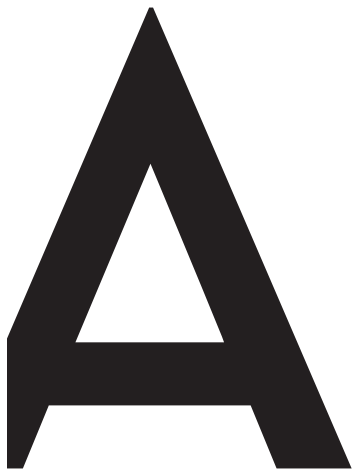


VISUAL ARTS 

CUBA SQUARED Rachel Valdés
Camejo's *Cubo Azul* (*Blue Cube-Immersion*) is part of the *Detrás Del Muro* (*Behind the Wall*) collective arts project at the 2015 Havana Biennial.

**THE CUBAN ART MARKET—FUELED
BY SCORES OF TALENTED NEWCOMERS—
HAS NEVER BEEN HOTTER**
BY ELIZABETH CEREJIDO





few months ago, I had dinner with Havana-based artist Glenda León at an out-of-the-way Argentine restaurant in Miami's Little Haiti neighborhood. A couple of weeks earlier, I had also dined with León, but at her refurbished apartment in Havana, in one of a handful of modern high-rises in the once affluent neighborhood of Vedado. These may not sound like noteworthy events, but they reveal new ways that Cuban artists live, work and move in the world today, realities that artists haven't experienced since Castro's Revolution took over the island in 1959.

For one thing, the policy changes by both the Castro government and the Obama administration have made it significantly easier for Cuban artists and cultural actors to travel—and even live—abroad, particularly to the US, and, most significantly, to Miami. Additionally, the steadily growing demand for Cuban art from the global art market has made a profound difference in how artists live and work. The ability to sell their work at international rates allows them to live a privileged lifestyle relative to Cuban standards.

Finally, León's presence in Miami and mine in Havana highlight the rapidly

changing dynamic between Cubans on either side of the Florida Straits, especially as it relates to artists. The grassroots rapprochement that has long been in the making is now starting to change perceptions of Cuban art. While the international market has been enamored of work by Cuban-based artists since at least the 1990s, it has been less interested in the messier politics and more complicated personal narratives of Cuban artists in the diaspora. Miami and Havana have been considered antagonistic spheres. That perception, too, is changing rapidly. Increasingly, the two cities are like two facets of an artistic identity expanding across the 90-mile divide—this time it *feels* different.

The Special Period

The contemporary Cuban art market began to emerge in the early 1990s. This was the Special Period in Times of Peace, the official name for the harsh economic crisis that Cuba endured after the fall of the Soviet Union, the island's principal benefactor. However, the strategies Cuba adopted to deal with the situation had a dramatic effect on culture. The government opened up the country to tourism and legalized possession of foreign currency, including the US dollar. For artists, this meant that they could sell their work directly to foreign collectors, curators and museum directors who began to flock to the island by the mid 1990s as part of Cuba's burgeoning cultural tourism.

The establishment of The Havana Biennial Art Exhibition helped introduce the international art world to contemporary Cuban art. Carlos Garaicoa, Los Carpinteros, Tania Bruguera and Estero Segura were among the first to cross over to the international market, primarily to the US.

The artists who emerged in the suddenly expanding Cuban art world of the '90s were very different from their predecessors. "The '80s generation," as they are known, confronted a very different Cuba. Convinced that art could be an instrument for social change, many of them created confrontational work that pushed political and aesthetic boundaries that provoked the state. By the end of the decade, with their exhibits being arbitrarily censored and cancelled, most had little choice but to leave. Many of these artists now live and work in Miami, including Rubén Torres-Llorca, José Bedia, Gleixis Novoa and Ana Albertina Delgado.

The generation that followed weren't only able to buy, sell and interact with the art world to a degree that Cuban artists had never enjoyed before, they had also learned a lesson about how to function on the island. Since the '90s, Cuban artists have veiled critical political commentary behind visual codes that appear humorous and cynical on the surface but have a hidden meaning. Fernando Rodríguez, for instance, has created an alter ego, Francisco de la Cal, a humble Cuban who went blind in the early years of the Revolution, and who "uses" Rodríguez to express his opinions on their country.



