

	<p><b>The-Merger</b>  (Mario M Glez / Niels Moleiro / Alain Pino)  <b>Cuchilla Cubana</b> (<i>Original 2009</i>)  Wood and polychrome metal sculpture  Variable dimensions  Executed in 2009  <b>Número de lote:</b> 166</p>	<p><b>Casa de Subastas:</b>  Sotheby's  <b>New York 18-nov-2009</b>  <b>Estimado:</b> \$18.000,00 - \$22.000,00  <b>Sold:</b> \$25.000,00 usd</p>
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# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2014

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U.S.

## Artists Bridge Divide Between Cuba, U.S.

Partnerships Among Painters, Musicians Expand as U.S., Cuba Ease Restrictions

By Arian Campo-Flores

KEY WEST, Fla.—Five years ago, the cross-border collaboration of the Cuban artistic trio known as the Merger would have been unthinkable.

With two members living in Havana and the third in Miami, they traverse the Florida Straits roughly once a month to work on their steel and Plexiglas sculptures. They show their works regularly at art fairs in Florida and draw buyers from across the U.S.—all despite the five-decade-old American trade embargo against Cuba.

An exhibit featuring the three—Mario González, Niels Moleiro and Alain Pino—along with seven other Cuban artists opened last week at five cultural institutions here. The



Members of the Cuban artistic trio called the Merger. From left, Alain Pino, Mario Gonzalez and Niels Moleiro.

show, called One Race, the Human Race, is the counterpart to an exhibit that had its debut last

month at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana, featuring pieces by Mario Sanchez, a deceased

Article Continues...

Front Section...

9 of 29 Articles

West Rushes to Stabilize Ukraine

As President Flailed, Allies Jumped Ship

Netflix to Pay Comcast to End Traffic Jam

Hey New York Subway Riders, Take Note of Turnstiles' Musical Stylings

How Mexico Nabbed a Drug Kingpin

China's State-Owned Sector Gets New Boost

Pediatrics Group Balks at Rise of Retail Health Clinics

Teen's Care Spurs Wider Fight

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Identity Theft

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Activate Account

☆☆☆

Continued

Cuban-American artist who lived in Key West.

Organizers say it is the first example of a cultural exchange between art institutions, as opposed to art galleries or fairs, in the two countries.

The dual exhibits underscore the growing cultural ties between the countries, facilitated by each loosening travel restrictions in recent years. The result is a growing thaw in relations at the grass-roots level, even as rhetoric between the two governments remains largely hostile. "These are the first steps toward a rapprochement," Mr. González said. "We can't be neighbors 90 miles away and not get along."

In recent weeks, debate over U.S.-Cuba relations flared once again, in part because of a poll by the Atlantic Council in Washington that found that a majority of Americans, and an even higher percentage of residents of Miami-

Dade County, Fla., which is heavily Cuban-American, favored normalized relations with Cuba.

In 2000, 62% of Cuban-Americans in Miami-Dade favored continuing the embargo in a poll by Florida International University.

A fundamental policy change is unlikely anytime soon, given the need for congressional approval and stiff opposition of Cuban-American lawmakers, said Guillermo Grenier, a sociology professor at FIU. "So what is left is clearly on the cultural level," he said.

While cultural exchanges between the nations have occurred periodically for decades, they have become more frequent after recent government moves. In 2011, the Obama administration loosened restrictions on educational and cultural travel to the island, and last year, it extended the duration of nonimmigrant visas for Cubans to five years from six months, and

allowed for multiple entries.

Meantime, Cuba last year eliminated the need for its citizens to obtain exit visas to travel overseas and extended the period they could stay abroad to two years from 11 months.

According to Cuban government data, the number of U.S. citizens, excluding Cuban-Americans, who traveled to the island rose to 98,000 in 2012 from 42,000 in 2008. And the number of nonimmigrant visas issued by the U.S. Interests Section in Havana to Cubans jumped to 33,394 in the fiscal year ended Sept. 30, from 17,110 the previous year, State Department figures show.

The eased rules have allowed more American painters, playwrights and musicians to travel to Cuba to collaborate on shows. Meanwhile, a variety of companies are organizing educational and cultural tours aimed at exposing Americans to Cuba's culture.

In South Florida, it is now

## Front Section...

9 of 29 Articles

West Rushes to Stabilize Ukraine

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How Mexico Nabbed a Drug Kingpin

China's State-Owned Sector Gets New Boost

Pediatrics Group Balks at Rise of Retail Health Clinics

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Activate Account

☆☆☆

Continued

common for Cuban rappers, poets and other artists to showcase their work. The Cuban Soul Foundation in Miami has hosted more than 30 dissident artists in the past two years, many of whom were allowed to travel to the U.S. under Cuba's relaxed policies. The foundation trained them in how to run a recording studio or open a gallery and provided financial support once they returned home.

In the past, such visits often set off demonstrations by Cuban-American exiles, who derided the performers as pawns of the Cuban government. But these days, "protests are almost gone off our radar screen," said Lillian Manzor,

director of the Cuban Theater Digital Archive at the University of Miami, who has helped organize numerous theater exchanges with groups in Havana.

A major reason is that Cuban-Americans have gained greater exposure to young artists from the island, said Pepe Hernández, president of the Cuban American National Foundation, which supports cultural exchanges. "People here are realizing that there is still a very vibrant culture in Cuba," he said.

Nance Frank, a co-curator of the Key West exchange, said she received just one angry call about the project, from Rafael Peñalver,

president of the San Carlos Institute, a Cuban-American organization in the city. The show is "scandalous," Mr. Peñalver said in an interview. "It's providing the Cuban government with a platform to project a falsehood about artistic opening in Cuba."

Moraima Clavijo Colom, director of the partner museum in Havana, responded that the artists in Key West display a diversity of messages, including critiques of the establishment. If detractors came to see the show, she said, "maybe they would have a more expansive view" of it.

**Write to** Arian Campo-Flores at [arian.campo-flores@wsj.com](mailto:arian.campo-flores@wsj.com) **WSJ**

## Front Section...

9 of 29 Articles

West Rushes to Stabilize Ukraine

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