Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography after the Revolution

January 12- March 9, 2002

1. Chicago Reader, 2. 22. 2002
2. Chicago Sun Times, 2. 3. 2002
3. Chicago Tribune, 2. 23. 2002
TROPICAL PARADOX

Eugene Roesler, a painter in the Chicago Reader, described his recent visit to Cuba in January 1990. He noted:

"What we have is lack... Yet in..."

The reviewer then went on to discuss the art and culture of Cuba, specifically mentioning the works of Elizardo Suárez and the Cuban artist William Claro.

---

FROM "IT'S ONLY WATER IN THE TEAR OF A STRANGER" BY GARY (ROGELIO LÓPEZ MARTÍN)

Photography

are ubiquitous today (postcard) focuses on the way, rainy texture of clout commandant's beard. The second instance takes the form of a painting in a portrait, the backdrop for more of Maracana's heroes. In the painting, Maracana is depicted in a military uniform, holding a sword and a flag. The third instance is a photograph of the Maracana stadium, taken in the summer of 1954.

---

FROM "LA PEÑA DE CIGÜEÑA" BY MARUGU (MARIA EUGENIA NAYA)

Multiples Che Guevara photos draped across a bed in a lamp-lit room. In contrast to Figuerola's photographs, this is a very fine art object, a series of works that contrast with the documentary nature of Figuerola's photographs. The images are of Che Guevara, a Marxist revolutionary, and the Cuban revolution.

---

Making the most of what they got also influences brilliant improvisations by two conceptually inclined artists, Manuel Pita and Carlos Garay. Pita's simple, haunting vision of the sea over the sill of Havana's famous Malecón bookstore is one of the show's masterpieces, but he makes his boldest statement in Manipulaciones, Truths, and Other Illusions (1991), in which found objects: small glass-plate negatives from a forgotten 19th-century photographer. Inspired by these family portraits and landscapes, he juxtaposes them with his own contemporary views of Havana, which have a precocious and sexual and racial dimensions, for instance, a shot of a black woman in a calash or the solicitous gaze of a black woman in a calash. Then he translates these images into billboards with texts that propagate not only the (photographic) illusion, but also, of course, of the woman becomes a symbol of the country's racial divide. Since the Russians pulled out and the pleasure seekers started rolling in, moving among U.S. dollars, adjustments have been made in ideology as in everything else. Garay refers to Russia in a more direct way, recalling the production of famous like Vladimir Tatlin, who in the hope of early days of the Soviet era decided to make a poster for another cities and dream palaces for the future. Working with current Cuban realities, Garay paints a snapshot in time, a snapshot in time, Cuba, a wooden sculpture with flawless blueprints for its habitation. In Regarding These Unraveling Atlas (from Day to Day) Supports Our Present (1999), he pairs a photo of a crumbling street corner with a machine made from a crumbling wooden scaffolding with a rendering of the granite gods sitting in a row to support the machine's monolithic and chronological traditions. Submitted to the Artist, "Another Necessary Project," this wildly imaginative, meticulously crafted painting suggests that such a whimsical proposal might be no more crazy than some now being effective.

The museum's presentation is impeccable, marketed better than any of the recent Art Institute blockbuster. Complete with an exhaustive time line, insightful chronological and thematic rubrics, and polished written materials (in both English and Spanish), the show is augmented by educational events. On March 3 at 6 PM there will be a screening of Mikhail Kalatozov's I Am Cuba, a brilliantly shot and edited 1964 Cuban-Soviet co-production. Admission to the show and this event is free—a paradoxical price for this embarrassment of Cuban riches.
When people see photographs of Cuba, they expect a collection of politically charged renditions of Fidel Castro smoking a cigar or scenes of broken-down cars littering open fields.

But in “Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography After the Revolution,” housed at Columbia College's Museum of Contemporary Photography, the complexity and sophistication of the more than 100 black-and-white and color images goes beyond such clichés.

There are scenes of Cuban Spanish-American War centenarians holding their hats, a couple dancing cheek-to-cheek, and the crevices and corners of an artist’s home. All images are created by artists who are living or have lived on the island.

“The Cuban artists said this show looked at Cuban art in a way that didn’t verify the cliches of what Cuban art and culture was,” says Corzine Rose, the museum’s educator. “This goes into the personal lives [of Cubans].”

The exhibit takes viewers on a journey through three generations of Cuban artists, who shed light on the cultural richness of the island and its people.

