

## *Ninety Miles Away and East of Eden: Photographing Cuba*

“Of course, I considered Cuba an exotic place...” “Initially, of course, I considered Cuba exotic, in a strange way...” “I found Cuba to be exotic, in the sense that, time seemed to stand still...” “Cuba is an “exotic” place, but that’s not all it is...” “Of course, I consider Cuba an exotic place!!!! A tropical island that has lured Americans for nearly two hundred years...” “Cuba to me was the most exotic place...” “It is unlike anywhere else in the world...” “I have never thought of Cuba as an exotic place since my family is from there...” “No I didn’t consider Cuba *exotic* by the American definition. I often had to remind myself that I was not in Puerto Rico...In essence I had to remind myself that I was not in a free country anymore...” “I think Cuba has always been an exotic place, but I was never suckered in by the exotic because I’m a realist and the reality in Cuba for me is not exotic...” “Cuba is a second home to me. It ceased to be exotic in 1988...” “Cuba is an exotic place. It’s forbidden fruit...” “Cuba to me is a unique place, not necessarily *exotic*...” “Cuba is an exotic place. I am part Puerto Rican and it reminded me of Puerto Rico in the early 70s when I was a child before there was a mall in every *pueblo* and a MacDonald’s every ten miles...”<sup>1</sup>

## *Ninety Miles Away and East of Eden*

Cuba is and Cuba isn’t at all an exotic place; neither and both assumptions are correct. Cuba exists in an ambiguous place between the two being a paradox and an illusion. That illusion implies endless complexities and contradictions and gives rise to myths and some truths; the paradox, on the other hand, helps to explain why some misconceptions never fade away and fit right in. In Cuba the commonplace resides comfortably with the extraordinary and the absurd. All things observed, and considered, Cuba is never what it seems and often is exactly just that. The photographers in this show had one objective and it is aptly reflected in the title of this exhibition—they went to work in Cuba. The images simply but rather extraordinarily represent their efforts while *working* in Cuba. While taking images throughout the island, they also were taken in by the people, the place itself and the reality of a

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<sup>1</sup> I cite from some of the statements submitted by the artists in the exhibition. Due to printing limitations, not all artists were quoted. The author wishes to acknowledge each and every artist who candidly wrote about his/her experiences in Cuba for this project; she has read every submission and found them extremely valuable in the understanding of their work and their interest or fascination with Cuba.

social system very different from theirs. Cuba's one-man rule is not unique in history<sup>2</sup> but remains a surreal fixture in the geopolitical map of the rest of the Americas. The distance is only ninety miles from the United States but Cuba is very far away in some distant time and place.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, Cuba has been on the American mind and indeed, agenda, since 1808 when President Thomas Jefferson having previously bought Louisiana from the French in 1803, sent General James Wilkinson to Cuba to make overtures to the Spanish authorities to sell the colonial territory.<sup>4</sup> Travel and general military books, and political views on Cuba by both male and female authors were published frequently throughout the nineteenth-century. Richard Henry Dana, Jr. in his enormously successful mid-nineteenth-century travel book *To Cuba and Back* writes in his concluding chapter, "To an American, from the free states, Cuba presents an object of singular interest."<sup>5</sup>

What then is the never-ending appeal Cuba holds for so many—tourists, art professionals, politicians, businessmen, and, photographers?<sup>6</sup> Tourists go to see a former beauty queen, a sort of Venice of the Caribbean, replete with crumbling yet still dazzling *palazzetti* to shoot; where sex is

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<sup>2</sup> Before the present strongman, another one existed. Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar was president of Cuba (1940–44, 1952–59).

<sup>3</sup> The title of this essay reflects the Biblical story of Adam and his children Cain and Abel who are condemned to live in exile east of paradise. This is of particular reference to this author who was born in Cuba but grew up in the United States, but also aids in dispelling romantic delusions of Cuba as utopian space.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin, Jane. *Cuba and the United States: A Chronological History*. Melbourne, New York: Ocean Press, c. 1997, 2. See also, Howard J. Wiarda. *The Soul of Latin America: The Cultural and Political Tradition*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001, 180. In the aftermath of the Civil War, The United States began to think of annexing the Dominican Republic and talked openly of acquiring Cuba.

