

PRESS COVERAGE



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
4. New York Times, 9. 7. 2001

SHIFTING TIDES: CUBAN PHOTOGRAPHY AFTER THE REVOLUTION
at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, through March 9

By Sean Francis

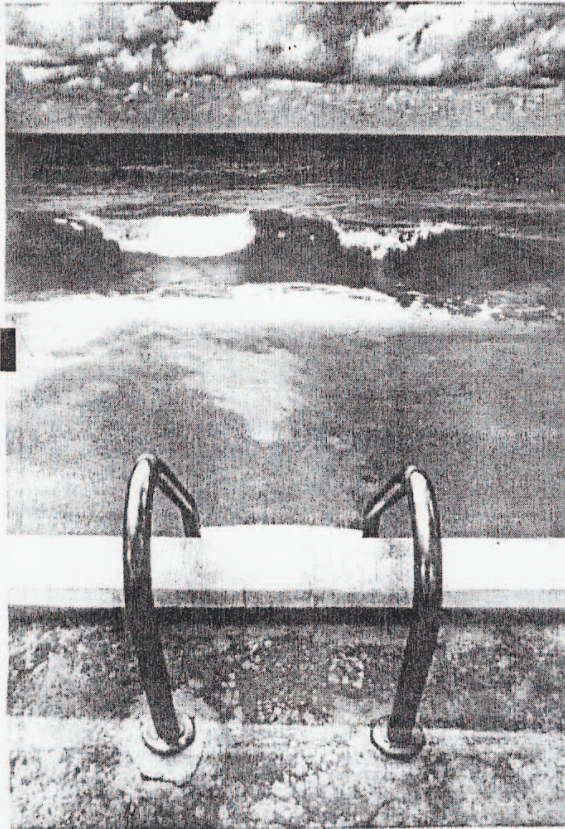
TROPICAL PARADOX

La que tenemos es escasez (an the graffiti I saw a year ago in Cuba: "What we have is lack." Yet as any Yankee who's thrilled to the sound of the Buena Vista or savored a con traband *paot* knows, whatever necessities Cubans may want for, the richness and vitality of their culture must curb the misery, at least to some extent. Suffering beneath a dream that has yet to come true and a regime that will not admit it, they are the world's most ecstatic-sad people.

This is confirmed by an extraordinary exhibit of photographs now on display at the Museum of Contemporary Photography. In part that's the result of artists' work coping to a moment of crisis. In other words, by the 16 photographers represented. But that exuberance is equally present in individual works.

Rogelio Romero, beginning his tendentious 1975 series "with the Sweat of a Millionaire," deploys an aesthetic that might be termed "sunny proletarianism" in portraits of workers at rest—of a woman beaming over her humble but substantial meal, of two field laborers grinning next to a stalk of sugarcane they've split open and written their names on (incidentally reminding us that literacy for all was one of the revolution's more successful bequests). "Marucha" (Maria Eugenia Haya—one of several artists best known by a nickname) in her 1979 sequence "In the Lyceum" shows older Cubans couples frozen forever at their most frenzied, mamboing to music whose soaring brass and insinuating rhythms one can all but hear. The contrasts Marucha draws between silence and sound, stasis and motion, appear too in the photos' setting: a grand beaux arts ballroom whose high ceilings, glassed-in portals, and marble walls serve as a glacial European counterpoint to the imagined heat of the band and the dancers.

While images like Romero's do conform to our expectations of work from the last and still heroic socialist experiment, clichés are refreshingly absent. Castro appears only twice in three floors of work. An extreme close-up by "Korda" (Alberto Diaz Gutierrez, whose indelible images of Fidel and the masses who cheered their amphib entry into Havana in 1959



FROM "IT'S ONLY WATER IN THE TEAR OF A STRANGER"
BY GORY (ROGELIO LOPEZ MARIN)

photography

are ubiquitous today on postcards) focuses on the wiry, shiny texture of el comandante's beard. The second instance takes the form of a painting in a tavern, the backdrop for more of Marucha's revelers. In the painting Castro gazes out from a cliff in his army fatigues, half guerrilla, half Olympian god; but the photo subtly mocks this deification, comically rhyming his stiff, at-attention rifle with a guitar's neck. The only cigar in the show is the one Castro holds in the Korda shot; the only antique car is drolly juxtaposed with a plastic kiddie car in a street scene by Jose A. Figueroa.

All of Figueroa's work, in fact, displays a mischievous wit—in one sequence of three shots he records the bemused sideways glance of a peasant on a donkey at a gigantic grader. Another, a deftly understated satire on the commodification of heroism, pairs a close-up of dozens of mass-produced figurines of Jose Martí (Cuba's national poet, martyred in the fight for independence from Spain) with a shot of



FROM "LA PEÑA DE CIRIQUE" BY MARUCHA (MARIA EUGENIA HAYA)

multiple Che Guevara photos draped across a bed in a lamp-lit room.

