Spreading Its Wings
Cuban Art from the Ron and Una Brasch Collection

Oct 3–Feb 21, 2016

Image above: Ernesto Rancaño, de la serie Sombras del Ayer (from the series Shades of Yesterday), 2015, digital print, laser engraving, acrylic, and LED lights
Introduction

Since the early 1960s, Cuba has been forbidden fruit to nearly all citizens of the United States. Once a tropical paradise renowned for its glitter and nightlife, the allure of Cuba has only grown in the minds of Americans (U.S. Americans, that is). Now that President Obama has considerably lessened the difficulty and illegality of traveling to Cuba, it is estimated that as many as 75% of Americans want to go there. “As soon as possible,” is the popular refrain – before American commercialism has a chance to destroy the charm of Havana. Frankly, we understand. Una and I love the country and the Cuban people we have met there.

Cuba is fascinating, historic, and interesting. You should experience the country for yourself. Yes, there are many classic 1940s and 1950s American cars. Don’t be fooled, though, by the pretty photographs you have seen. The cars are anything but pristine after 60-70 years of wear and tear. Not to mention the inability to obtain replacement factory parts. However, the Cuban people are highly imaginative and inventive. They’re able to somehow keep cars and other things working. With cars, they’ll substitute Japanese or Korean car parts.

You can expect to see plenty of old, crappy Russian Ladas, too. They are remnants of the Soviet Union’s massive support for Cuba’s economy prior to the USSR’s disintegration in 1990. Without the Soviets propping up their horrible economy, the world changed again for Cuban people, as they were faced with even greater hardship and privation. As an economic system, Communism has failed everywhere. In Cuba, it has been an unmitigated disaster. Even before the so-called “Special Period” was officially announced in 1990, survival was all that was talked about in Cuba.
Contemporary Cuban Art Today

It is important to know that contemporary Cuban art is already highly regarded around the world. Its unique and dynamic nature has been recognized for decades … just not as widely in the United States. A small number of collectors, like Miami’s Howard Farber, have been collecting Cuban art for years. Farber tours his large collection and actively promotes Cuban art. Other prominent collectors include Jorge Perez (largely responsible for the Perez Art Museum Miami) and Ella Fontanals-Cisneros, one of the Top 200 Collectors in the world, according to Art News.

As artist Ana Flores wrote in her 2013 book, The Island Draws Me, “In the late 1980’s, Fidel Castro shifted his thinking on artists. Instead of treating them as dissenters, he realized that artists were the island’s best public relations ambassadors. Now no other professionals in Cuba had such loose reins. Visual artists, musicians and dancers of exceptional caliber were allowed to tour Europe and the United States, returning flush with dollars. Their foreign fans followed them back seeking the dream and the soul behind their work – while Castro smiled and deposited more dollars into his coffers.” Although Cuban artists require government permission to leave, many have travelled widely to Europe, South America, Canada and other countries.

Unique and Compelling

The art being created in Cuba is unlike anything else being done in the world. That distinct personality is part of what makes the art so compelling. The experiences of artists growing up there are unique to its time and place. Here’s a small country at the doorstep of the United States that exists almost in a time warp – largely due to politics that have kept a U.S. economic embargo in place since the early 1960s. Fidel and Raul Castro’s continued repression and economic mismanagement have devastated Cuba.

Art supplies are very scarce in Cuba, which suffers from shortages of everything from food to medicine. So artists have learned to be imaginative and to use whatever is available as materials. They even
have a term for this – *inventar*. For example, *Visceral No. 001* by Douglas Argüellas is composed of a plexiglass light box with hundreds of crumpled-up napkins. Written in Spanish on the napkins are the words that translate, “There is nothing more mysterious than the destiny of a body…” Both the unusual materials and the thought-provoking, philosophical nature of this piece are two elements that we love.

Most Cuban art possesses the single-most important characteristic to Ron: artistic integrity. The artists are creating with a purity to the process. Work is not being made in order to sell and make money.

Visual artists in this Communist country are highly valued, unlike in many countries including the U.S. They are identified early in the public schools and groomed to hone their craft all the way through the highest level of graduate school at the Superior Institute of Art. If they are commercially successful (i.e., able to sell their art to collectors worldwide), they live like royalty compared with everyday Cubans.

The average Cuban household lives on the equivalent of $25 USD per month. Public education, housing and healthcare is free in Cuba. Still, families struggle to get by. The quality of life is terrible for most Cubans.
Art that Tells a Story

We love art that tells a story. Art that is not just visually attractive, but interesting and enlightening. A perfect example is *La Batalla* (The Battle) by Angel Ramirez. The wall sculpture is a wooden box (made from a desk drawer), partitioned, and filled with many diverse materials and objects. *La Batalla* deals with the everyday battle the Cuban people have just to live, and how the pieces of their life don’t fit together (see the puzzle pieces in the center bottom section).