<sup>5</sup> Dana, Richard Henry, Jr. *To Cuba and Back*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966, 111. Dana traveled to Cuba in 1859 and returned to Boston to write his travel book. Originally published simultaneously in Boston and London in 1859, the book enjoyed decades of popularity. The 11<sup>th</sup> edition is the basis for this 1966 copy used by this writer. As well, John S. Thrasher edited an English translation from the Spanish of Alexander Humboldt's *The Island of Cuba*, which was published in 1856.

<sup>6</sup> The lure of Cuba exists in the imagination of many to this date, including marketers. Pre-revolutionary Cuba has been "duplicated" as part of Tropicana Casino complex in Atlantic City and named The Quarter. The logo for the enterprise is designed to look like a cigar label. Visitors will get a taste of Old Havana "... where traditions from the old world blended perfectly with pulsating Latin rhythms. Sophisticated, yet sultry, cosmopolitan, yet exotic. Havana was a place where you could have it all—indulgence and illusion, elegance and irreverence." See, [www.tropicana.net/thequarter/index.htm](http://www.tropicana.net/thequarter/index.htm). The casino has opened as a new gambling attraction advertised to appeal to a crowd thirsty for the so-called good old days in Havana. In its recent advertisements in New York City dailies such as the Daily News, (Sunday, November 28, 2004), a full-page color advertisement describes the place thus: "The Quarter, It's Revolutionary;" a rather ironic twist of words if recalling a pre-Castro era in Havana nightlife. The advertisement further describes the delights of the place: "The sensual charm of Old Havana, with its scented breezes and swaying palms..."

available for dollars mostly; and, also where there exists the possibility to see other than all these crude realities beyond the appointed points of interests in the capital city of Havana and the powdered sands of Varadero Beach. International art professionals have made the pilgrimage to the Havana Biennial since 1984. Businessmen from all over the world, except the United States<sup>7</sup> travel to the island to set up hotels, retail outlets and joint ventures with the government. The *viajeros* in this exhibition made journeys to begin their work. For some photographers in this exhibition, the trip or expedition was not so much to Cuba but in search of *visions* of Cuba beyond the magical spectacle and tropical paradise, whether they were first time or returning visitors or native-born visiting the island long after their departures. Along with their camera equipment and their ample supply of film, they took along their notions, sentiments, and, in some cases, romantic ideas about the exotic and not-so-exotic island utopia as some of the statements in the beginning of this essay fittingly demonstrate. As one of the artists has said, "...I had to go to see for myself."

The current interest in Cuban photography and indeed, in Cuba, is a continuing tendency, partly triggered by the success of the Havana Biennial. Since its inception in 1984, the Biennial has given rise to a remarkable flow of ideas and has become a meeting ground for international professionals in the arts who travel to the island every two years.<sup>8</sup> As consequence, some Cuban artists have been allowed to leave the island as invited guests often by renowned institutions worldwide and the Biennial itself has been a force in creating a dialogue between Cuban artists and Cuban-American artists who have been asked to participate in several editions.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, over the last ten years alone, important

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<sup>7</sup> The United States imposed economic embargo since February 3, 1962 has prohibited American citizens from doing business with Cuba.

<sup>8</sup> In recent history, the biennial has not taken place every two years.