In contrast to Figueroa's pranksterism is the astonishing "It's Only Water in the Tear of a Stranger" (1986), a set of nine seamless color collages by "Gory"

(Rogelio Lopez Marin) showing swimming pools giving onto gorgeous symbolic vistas, an enigmatic tour de force that somehow evokes the Cuban sense of exile. Series by other photographers are perhaps more expressive of personal sensibilities than of specific Cuban realities. Selections from Marta Maria Perez Bravo's great 1986 series "To Conceive," for instance, are cropped nudes of an extravagantly pregnant woman; in the most sensational, *Neither Kill, nor Watch Animals Being Killed*, she brandishes what appears to be a bloodied butcher knife above her swollen belly. Quieter but no less compelling are Jose Manuel Fors's sepia-toned assemblages of found images and photos he shot. The best of these, *The Great Flower* (1999), is a monumental wheel spiraling hundreds of passport-size images ranging from details of old master paintings to pinup bombshells, from fossilized seashells to feathers and caterpillars. Perfectly positioned opposite the gallery's entrance, this absorbing piece is alone worth the trip.

Fors, who considers himself more a painter than a photographer, said in a recent panel discussion that the most salient characteristics of his work—usually large-scale constructions made up of smaller pieces in gradations of brown—are due mostly to the lack

of typewriter paper.)

Making the most of what they've got also influences brilliant improvisations by two conceptually inclined artists, Manuel Piña and Carlos Garaicoa. Piña's simple, haunting window on the sea over the sill of Havana's famous Malecon boulevard is one of the show's masterworks, but he makes his boldest statement in *Manipulations, Truths, and Other Illusions* (1995) using found objects: small glass-plate negatives from a forgotten 19th-century photographer. Inspired by these family portraits and landscapes, he's juxtaposed them with his own contemporary views of Havana, which have provocative sexual and racial dimensions: for instance, a shot of a black woman in a culture that still has a racial hierarchy. Then he transmits these images into billboards with texts that propagandize not on behalf of the glorious revolution, as usual, but of tourism: the black woman becomes a symbol of the country's "rainbow coalition." Since the Russians pulled out and the pleasure seekers started rolling in, tossing around U.S. dollars, adjustments have been required in ideology as in everything else.

Garaicoa refers to Russia in a more direct way, recalling the productions of futurists like Vladimir Tatlin, who in the hopeful early days of the Soviet era drafted grandiose plans for utopian cities and dream palaces for the masses. Working with current Cuban realities, Garaicoa pairs straightforward snapshots of the ruins of Havana's once spectacular architecture with fanciful blueprints for its rehabilitation. In *Regarding Those Unraveling Atlases Who From Day to Day Support Our Present* (1999), he pairs a photo of a crumbling street-corner building held up by ramshackle wooden scaffolding with a rendering of the titanic gods sitting in a row to support the same balconied facade. In *The Initial Planting of Hallucinogenic Mushrooms in Havana* (1997) he turns the rebar-sprouting pillars of a blasted building site into an Alice in Wonderland field of mind-expanding roadstools. Subtitled "Another Necessary Project," this wildly imaginative, meticulously drafted pairing suggests that such a whacked-out proposal might be no more crazy than some now being effected.

The museum's presentation is impeccable, markedly better than any of the recent Art Institute blockbusters. 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 5 at 6 PM there will be a screening of Mikhail Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba*, a brilliantly shot and edited 1964 Cuban-Soviet coproduction. Admission to the show and this event is free—a paradoxical price for this embarrassment of Cuban riches. ■

of suitable materials in Cuba: the paper he could get had expired, so it changed color, and it was only available in small sizes. (I met a literature professor in Mantanzas, the "Athens of Cuba," who had to suspend work on

on VIEW

Uncommon Cuba

BY LISA LENOIR
staff reporter

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

jects. 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 clichés of what Cuban art and culture was," says Corrine 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 made 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, 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 "Siting the Self," works come from artists who never experienced life before Castro. Their works don't idolize the revolution or represent a collective thought. They speak to the individual and to the invasion of privacy.

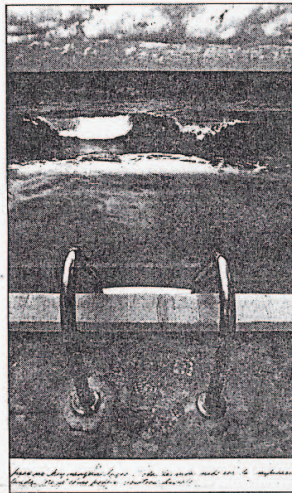
Ernesto Leal photographs hidden places: under beds, behind furniture and in niches of his home. His large color photos suggest a search is being conducted, but the object hasn't been found.

