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Havana Biennial, in Which Chelsea Takes a Field Trip to Cuba



Jose Goitia for The New York Times

Delia Brown, with one of her "Guerrilla Villa" works, at Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes.

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HAVANA — About 10 minutes after arriving at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes to show her work at the biggest exhibition by American art galleries in Cuba since the 1959 revolution, Delia Brown whispered, only half joking, to her Cuban assistant that the gallery was too hot and that she planned to head back to her hotel.

“I think I’ve worked hard enough standing here,” she said, though she had intended to spend some time eavesdropping on Cubans looking at her work to see how they interpreted it.

She was standing beside one of her works from the “Guerrilla Villa” series, an oil painting of Ms. Brown and her friends posing against the decadent backdrop of a

\$1,000-a-night resort in St. Bart's. Dressed in bikini tops, camouflage pants and Che berets, the women look stern-faced while drinking Havana Club Rum and eating Skittles.

The painting, part of Ms. Brown's "Guerrilla Lounging" project, is both an embrace and a critique of the leisure class. And its wry irony could not have been more apropos for the "Chelsea Visits Havana" show, which opened on Saturday as part of the 10th Havana Biennial and gives the Cuban art world a look at the New York art scene.

Ms. Brown, a dozen other American artists and scores of critics and buyers flocked to the island to enjoy themselves, show their wares and, perhaps, offer solidarity to Cuban artists, many of whom were denied travel visas to the United States to sell their work during the eight years of the Bush administration.

"The hope is that this will be a first step toward normalizing U.S.-Cuban relations," said the show's organizer Alberto Magnan, who left Cuba when he was 5 and owns the Magnan Projects Gallery in Chelsea with his wife, Dara Metz.

The biennial, which opened on Friday, runs until April 30 and has attracted works from more than 300 artists and 54 countries. It has given the streets of Havana an almost carnivalesque air.

At the Palacio de Bellas Artes, children gathered on Sunday to gawk in disgusted fascination at an outdoor installation by the Cuban artist Roberto Fabelo called "Survivors." It consists of more than 10 giant cockroach sculptures, with human faces, crawling up the side of the building.

Near the bus terminal about 50 tattooed and scruffy skateboarders spent much of Sunday participating in a performance piece called "Skate My Patria," created by the Puerto Rican-born artist Sofia Maldonado. After designing dozens of skateboards, Ms. Maldonado handed them out at a vibrantly painted skate ramp that she had built. In return for the skateboards, Cuban skaters shared personal narratives about their lives on the island that Ms. Maldonado recorded for another project. The day also featured a freestyle biking and skateboarding competition.

"Especially for young people, we have to create the way we can," said one Cuban skater, who asked for anonymity because he said he did not want to be pegged as a dissident. "In the U.S., it's graffiti. Here we skate."

The biennial's theme is "Integration and Resistance in the Global Age," which means that many of the artists at least loosely address issues of globalization, immigration and the economy.

Most of the works are being shown at Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, a cavernous fortress built by the Spanish beginning in 1763.

A piece by the Cuban artist Alexandre Arrechea consists of a spinelike metal device that contracts or expands in sync (though not quite in real time) with the fluctuations of the Dow Jones industrial average.

Annalee Davis's installation "Just Beyond My Imagination" is a fake golf course with sand traps shaped like the Caribbean islands. Ms. Davis is from Barbados, and her piece is a sly take on how the region is used as a romping ground by wealthier nations. A painting by Jules de Balincourt hints at the Cubans who have fled the country in its depiction of rappers navigating a boat past an unidentified city.

Globalization has a special relevance for the island's artists. Before the Bush administration stopped giving visas, many of Cuba's top artists spent months at a time in the United States or Europe. They stayed linked to the island partly because collectors are typically more interested in works produced by Cuban-based — not immigrant — artists.

Now, with a new administration in Washington, many in the art world say they believe that there will be a loosening on restrictions, and that the Cuban art market will benefit.

"Cuba knows about the fight for independence from bigger powers and bigger forces," said Alexis Leyva Machado, known as Kcho, one of Cuba's most famous artists. For his contribution Kcho (pronounced "KAH-cho") installed a carousel with sculptured representations of Cuban history, including wooden models of the U.S.S. Maine, a slave ship and the Granma, the boat that was used to transport Castro and his revolutionary fighters to Cuba in 1956.

Kcho was also in charge of bringing scores of young artists from every Cuban province to Havana, a first for many of them, to show their work. "Part of integration for us means making sure that no one is left out, especially on the island," he said.

Ms. Brown said she too hoped to make a subtle political point with her "Guerrilla Lounging" project, although it's hard to tell if she is at all serious.

“It’s basically a critique of the all-encompassing nature of capitalism,” she said. Ms. Brown, who is filming her trip to Cuba, explained that she was working on a video to pitch a reality show about artists.

With funds from the Fundación Amistad, a nonprofit organization based in the United States that promotes exchanges and understanding between Americans and Cubans, the Chelsea exhibition includes works by 30 artists from more than two dozen galleries, including Jack Shainman, Loretta Lux, Charles Cowles and Lehmann Maupin.

Among the pieces on exhibit is Doug Young’s “Nuclear Launch Center,” a pea-soup green desk that looks like one from the Arizona nuclear silo.

Next to it stands “New Mount Rushmore,” by Long-Bin Chen, made out of New York telephone directories, which adds [President Obama](#) to the usual quartet of presidents.

The artist Duke Riley, who arrived in Havana at the beginning of March to organize a St. Patrick’s Day parade, takes a different course. “I like making friends,” he said, “but I also like messing with folks.”

An eccentric bon vivant, Mr. Riley is best known for his commentary on homeland security. (He built a model of a Colonial-era boat said to be the first submarine and was arrested as he floated up to the Queen Mary 2 when it visited New York Harbor.)

Here, he organized the parade down O’Reilly Street in Old Havana partly to highlight the role the Irish had in Cuban history, he said, but also to see if it was any more difficult to get permission to march here than in the United States.

“Imagine if a North Korean citizen showed up in Washington and suddenly said he wanted to organize a parade to commemorate some random holiday of his choosing,” Mr. Riley said. “How long do you think it would take to get permission?”

It took him a week to persuade Cuban officials to let him have the event. On the day of the parade he put the island’s most famous transvestite, Farah, at the head of the march to see if officials would stop it. They did not, and some of the security guards assigned to the event actually joined in the dancing when the bagpipes were played.

“It just goes to show that you can have a little fun while you’re trying to push the envelope,” Mr. Riley said.

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