<sup>9</sup> Cuban-American artist Ernesto Pujol has been invited to the Havana Biennial since its inception in 1984 and participated in the VI edition, May 3 to June 8, 1997. He has also had solo exhibitions in Cuba since 1995 when he presented *Children of Peter Pan* at Casa de las Americas in Havana; and, in 1996, with *Saturn's Table* at La Fundación Ludwig de Cuba, Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales. His work, *Trofeos de la Guerra Fría* was also shown in a group show at the gallery Espacio Aglutinador in 1995. Also, Ana Mendieta who like Pujol left Cuba as a child, returned to re-discover her roots and to establish contacts with artists in the early 1980s. It must be noted that the so-called dialogue that I refer to, has not been promoted by officials of the Biennial but often by and through the efforts of the artists within and outside the island. In addition, scholars and other specialists outside Cuba such as Edward J. Sullivan of New York University and Holly Block of Art in General have conducted workshops, classes, and seminars in the island and granted residencies for Cuban artists to travel to the United States.

exhibitions on photography about Cuba and photography by Cuban practitioners have been shown and accompanying catalogues published in the United States and Europe.<sup>10</sup> International and American galleries and museums have also been disposed to show not just emerging Cuban photographers but also to represent some of the leading figures who are primarily known for their images of the Cuban Revolution such as Raúl Corrales, Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez (Korda), and Osvaldo and Roberto Salas.<sup>11</sup>

The printed images and videos in this exhibition are the product of diverse methods of working and areas of interest that celebrate the natural landscape; urban and rural life and its daily permutations; religious and spiritual practices or traditions that affirm African roots alongside Catholicism; national pastimes that bear the stamp of Cuban-style *machismo*; the presence of the state in rather startling manifestations; the ubiquitous Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary icons; and, the people of Cuba living out their daily existence. Established artists as well as emerging photographers are represented in the exhibition. All bring sensibility and care accompanied by remarkable curiosity about the place they have traveled to photograph. Included in the show are several photographic essays that illustrate if only briefly but nevertheless eloquently, narratives on a range of subjects. The many single entries are equally charged with great visual economy and, excellence. While not specifically or tightly organized by subject matter or themes, the exhibition embraces particular ideas, and the choices made by the curatorial team express a somewhat fluid but clear organizational system. The curatorial team led by Ricardo Viera, consciously avoided the pitfalls of a selection that would be or could be deemed as highly romanticized, ideal, or worse, exotic. The “look” of the exhibition is therefore a general perspective that does not bear the burden of a survey. Rigorous editorial decisions were made after all and, arguments for or against were defended and sometimes lost by the entire team respectively.

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<sup>10</sup> Recent exhibitions of Cuban photography have included, *Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography after the Revolution*, organized and curated by Tim B. Wride, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, a traveling exhibition, 2001-2002; *Cuba, 100 Años de Fotografía: Antología de la Fotografía Cubana, 1898-1998*, organized by Mestizo A.C. and the Fototeca de Cuba, Casa de America, Madrid, Spain, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Corrales enjoys representation in the United States through Couturier Gallery in Los Angeles; also represented by the gallery is the late Korda, José Alberto Figueroa and other Cuban artists. Other Cuban photographers have benefited from the attention paid to their work by visiting art professionals and have gained access to international markets by showing in galleries such as Spencer Throckmorton in New York City, Fraser Gallery in Washington, DC, Pan American Art Gallery in Dallas, Texas, and the already mentioned Couturier in Los Angeles.

## *Photographing Cuba*

The images by Donna L. Clovis, Derek Dudek, Liliana Rodríguez, John Goodman, Wendy R. Walter, Azita Panahpour, and Francine S. Krieger are portraits of Cubans that reflect on their individuality but, also their condition and place in Cuban society. They are workers as in the case of Clovis' *Waiters*; young and old, men and women, portrayed with remarkable veracity; sometimes framed in close-ups that resemble passport pictures such as Dudek's *Puria* and *Francisco* who stare at us like old sages tired of the human condition; at other times, completely abstracted as in Rodríguez' *Victor's Hand* or utterly alone as Goodman's *Faceless* athlete who is wrapped in darkness. Walter's *Perla Negra*, a series of introspective images of a former performing "star" and Panahpour's image from her unabashedly flamboyant but extraordinarily Cuban Women series, *I am, therefore, I am*, are sympathetic but ultimately free from any stereotypical or presumed ideas about women or specifically, Cuban women. Krieger's image, Cubans are rationed a meager 12 oz. of meat per month, of line of people outside a butcher shop waiting for a Kosher butcher to come is a fact of life throughout Cuba where endless cues are the routine of daily existence. The sadly dilapidated place of worship acts as a metaphor for the state itself. More politically charged than the rest of the portraits, the image is not merely the photographer's personal statement but simply depicts a fact of life and state of affairs in the island.