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., Thursdays; 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.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUAN CARLOS ALOM AND GORY (ROGELIO LOPEZ MARIN). PHOTOGRAPH BY IVAN CANAS.

'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?'"

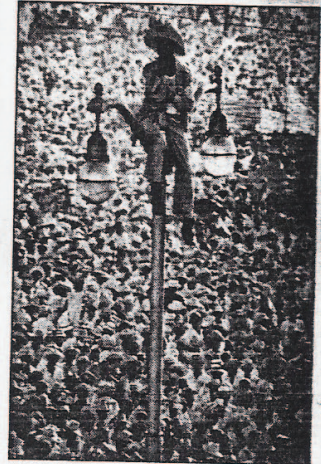
Four decades of Cuban artistic vision are represented in "Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography after the Revolution," an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College that runs through March 9.

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.



"El Quijote del la Farola, La Habana" by Alberto Diaz Gutierrez, known as Alberto Korda.

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.'"

Politics politics

'How is it that all of this wonderful amazing work is flourishing amidst material privation?'

— Tim B. Wride

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.

drank.) 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 Osvaldo Salas (1914-1992); 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.”

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

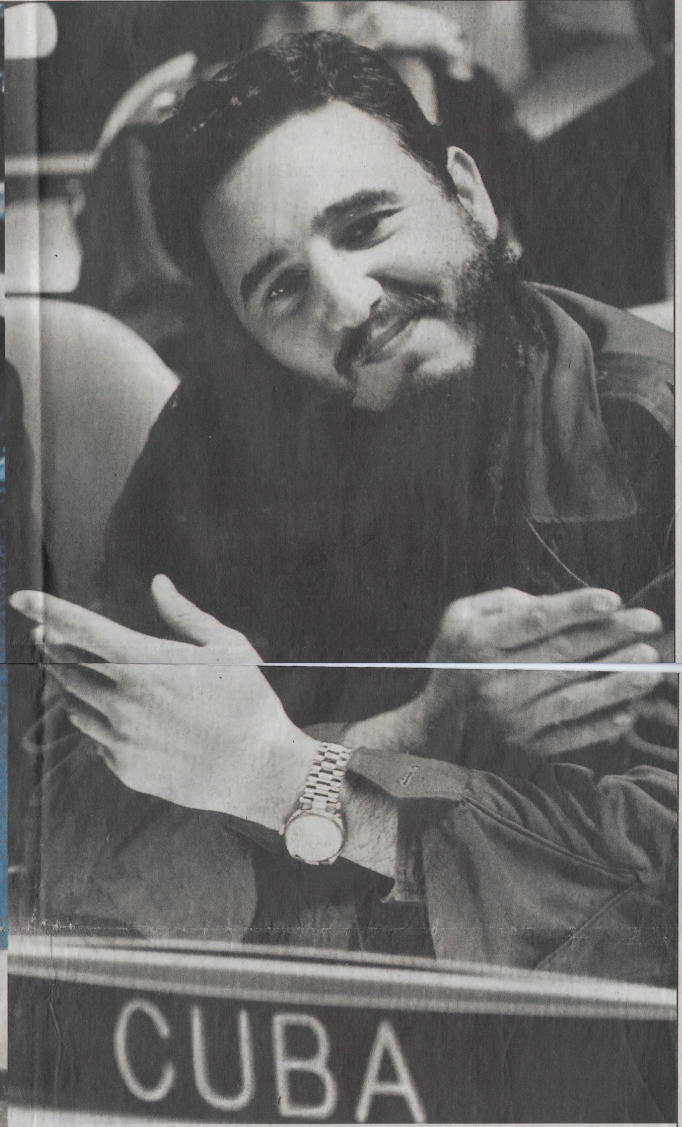
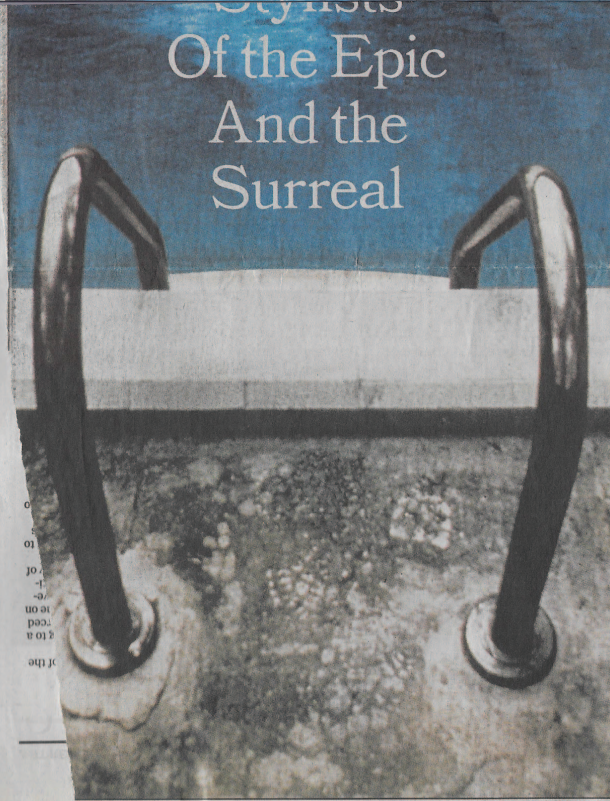
FEBRUARY 23, 2002 SATURDAY

