, Adislen Reyes Pino and Maylek Linares.

Ms. Lambert curated the exhibition herself, visiting Havana to select this diverse representation of emerging and established Cuban talent. The most striking take-away: today, Cuban visual artists are wonderfully free to express themselves in their own individual personalities and styles. They can freely choose their preferred art history reference points, delve into their own subconscious, make a political statement (or, just as telling, not make one). These Cuban artists are not constrained by a single, official style. They have long ago left behind crass sloganeering, forced political realism, and historical myth-making. They are profoundly post-Castro.

Cuban artists aspire to global quality and relevance, and why not? Many are graduates of the San Alejandro Academy (Cuba's most prestigious fine arts high school), where they develop technical skills and then proceed to the elite, highly selective Institute of Advanced Arts (ISA) to deepen their grasp of art history and contemporary styles. Consequently, many Cuban artists possess an intellectual heft and verbal competence not always found among their counterparts elsewhere.

In Cuba, artists can exhibit in government-run spaces and in their own workshops, but private galleries are not yet legal. At the Lois Lambert Gallery, and increasingly at other spaces around the United States, Americans can appreciate the variety and depth of artistic talent in today's Cuba. Moreover, the quality/price ratio of these six Cuban visual artists is extremely favorable by international standards.

To label the exposition, Ms. Lambert smartly selected a phrase from Jose Martí's famous poem, "*Yo soy un hombre sincero*": "*Yo vengo de todas partes y hacia todas partes voy.*" (I am a sincere man: I come from everywhere and everywhere I go.) As rooted as he was in his Cuban national identity, Martí was also a cosmopolitan who travelled extensively and read widely. Lambert's artists root their work in their Cuban reality but also break out to tackle transcendent themes. Their works speak to a broad international audience.

Of the six artists, Eduardo Rubén's "*combatientes*" (combatants) series is the most arresting. A trained architect, Ruben takes the cinder blocks and twisted steel reinforcing bars of Havana's decaying buildings and fashions this material residue into powerful black-and-white dramatic images on canvas. In an evident reference to

Giacometti, two tall, thin cinder block–rebar figures stand face-to-face in erotic tension; in "hard headed," a man's bent head smashes a hole into a brick wall. Is Rubén suggesting that Cubans are enmeshed in restrictive social structures? At the minimum, he is calling attention to the urban decay that surrounds too many Cuban families.

The sole female artist in the show, Adislen Reyes Pino, is the most introspective. She groups her evocative black-and-white drawings in series: "Crisis," "Nightmare," and "Bipolar." In many of the sketches, a young girl—the artist—is a solitary figure, following her artistic muse to an uncertain escape. Reyes Pino gives expression to the angst of her generation—many of her talented classmates have emigrated—regarding the limited opportunities and uncertain future of her island nation. No salsa dancing, domino-playing lightheartedness here. And certainly no heroic images of Ché Guevara.

In contrast, the surreal landscapes of Maykel Linares suggest an open horizon to Cubans brave enough to venture forth. But the landscapes are far from the idyllic visions of the 19th century Cuban masters. Instead, a dark foreboding dominates his work. Maykel's asymmetries add to the subtle anxiety. In "The Whistle," a large dog, placed off center, gazes at the viewer, tense with expectation, leaving unanswered who is calling and where the dog is going. Nothing is fixed, life is transient; by implication, the Cuban revolution, once frozen in time, cannot endure forever in its present form.

Alejandro Gómez Cangas explores the relationship between the individual and society. He photographs ordinary Cubans, then arranges them in collages and transforms them into oil on canvas. The diversity of his subjects—by skin color, body type, age, and profession

—is striking; this is not a one-dimensional society. Uniformed police and army officers mix casually with civilians. In Gomez Cangas's work, there is both static tension and forward movement, but real progress seems uncertain. Clearly, this a not a solidarity society; however tightly packed, each individual exists apart from the masses, neither gaining succor nor suffering hostility.

Luis Rodriguez Noa's mixed media on canvas are the most lyrical and fun. His colorful paintings are a riot of activity, of the quotidian, absurd, charming, sometimes surreal natures of Cuban existence. Noa's work evokes more of a communal feel, of crowded Cubans living on top of each other, packed together but in harmony. He most directly addresses the United States-Cuba connection; visitors arrive by cruise ships and airplanes and become a welcome part of the urban landscape. In "Analogies," Noa draws attention, seemingly without irony, to the overlap of colors in the U.S. and Cuban flags, and in the architecture of our national legislatures.

Finally, Darwin Estacio Martinez extracts figures from classical films and other sources, but without their faces, focusing instead on their hands. Actions not words are what matter. The viewer is free to interpret, but Martinez depicts a vaguely sinister, noir atmosphere, an authoritarianism in the assertive communicative gestures of well-dressed males. A whimsical exercise or a reminder of pre-revolutionary capitalist domination? Martinez insinuates but like his colleagues he eschews dogmatisms and is comfortable with ambiguity.

Through Cuba's current generation of gifted visual artists, a post-socialist, patently pluralistic culture is on display. Theirs is a restless society in unsettled transition, an open-ended journey being observed,

experienced and critiqued in real time.

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