Also considered portraits of a particular group often at odds with the Cuban regime are the two series by Alexis Rodríguez Duarte's *Los chicos de la azotea/ The Boys on The Roof*, a male rhapsody of sorts and, Jacqueline Hayden's rather poignant *Transvestite Series* of couples; both humanize and celebrate the spirit of these social outcasts without trivializing the individual.<sup>12</sup>

Preferring to portray Cubans at work and at play, Adam Kufeld, E. Wright Ledbetter, Rolfe R. Ross, Hillary Duffy, Eduardo Muñoz, Barbara Alvarez, Alex Pitt, Deborah Harse, Laurence Salzmann, and Craig Schneider and, Laura Bidwell set their respective lens on daily activities that double as institutions—part

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<sup>12</sup> Some of the artists have related stories about their sitters or subjects and their experiences. Liliana Rodríguez *Victor's Hand* belongs to Victor, her aunt's husband who still lives in the house where she was born and who now runs a black market. Derek Dudek feels that his portraits of Cubans have nothing to do with politics. While Alex Pitt insists, "...everything is political in one sense or another." Deborah Harse writes of her troubles during a visit in the summer of 1997 when she was robbed of her camera and bicycle. From then on, she claims, her "images became a bit less idyllic." All cites are from individual Artist Statements.

of the national psyche, for better or worse. Kufeld series of groups of men, women and children taken from a safe distance, *Everyday Life in Cuba*, are animated gatherings that strangely enough, have the power to transport the viewer. We become immersed in the men's lively chat about baseball or seem fascinated like children; and peer as if in trance into a shop's window or birdcages in a local club. Ledbetter's *Dominoes*, and, Ross' *Plaza de Armas* share contemporary Cubans' penchant for being out in the city at all times—*el paseo*—has not gone out of favor and neither has playing dominoes after all these years. Duffy's *Una fula*, is set in El Malecón, the seawall that protects Havana, which remains a popular place for human transactions and dollar dreams.<sup>13</sup> Muñoz' series (*Salto, Ventana, Brazos Abiertos* and *Trusa*) includes urban scenes at once personal, but also iconic; they represent things dear to Cubans—the sheer joy of being out in the open, by the sea—always being themselves. The images seem splintered, multi-layered and like collages, with many floating worlds happening in one frame.

The very personal short by Alvarez, *Love and Laundry*, a narrative about the photographer's aged aunt and uncle, Cariche and Olvido, whose marriage and love for each other has lasted a lifetime, unfolds against the backdrop of a clothesline. Cariche and Olvido, through the simple chore of doing laundry, express what they feel about each other. For them, the task becomes a re-enactment of their courting ritual and an affirmation of their lasting love.

Popular pastimes such as the national game of baseball and the circus come into focus in Alex Pitt's *Havana Baseball* and Deborah Harse's *Circus Series*. Cuba's national sport enjoys remarkable popular and state support. Pitt's *Havana Baseball* is situated in a factory for the manufacture of baseball bats rather than on the baseball field. We are drawn to the sculpting of the bat by a single worker in a set of sequential images that perhaps alludes to the worker's collaboration in the game itself; he precludes the game, the player and in the end, he shapes the bat that makes all of it possible. Harse's acrobats, trapeze artists, jugglers and other circus performers from Circuba, are rendered in moments of repose and practice; they are *themselves* but in costume, trying a move or contemplating a step. There is no sense of a circus ambience or performance but of workers perfecting skills or waiting for

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<sup>13</sup> At the writing of this essay, Castro has banned the use of the US dollar as currency in Cuba's economy.

instructions even if sitting atop a stuffed crocodile. Both images are linked by the photographers' curiosity—what happens before the game or the circus performance?—and ultimately, in the transformation of reality into magic later on the baseball diamond or under the circus tent.