Tash
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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

Stylists Of the Epic And the Surreal



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 to the outside world. Columbus thought it was the prettiest place he had ever seen. Later adventurers went there for gold and found it: "white gold," sugar. With African slaves to harvest the cane, they lived like grandees. By the 19th century and well into the 20th, the capital city, Havana, with its thick sea walls and rococo facades, was a cosmopolitan magnet for businessmen, artists and tourists alike. Its casinos were lavish; its night life was tireless. It was where you went to be extravagant, liberated and bad.

Even the moralizing political liberation of the 1950's and 60's had its glamour. The revolutionary troops, with their scruffy-chic beards and berets, were popular international heroes for a time. And they were led by two genuine superstars: the baby-faced Fidel Castro and the Byronic Che Guevara. When their pictures appeared in the news, readers alternately flinched and swooned. With global capitalism triumphant, yet another fantasy is on the horizon: the revival of the island as the vacation spot it once was, a semitropical dream come true.

But what does Cuba look like from the inside, to people born there and defined

Gory's "It's Only Water in the Teardrop of a Stranger," left, at the Grey Art Gallery; Fidel Castro, above, in a 1959 portrait by Roberto Salas at Cuban Art Space.

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Photographic Stylists of the Epic and the Surreal

Continued From Weekend Page 27

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 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 Oswald 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 fatigues and smiles and gestures with a diva's grace as he addresses the United Nations.

Meanwhile, in Havana, the photojournalist 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 cosmetic myth-making that continues to have currency today.

An uncropped print of the Guevara picture hangs at the start of "Shifting Tides" at the 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 Cañas'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 photographic historian María Eugenia Haya (1944-91), 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

"Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography After the Revolution" is on view at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village, (212) 998-6780. "Epic Photography of the Cuban Revolution" is at the Cuban Art Space, 124 West 23rd Street, Chelsea, (212) 242-0559. Both remain on view through Oct. 27.

The Epic and the Surreal



Couturier Gallery, Los Angeles

balleria" by Raúl Corrales, at the Cuban Art Space.

t a billboard blowup of Korda's Guevara. But with his gaze perpetually fixed on a future that er happened, he doesn't see them. With such pictures, we leave documentary behind and link up with new photography, the show's real project. Conceptually grounded, in multimedia in format and obliquely critical, focused on personal ception rather than historical nts, the recent work is too varied e tagged by a look or a style, and h diversity is in itself a novelty. n his elegiac photomontage series ed "It's Only Water in the Tearp of a Stranger" (1986), Rogelio ez Marín, known as Gory, superposes images of a swimming pool, open sea, vegetation, a battered and accompanies all of them n the words of a despairing poem, if to evoke the surreal dreamce that Cuba has become. José uel Fors similarly assembles his ures from fragments. His mana-shaped "Great Flower" (1999) composed of thousands of slivershots of Renaissance paintings, nd objects and the natural world. uan Carlos Alóm, 36, adapts the iny texture and introspective tone /r. Fors's art to emblematic stills that refer to Afro-Caribbean eons. Marta María Pérez Bravo's eless, nude self-portraits have ilar cultural sources, but taken ing the artist's pregnancy, they gest disquieting rituals of self-rifice and self-protection. he emotional ambiguity of Ms.

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 atlantes, 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 Piña, 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. Piña's three-part contributions includes an "original" 19th-century photo of a woman, the contemporary photographer's re-



The Cuban Art Space of the Center for Cuban Studies

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

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. Piña's take on 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. Piña that concludes the Grey show manages to tie 40 years of Cuban photography together, in spirit at least. It is a cinematic view of a crenelated 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. Piña 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 Eligio, 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.