“Everyday Heroes” explores men and women at festive affairs, eating or in the sugar cane fields. Their introductions are by photographers such as Enrique de la Uz and Maria Eugenia Haya, who try to show how these citizens, like Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, represent a vital part of the revolution.

The “Collective Memory” segment displays works by trained Cuban artists, who use tableaux or montages to create images of Cuban life. Juan Carlos Alom and Gory (Rogelio Lopez Marin) approach subjects from different perspectives, yet both try to address specifics of Cuban life as well as the human condition.

In “Only You Fit in the Palm of My Hand,” Alom takes a Christian symbol, the image of fish, places one fish in a hand, surrounded by a group of fish, showing what it’s like to be an individual who is part of a collective.

Gory uses the images of a pool ladder and superimposes other scenes to show how luxury items in disrepair and the sea represent social class, migration and deteriorating economics.

In “Fighting the Self,” works come from artists who never experienced life before Castro. Their works don’t idealize the revolution or represent a collective thought. They speak to the individual and to the invasion of privacy.

Ernesto Leal photographs hidden places: under beds, behind furniture and in niches of his home. His large color photos suggest a search is being conducted, but the object hasn’t been found.

Unlike the empty searches of Leal’s work, viewers will find something in the exhibit—an understanding of how Cuban art is as complex as the artists who conceive it.

Through March 9, view the exhibit, located at 600 S. Michigan, across from Grant Park, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Thursday; and noon until 5 p.m. Saturdays.

ABOVE: Juan Carlos Alom’s “Only You Fit in the Palm of My Hand” is one of the complex works in the Cuban photography exhibit.
BELOW LEFT: Gory (Rogelio Lopez Marin) uses images of a pool ladder to make social commentary.
BELOW RIGHT: A Cuban centenarian represents one of the country’s everyday heroes in Ivan Canas’ black and white photograph.
‘Shifting Tides’: Cuban photographers capture mixture of social and political

By Ruth Lopez
Special to the Tribune

When photography curator Tim B. Wride went to Cuba for the first time in 1997 to attend the contemporary art biennial in Havana, he expected to see a lot of social realist, documentary, street reportage photography.

"And indeed I did," he said.

But Wride also found very rich and amazingly complex images.

"The work was so diverse and so much within a mainstream of international art dialogue, my question was, 'How can this be?'

Four decades of Cuban artistic vision are represented in "Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography after the Revolution," an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College that runs through March 9.

Wride, the show’s curator and a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gathered 16 photographers for the show, which is a direct result of his visit.

"What I saw there flew in the face of expectations and because of that there were a lot of questions that I had," he said.

"The show is really the answer to those questions."

"Los Manos" is by Jose Manuel Fors, who arranges his images in what he calls photo mosaics.

The tense relationship that exists between the governments of the United States and Cuba forces a political prelude to any discussion. There have been travel restrictions for U.S. citizens during Fidel Castro’s rule.

But one way or another, Americans have been going there in droves.

Culture, specifically music, has built a bridge and even the catalog accompanying this exhibit can’t resist making that connection; a banner on the cover reads "preface by Wim Wenders, director of the award-winning movie 'Buena Vista Social Club.'"

Korda, a fashion photographer before the revolution, was born in 1928 and died last May in Paris while visiting an exhibition of his work. The work has been reproduced in countless ways and Korda never minded until the image was used in a vodka ad. (For one, Che never
“Everything there is political and given that, all of these photos are political,” Wride says. “The trap is in thinking that they are only political.”

The work goes beyond making social statements. “They fall within a very rich tradition of art making in Cuba and the Caribbean and Latin America,” Wride said.

Cuba has some very sophisticated graduate art programs, but there is no studio photography in the art education system, Wride said. The photographers by and large were schooled in these programs and all turned to photography.

Wride worked with critic and independent curator Christina Vives who lives in Havana. Vives, who is married to photographer Jose Figueroa, curated a show a few years ago in Minneapolis on Cuban conceptual photography.

Some of the younger photographers who came to the U.S. then, such as Jose Manuel Fors, whose work is very personal, are a part of this exhibit. Using old family photographs and objects found around his home, Fors is working with the idea of memory. He arranges his images in grids, or what he calls photo mosaics.