In their respective essays, *Before the Bell* and *La lucha/The Struggle*, Craig Schneider and Laurence Salzmann, tell stories about dedication and hope played out in an open-air boxing gym for young boxers in La Habana Vieja and a wrestling school in Santiago de Cuba. About his work, Salzmann emphasizes the use of a metaphorical title for the series; “la lucha” means wrestling in Spanish but it also means struggle, meaning the daily struggles Cuban face for physical and spiritual survival.

Laura Bidwell abandoned her video cameras and instead used her tiny digital camera to take video clips for her *Cuban Nights* essay that depicts, as she herself expressed in her statement, “impressionistic, glittering” images of nightlife in Havana. In doing so, she explains, her images “feel” like Cuba rather than “look” like Cuba. <sup>14</sup>

Taking the land and the landscape—or, *el campo cubano*, as inspiration for their work, Mario Algaze, Manuel Rivera-Ortíz, Tria Giovan, Susan Bank, John Valls, Janis Lewin, and Mel Rosenthal undertake very different approaches; some of the artists prefer to emphasize what happens in the landscape or el campo, others, find the land too sublime to depict any other aspect that may detract from her majesty. Algaze's *Plantación de malanga*, Pinar del Río, Rivera-Ortíz' *Finding Home*, Pinar del Río; Giovan's images of various locales, such as Holguín, Cayo Coco, Ciego de Ávila and Camagüey; Bank's beautifully haunting essay, *Campo Adentro*; and Rosenthal's images of the harshness of rural life, employ aesthetic similarities but display significant distinctions in composition and in framing their photographs. They are all achingly lyrical. Unlike them, Valls and Lewin delight in the daily lives of those who live so removed from urban centers. Both artists's series or essays concentrate on traditions that unfold in the countryside such Valls' images of the slaughtering of animals for consumption in an open-air barbecue. Lewin sets her camera lens on a cockfight in *Pelea de gallos/Cockfight*, a long-established diversion

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<sup>14</sup> For her work, Bidwell felt comfortable with the use of a “tiny” camera. She explains she wanted to be less conspicuous. Although no one ever stopped her, she noticed the presence of the police everywhere, Artist Statement.

mostly for men—the cock being a symbol for masculinity in the island. “Cockfighting is a game of pride, chance and sport...” writes Lewin in her artist’s statement for the exhibition.

The urban landscape does not go unnoticed in the exhibition and several artists set their work in the city or towns marred by the ravages of time or decay; the ugliness of an impoverished reality; and, a sadness or nostalgia for a past. Maria Lau, Manuel Llaneras, Abelardo Morell, Roy Llera, Elena Borstein, Mari Seder, Craig J. Barber, Sue Gersten, Hazel Hankin, Tony Mendoza, and Rebecca Norris Webb all describe the city or life in the city in their work. Lau’s double exposure *Capitolio*, Llera’s *La Habana*, Morell’s *La Giraldilla de La Habana/In room with a broken wall*, and Llanera’s *Untitled*, evoke places and people not seen; broken dreams and promises; allude to poignant memories; and the persistence of the past with the presence of signs once denoting status or wealth.<sup>15</sup>

In their photographic essays, Borstein, Seder, Barber, Gersten, Hankin, Mendoza, Norris Webb, and Laura Watson inevitably incorporate architectural landmarks or sites; their images are devoid of any human presence or activity. They are evocative and hint at life at another time—an absence that is palpable and unexplainable. Borstein’s façades of small dwellings or houses throughout the island have open or closed doors, show empty hallways, and do not tell us if someone has left or is yet to come. Like Borstein’s, Seder’s images are of houses but the photographer chooses to linger almost lovingly on the ornately decorative elements of these private homes and their interiors. A sense of a languid lifestyle and another era come to mind; her title for the series, *Faded Dreams*, seems all the more moving. Barber’s *Havana Passage* is a suite of pinhole camera images taken in the streets of the island’s capital city; the artist first visited the island in 1999 and became fascinated and continues his predilection with the island’s blinding—improbable, and, surreal light.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lau’s double-exposure image is part of a series she developed while experimenting and exploring self-identity and what she calls the multi-layers of her heritage, Artist Statement.