![Angel Ramirez, La Batalla (The Battle), 2004, mixed media in a wooden box](image)

Another wonderful example of storytelling is the *Everyone Wants to Fly* metal etching by Esterio Segura. These words reach out from the airplane engines:

“We were exhausted and crowded, there wasn’t much space to travel further. Over there in the other place we’ll find somewhere to park and I hope there’s room for us all…”

Additional pieces in the exhibit that incorporate words include Ana Flores’s *Black Madonna/Para Mi Tata* and the lit wall sculpture by Donis Dayan that features San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge.
**Spreading Its Wings:**
**Both Representative and Symbolic**

The title for this exhibition is both representative and symbolic. As you view the artwork, you’ll notice wings as a graphic element in several pieces. There are the wings attached to Esterio Segura’s 1949 Chrysler, Ernesto Rancaño’s ethereal red sculpture, Ana Flores’s *Soul of the Exile*, and Sandra Ramos’s *And now, what can I hold you with?* All types of transportation modes (especially boats and planes) are frequent images in Cuban art for an obvious reason: they represent escape from the isolated island.

The exhibition title has several levels of symbolism, too. The artists having an opportunity to grow and enhance their horizons or careers is one level. The same holds true for Cuban art, in general. A greater openness to the U.S. market will inevitably lead to its spreading popularity. And, of course, the title applies to us as collectors. Our knowledge and appreciation grows as we become exposed to this extraordinary work.

Ron has had an appreciation for the passion of Latin and South American culture since college when he lived in Miami for a year. He lived again in South Florida for eleven years, just prior to moving to Colorado.

**Our Introduction to Cuban Art**

We were introduced to Cuban art by our close friend, Dr. Annette Seagraves, a fellow collector and Trustee on the Fine Arts Center Board. This happened at an international art fair when Annette introduced us to Nina Menocal, a gallerist in Mexico City. We immediately loved the look, feel, and energy of the Cuban artists she represented. We loved Nina, too, for her knowledge and passion for art.

Nina is the president-owner of Gallery Nina Menocal in Mexico City, founded in 1990 and dedicated to the promotion and exhibition of contemporary art. Nina comes from one of the oldest Cuban families, “Mambies,” who fought for independence from Spain. They were intellectuals, painters, collectors, and patrons of the arts. Although she now represents an international scope of artists, in 1989 Nina was the first gallerist in the world to open a gallery for Cuban contemporary art.
She brought the legendary Cuban Generation of artists of the 1980s to Mexico City, and from there they dispersed to the United States and Europe. Some returned to Cuba. The Nina Menocal Gallery now has a branch called ninart-havana, specifically for artists’ projects in Cuba. ninart-havana has completed 18 successful editions of tours to visit Cuban artists, museums, special exhibitions, the Havana Biennials, architecture, cultural sites and events such as dance, ballet, music, and touring grand homes.

Our first trip to Havana with Nina was in 2008, which is when we seriously began to integrate Cuban art into the rest of our international collection. Since then, we have made several additional journeys to Cuba. In May 2015, we attended the 12th Havana Biennale. We also journeyed into the cities of Trinidad and Cienfuegos, plus to the more remote countryside that includes the Bay of Pigs invasion area.

**The Journey from Cuba to Colorado Springs**

People have asked, “Isn’t it illegal to bring Cuban artwork into the U.S. because of the embargo?” No. In 1991, President Bill Clinton signed legislation allowing for an exemption to the U.S. trade embargo that made it legal to buy and import Cuban art. The art is classified as a cultural asset – unlike rum or cigars.

All of the artwork in this room (except for the Ana Flores and Esteban Blanco works) was purchased in Cuba and shipped to Colorado Springs via Mexico City. At present, artwork and most everything else cannot be sent directly from Cuba to the U.S. It must have appropriate permits both from Cuba and U.S. Customs and be imported here via a third country, such as Mexico.

In closing, we hope that viewers of the exhibition will bring their fresh eyes to whatever they have perceived about Cuba. We are not making any political statement here, although some of the artists certainly are!

Art should be about art. Art should be about the humanity of people and help bring people together. Very simply, that is what this exhibition hopes to accomplish.
This magnificent Cuban art, as well as other internationally significant art in the Brasch Collection, is a promised gift to the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. Among the artists represented in this extensive gift are Francis Bacon, Alexander Calder, Helen Frankenthaler, David Hockney, Anish Kapoor, William Kentridge, Roy Lichtenstein, Joan Miró, Robert Motherwell, Chris Ofili, Pablo Picasso, Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, James Rosenquist, Frank Stella, and many more.

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We are so pleased to share these works with you and hope you enjoy the experience! —Ron and Una Brasch