The work of Alberto Diaz Gutierrez, professionally known as Alberto Korda, presents the stark contrast one might expect. He created perhaps one of the most famous photographs of the past century — the portrait of Ernesto “Che” Guevara wearing a beret, his eyes looking up.

(Blank.) Since Cuba rejoined the international copyright convention in 1997, Korda was able to sue the advertising agency and won his case before he died. The image is on display at the museum.

Wride saw these extremes in style as a way of organizing the exhibition. He broke down the work into three categories: the “cult of personality” work of Korda and others like Oswaldo Salas (1914-1962); images of everyday life documented by photographers such as Ivan Canas (born 1946); and the personal or more international conceptual work by artists such as Ernesto Leal (born 1970).

Perhaps simplistic, but he had to start somewhere.

What about support?

Wride said he wondered how the artists had managed to engage in the international art dialogue and once they did that, how much support were they getting.

“How is it that all of this wonderful amazing work is flourishing amidst material privation?” he said. Photography is materially intensive and the artists were going through “great lengths to give a physicality to their vision.”

Wride, who speaks very little Spanish, was accompanied by Vives on many of his visits with the photographers.

“There is a moment when you begin to engage in the dialogue of the art,” said Wride who quickly was able to leap over the language barrier. “We had a common vocabulary.”
By Holland Cotter

Cuba, fantasy island, seen from within.

Cuba, shaped like a scythe, lies in the Caribbean 90 miles off Florida. For centuries it has been a kind of fantasy island in the minds of writers. Columbus thought it was the predestined place he had ever seen. Later adventurers went there to gold and found it: “White gold.” sugar. With African slaves to harvest the cane, they lived the grandees. By the 19th century and well into the 20th, the capital city, Havana, with its clock arched gates and velvet facades, was a cosmopolitan magnet for businessmen, artists and tourists alike. Its casinos were lavish, its nightlife was lively. It was where you went to be extravagant, liberated and bold.

Cuba, shaped like a scythe, lies in the Caribbean 90 miles off Florida. For centuries it has been a kind of fantasy island in the minds of writers. Columbus thought it was the predestined place he had ever seen. Later adventurers went there to gold and found it: “White gold.” sugar. With African slaves to harvest the cane, they lived the grandees. By the 19th century and well into the 20th, the capital city, Havana, with its clock arched gates and velvet facades, was a cosmopolitan magnet for businessmen, artists and tourists alike. Its casinos were lavish, its nightlife was lively. It was where you went to be extravagant, liberated and bold.

Continued on Page 29

Cuba, fantasy island, seen from within.
by its shores? That story comes in many versions. And some of them are told by art, as can be seen in two exhibitions in New York at present: "Epic Photography of the Cuban Revolution" at the Cuban Art Space in Chelsea, and "Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography After the Revolution" at Grey Art Gallery, New York University.

"Epic Photography," organized by Sandra Levinson, director of the Cuban Art Space, is a selection of documentary pictures by a few remarkable photographers who were on the spot when the revolution ignited and the emotional heat it generated crackles through their work.

The drama actually starts with a 1955 portrait by the Cuban-born Osvald Salas (1914-1992) of a glum, exiled Fidel Castro dressed in a natty suit and tie and strolling through Central Park. There's also a second New York portrait by Mr. Salas's son Roberto, dating from 1959, by which time everything had changed. Mr. Castro, now prime minister of the Cuban Revolution, wears army fatigue and smiles and gestures with a diva's grace as he addresses the United Nations.

Meanwhile, in Havana, the photographer Ernesto Fernández had caught the revolution as it happened on Jan. 1, 1959, in an extraordinary picture of clean-cut students and office clerks carrying guns for the first time.

With such images, the concept of epic photography kicks in. It is nowhere more effective than in Raúl Corrales's panoramic shot from 1960 of a brigade of revolutionary cavalrymen with rippling Cuban flags, advancing toward the camera at full gallop. The tableau, which could be from a 19th-century photograph, a Diego Rivera mural or a John Ford western, has the pumped-up grandeur of history painting.

The leading stylist of the heroic, though, was Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez, or Korda (like many other Cuban artists, he used a one-word professional name), who was born in 1928 and died in May of this year. He was Mr. Castro's official photographer and produced many promotional portraits of him. Unsurprisingly, he came to the job through a career in fashion photography and advertising.

Whether depicting Mr. Castro as a magnetic orator, a military leader or just folks, Korda paid shrewd attention to camera angle, facial expression, composition and backdrop. The idea was to create the image of a great man of action in action, an illusion of Olympian spontaneity, and he got what he was after.