<sup>16</sup> The artist has expressed his feelings about how much Cuba “has remained a forbidden mystery for American citizens.” See [www.craigbarber.com](http://www.craigbarber.com).



Gersten's images memorialize a Jewish presence; the entrance to the Jewish cemetery is partly inscribed in Hebrew, English and in Spanish denoting a somber but dignified sacred space. Full of wondrous geometric interplays, Hankin's images dazzle with the spectacle of light, shape and quiet shadows that render the buildings of the never completed Cuban National Schools of Art as little bits and pieces from a kaleidoscope.

The images of the ubiquitous stray dogs in the streets of Havana taken by Tony Mendoza are wrenching and brutally real. In his film *Cuba: Going Back*, Mendoza documents his return to the island after thirty-seven years of exile. "I took four or five rolls of film everyday. Mostly, I photographed anything that caught my attention: buildings, cityscapes, people, cats, dogs. Most dogs I saw were in terrible shape. Many have been abandoned to the streets because of food shortages."<sup>17</sup> Mendoza's images are in sharp contrast to other images of animals that inhabit the city too, such as Norris Webb's abstract compositions of red-faced macaques in Havana's zoo, pigeon coop overlooking the Malecón or turtles in the safety of the National Aquarium or the spectacularly stunning creatures to be found in Laura Watson's photographic essay, *Art Unseen*, on Cuba's fauna and flora.

The "state" did not escape photographic scrutiny and it is represented in individual images and essays in the work of Ernesto Bazan, Andrei Sobieski, Jonathan Moller, Dennie Eggleston, Anna Mia Davidson, Nicole Cattel, and Mel Rosenthal. Bazan had access to the Cuban army at military academies during training sessions and his essay, *The Cuban Army*, plays out as an absurd and frightening maneuvers practice; the tightly shot images of men "fighting" the perceived "enemy" seem more like play acting rather than actual preparation for warfare. Is it possible that these men in caps and shorts can defend a nation, let alone themselves? They recall the Cold War. With backs to the camera, the policemen in the images by Sobieski, *Malecón* and Moller's, *On The March Route Led By Fidel Along the Malecón*, are used to prop up rather than safeguard anything or anyone; they are one-act players watching life go by. Eggleston's *March for Elián* is a series of color close-ups of children constructed to

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<sup>17</sup> Mendoza, Tony. *Cuba: Going Back*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1999, 62, 92. His film led to a book, which grew out of the journal Mendoza kept while in Cuba.

function as a narrative and an edited version of the little boy's saga played out internationally in 1999.<sup>18</sup> Uninformed of all the political implications set off by the custody fight, the children's images are somewhat out of context. Davidson's gritty images are shot in the intimacy of state-run maternity hospitals that seem more like private homes where one's neighbor can pop and chat with a soon to be mother; this is maternity socialist style. Cattel's video *The Revolution: Vision of Cuba Since The Revolution* operates as a link to the past and presents a look at photographic practices in Cuba since 1959. A generation or two by now, has been influenced by the work of the photographers who made the Revolution known internationally; their propaganda images now reproduced in postcards for the tourist trade, created the interest in contemporary photography in the island. Rosenthal's image of Castro holding a wilted rose—perhaps a symbol of the nation—Martí's *rosa blanca*, which, he has, for some held as hostage and for others, guarded, is an intimate portrait of Castro that may be read as a political statement by both supporters and detractors of the Cuban strongman.

The icons and symbols of Cuba—images of people, places and “things” that have since the Revolution, come to define a certain new “Cuban” iconology—an identity—ideally, falsely, or stereotypically, are included in the exhibition and critique, sometimes ridicule, and, reflect on the socialist experiment Cuba has endured or undergone over the nearly-fifty years under Castro. They exist as details, as historical footnotes, the snapshots of a particular place that has become resistant to change. The work of Ron Tarver, Luis Mallo, James Quine, Rita Rivera, J.J. Fox, Daniel Mirer, Amy Arbus, Alex Webb, and Peggy Fleming carefully frame these symbols that always allude to a political and social reality. Tarver's *Marketing Che*, Mallo's *Untitled*, Quine's *Pump # 2*, and, Rivera's *Untitled*, explore how bizarre commonplace things have become, how starkly unreal, reality seems. The postcard souvenirs of a revolution long ago; the extraordinary bici-taxi that functions without gas but is powered by human energy; the pump that may be empty more often than not; and, the Hitchcock-like store window devoid

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<sup>18</sup> Five-year old Elián González was rescued on Thanksgiving Day in 1999 after floating on an inner tube without food or water for more than two days. His mother, stepfather and nine other Cubans fleeing the island, had lost their lives trying to reach the shores of Florida. Castro accused the US authorities of kidnapping the child and demanded his safe return. What followed was months of media coverage of the custody battle waged by the young boy's Miami relatives and his father in Cuba. After an early morning raid on the home where he had been living on April 22, 2000, US federal agents removed the child and reunited him with his father hours later at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. The US Supreme Court had denied Elián's asylum petition.

of merchandise but housing two pink flamingoes, are perversely featured in the images of these artists. In their individual essays, J. J. Fox, Daniel Mirer, Amy Arbus, Alex Webb, and Peggy Fleming delve further into the strange resilience Cubans have developed over the years—a thick skin—to overlook shortages of all kinds; to do without necessary commodities constantly; and, the endless creativity exhibited in keeping the continuum of daily life. Often heard in Havana, “Hay que resolver.”<sup>19</sup>

*Los cubanos también rezan*<sup>20</sup> (Cubans also pray) goes without saying. The deeply rooted spiritual practices and beliefs, which have been part of a national ethos, were not erased when Cuba became socialist. Devotional conventions have been hard to eradicate; Cubans continued to pray and attend church and to have altars in their homes honoring both Christian and African deities. Although the system is not on best terms with the Catholic Church, over the last few years, a certain peace or accord has been reached. Pope John Paul II, a fervent critic of Communism, visited Cuba in January of 1998. As well, the Jewish community has been allowed to keep its various temples or synagogues open for their members.<sup>21</sup>

Titus Brooks Heagins, Elaine Ling, Mari Seder, Vincenzo Pietropaolo, and Joe Guerriero set their attention to manifestations of faith. Heagins’ image, *Untitled*, is a wonderful tapestry of elements—flowers, candles, and images of saints—that create a rich composition where the power of prayer is evidenced in a very intimate close-up. The framed prayer to St. Lazarus propped on the altar lets the viewer become a supplicant alongside the man whose back is turned toward us.

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<sup>19</sup> A close translation would be (*You gotta do what you gotta do*).

<sup>20</sup> A Mexican soap opera of the 1980s that achieved worldwide audience, *Los ricos también lloran*, (The Rich Also Cry) served as inspiration for my phrase. In spite of the establishment of an atheistic society, Cubans have held onto their religious practices and traditions. In the early days of the Revolution, Church property was confiscated, private schools run by religious orders closed and, nuns and priests sent out of Cuba. Since 1991, with the prodding of Rome, Catholics in the island have been allowed to profess openly. The Cathedral of Havana has also been designated world monument status. Other denominations exist in the island, such as the Jewish community.

<sup>21</sup> Photographer Francine Krieger mentions in her personal essay done in conjunction for this exhibition that Castro allowed participation in organized religion since 1991. On her trip to Havana, she discovered that the Jewish community was a growing one as a result of intermarriage. The three synagogues in Havana function more as communal and cultural meeting places.