His most famous portrait, however, was of Guevara, and it was a product of pure manipulation. In the original picture, Guevara was standing outdoors in a crowd intently listening to a speech. Korda cropped the negative, eliminated the other figures and isolated the handsome young man in a head shot against a patch of sky. Titled "Heroic Guerrilla," the result is an exercise in cosmic myth-making that continues to have currency today.

An uncropped print of the Guevara picture hangs at the start of "Shifting Tides" at Grey Art Gallery and has clearly been placed there for a reason. It exposes the conceptual machinery behind "epic" photography in order to move beyond it, and the show, organized by Tim B. Wride, associate curator of photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, emphatically does.

Mr. Wride suggests in a catalog essay that a second wave of revolution-era photographers turned away from the cult of personality to concentrate on ordinary people: the ones in pictures of cane cutters by Enrique de la Uz, in Iván Cahás's portraits of elderly veterans of the 1898 revolution, and in the festive shots of couples in a Havana dance hall by the artist and photographer historian María Eugenia Haya (1844-91), known as Marucha.

Then, with the work of José A. Figueroa, born in 1947, there's a change. This artist starts fooling around with "epic" as a category, prodding it, mocking it, shading it. In his "Sierra Road" series (1972), named for the mountains where Mr. Castro lived as a guerrilla in the late 1950's, a man on a tractor and another on horseback pass each other as if in separate worlds: so much for progress, the picture seems to say. In a 1995 shot of an impoverished Havana, men drag salvaged furniture
The Epic and the Surreal

At Grey Art Gallery: Havana dance-hall couple by María Eugenia Hayo.

Pérez Bravo’s pictures finds darker echoes elsewhere: in Abigail González’s mock-voyeuristic pictures of scantily clad women (the scenes are staged for the camera); in Pedro Abascal’s ghostly, X-raylike architectural shapes; and in Ernesto Leal’s color close-ups of dirt-catching cracks and crevices in his own apartment, which bring to mind the rot eating away at Havana’s antique architecture.

Architecture also plays a part in one of the show’s rare utopian moments. A two-panel piece by Carlos Garaicoa offers a photograph of a decrepit Havana building propped up with wooden braces and a drawing of the building in which the braces are replaced by figures of giant classical altaries, implying that a falling-down city is actually supported by benign but invisible supernatural beings. Mr. Garaicoa, who recently had a one-man show at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, is full of such witty and restorative ideas. He’s a wonderful artist.

So is Manuel Piliá, represented by a series of pictures whose very title, “Manipulation, Truths and Other Illusions,” would suit both shows. The work is conceptually elaborate, based on the persona of a fictional contemporary artist who has rediscovered a forgotten 19th-century Cuban photographer.

Each of Mr. Piliá’s three-part contributions includes an “original” 19th-century photo of a woman, the contemporary photographer’s re-make of that picture using a prostitute as a model, and a shot of that remake enlarged to heroic scale on a billboard advertisement for Cuban tourism.

Mr. Piliá’s taking of epic photography — with a prostitute as hero, an artist as commercial sellout and advertising as promoter of both — is a far cry from Korda’s. Yet a piece by Mr. Piliá that concludes the Grey show manages to tie 40 years of Cuban photography together, in spirit if at least. It is a cinematic view of a crowned section of the sea wall that both shelters Havana and connects it to the Atlantic. Seen in dark silhouette against the sky, it suggests the turret of a military tank, an altar, an abstract sculpture, an emblem as valorous and crushing as the revolution itself.

Mr. Piliá and most of the other artists in “Shifting Tides” have not yet had New York solo shows, which makes the exhibition catalog, with its strong first-person essay by Cristina Vives, a valuable resource. It has recently been joined by a second book of wider scope edited by Holly Block, director of Art in General, a nonprofit arts organization in Manhattan. Titled “Art Cuba: The New Generation” (Harry N. Abrams), it covers work in various media and includes critical contributions by the curator Gerardo Mosquera and the artist Antonio Elías, known as Tonel.

Good as they are, both books are still only a handful of essays with pictures, just as the exhibitions are mere samplings of much larger bodies of material. Cuban art, like the island itself, has changed radically in the last half century and is changing still. Now it’s time for someone to give that dynamic process the big-picture historical treatment it deserves.