Ling and Seder construct *estampitas*, or religious pictures through their imagery of home altars or family shrines where African and Christian saints inhabit profane spaces and mix with sinners as members of the family. Pope John Paul II's trip to the island in 1998 is narrated in images of pilgrims en route to meet or hear the Pontiff in the work of Pietropaolo's *Papal Visit*. Guerriero's video, *Santería: Life in The Religion*, was developed alongside his photographs of rituals and ceremonies where he was invited. While a sense of mystery and awe is clearly evident in his work, especially in his use of strange light sources, his video and stills, illustrate devotional and spiritual traditions that have been part of Cuban cultural life since the first Africans first settled in Cuba in the early sixteenth-century.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Thoughts on leaving Eden...***

Cuba as island paradise is only part of a story; paradise as a construction functions best to tell only one of the many *Cubas*. The other pieces of the story —the social, political, historical, spiritual, artistic, personal, are illustrated in the images in this exhibition. And, yet Cuba remains unknown and therefore still suspect of all things exotic. For Cubans who left long ago for exile, Cuba has remained the “perfect place” that had existed before the Revolution; for them the clock stopped on January 1, 1959. Some cling to notions of a perfect Eden. The exodus continued through the sixties and seventies and in the spring of 1980, more came in what was to be known as the Mariel Boat Lift when Castro temporarily lifted restrictions preventing Cubans from leaving the island.<sup>23</sup> These subsequent waves of Cubans too, have their own visions of the place they left behind. For non-Cubans the place holds a charm that is quite astonishing in spite of the island's political and economic status and restrictions imposed both on Cubans and those visiting the island. And, part of the fascination Cuba elicits is the continuing myths about the place.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Africans were brought to Cuba as slaves in the first quarter of the sixteenth-century.

<sup>23</sup> During a period of six months in 1980, refugees crossed the Florida Strait on any boat or vessel that would take them from the Cuban port of Mariel. See, Melissa Nelson, “Recalling Cuban ‘Boat Lift’, The Price of Freedom.” Associated Press, *The Seattle Times*, April 8, 2001. More than 125,000 people left Cuba; among them the “undesirables” - people from the nation's prisons and insane asylums - but also many law-abiding, mentally healthy “Marielitos” who continue to suffer the stigma associated with the exodus.

<sup>24</sup> Artist Amy Arbus writes in her essay, that she encountered surveillance cameras all over Havana. She explains prostitutes and government officials cannot be photographed. In his statement, Daniel Mirer writes that before undertaking the trip to Cuba he found himself “...looking for the Havana of myths.”

Each of the participants in the exhibition has expressed an opinion that is underscored by a particular romantic notion of the island as an idyllic place—“It’s like Paris but with palm trees.”<sup>25</sup> For them, Cuba remains an enigma, which some have sought to explore, comprehend on some level, but most have preferred to document and act as eyewitness presenting many views of the so-called paradise nation in their personal search or work. Their images are testaments of time, of extraordinary aesthetic choices and although individually composed and informed, are nevertheless utterly influenced by a place and people that for the time being, must remain exotic, alluring, and in the end, partially unknown. Understandably so, this exhibition presents snippets of a larger story—part of the picture—the never-ending story of Cuba. It must be noted that all the artists went to Cuba on their own personal assignments or volition; each developed a *modus operandi* that suited artistic preferences and expressed personal commitment to a particular body of work to be undertaken. During their stays, they became anthropologists, historians, sociologists, ethnographers, and perhaps, even *santeros*; their images transcend stereotypes and pre-conceived notions they might have had about what and who they would eventually photograph. In doing so, they chipped away at the construction or edifice of exoticism—and laid bare some fundamental truths still to be found in this complex island called Cuba.

**Margarita J. Aguilar © 2016  
December 2004**

**Exhibition (*Viajeros: North American Artists/Photographers’ Images of Cuba*) at Lehigh University, Co-Curator.**

**SEE:** <http://www.luag.org/event/viajeros-north-american-artist-photographers-images-of-cuba-part-one-curated-by-ricardo-viera-and-margarita-aguilar-with-susan-bank/>

**ALSO SEE:** <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005398483>

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<sup>25</sup> Cited from Alexis Rodríguez Duarte’s personal statement submitted for the exhibition.