PILING ON With *Secreter*, another *Detrás Del Muro* installation, artist Lina Leal piles home furniture upon itself to address issues of privacy, pain and domestic violence.

Cuba's 'Now' Moment

Long before the official rapprochement between Cuba and the US began a year ago, I had embarked on my own journey of reconciliation. I left the island as a baby, and my mother brought me back once, when I was nine, to meet my father, who was in prison. Then, in 2002, I participated in an intense weeklong exchange program in Havana. It was an enormously emotional experience to meet and bond with Cubans my own

age, making a human connection that contradicted all the horror stories I'd heard about the island. That visit divided my life into "before" and "after." Since then, I have traveled frequently to Cuba, which has shaped my focus as a curator. I now have my own memories of the place my parents left behind.

Last May, I launched Dialogues In Cuban Art, a multi-year exchange program that brought a group of Cuban-American artists from Miami on their first visit to Cuba. They included Leyden Rodríguez-Casanova, Bert Rodríguez, Antonia Wright, Ruben Millares, Manny Prieres, Juana Valdes and Marcos Varella. Our days were packed with visits to artist studios, galleries, museums and other cultural venues. We not only saw the work of artists from different generations, but new trends and practices. For example, most of the artists received us not in their studios, but in homes or apartments that they use as personal showrooms. The strategy is a telling indication of how artists are accommodating the growing number of international collectors, scholars, curators and exchange groups visiting the island.

Not far from the apartment where I had dinner with León, she met us at her second home, where each room featured a different body of her work. The house was an eclectic mixture of architectural styles typical of Vedado, with Colonial, Art Deco and contemporary elements. Wilfredo Prieto, a conceptual artist and contemporary of León's who has a successful career abroad, met us at an apartment with a similar setup. Prieto's space merged stark minimalism with old-world ruin, sleek appliances contrasting with rough walls whose crumbling structure was deliberately exposed. The commingling of sophisticated design and dilapidated buildings has romantic appeal to foreigners drawn to Havana's exotic decay. How could it not?

New Directions

Our group's visit last May coincided with the 12th Havana Biennial. However, it functioned mostly as a backdrop that framed our visit and hinted at



other changes in the Cuban art world's relationship to the market and the diaspora. *Detrás Del Muro* is a project in this year's Biennial featuring public work by artists from Cuba and abroad, displayed along Havana's famous Malecón, a broad coastal esplanade and seawall. It's wildly popular and its visibility makes it one of the event's main attractions. This year, project founder and organizer Juanito Delgado also invited artists from the diaspora to participate. They included Gleixis Novoa and Florencio Gelabert, who were born in Cuba but have long lived in Miami. Increasingly, both are working in the city they once fled; Novoa even has a studio in his mother's home in Havana.

I had a chance to have lunch with León in Miami, as she was scouting for a permanent locale for a site-specific installation purchased in Cuba by the wealthy Cuban-American developer Jorge M. Pérez (whose name is on Miami's main

BRAVE ART Visual artist Gleixis Novoa (TOP); Glenda León's *Summer Dream* installation invites members of the public to swim in the symbolic divide between Cuba and the US.

art museum). Titled *Sueño De Verano (El Horizonte Es Una Ilusión)*—or, *Summer Dream (The Horizon Is An Illusion)*—it's comprised of blown-up maps of Miami and Havana placed on either side of a swimming pool. Members of the public complete León's *Dream* by diving into the pool in a symbolic crossing of the divide between Cuba and the US.

Next year, the second part of Dialogues In Cuban Art will see Cuban artists, curators and scholars visiting Miami. Like León's installation and its journey from Havana to Miami, the visitors represent not only the paths to and from the island being forged by Cubans here and there, but a new direction for Cuban art beyond nation and diaspora.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE HIPS WHEN CUBANS START TO DANCE (THANK GOODNESS) BY JORDAN LEVIN

carry some great dance moments in my memory—Gelsey Kirkland in *Giselle*, Stephen Petronio in Trisha Brown's *Set And Reset*, Crazy Legs spinning at the Roxy and an ordinary woman dancing in a Havana nightclub, her body and limbs a dizzying nexus of gracefully swirling S-curves, from her slim fingers to her close-cropped head, from her spiraling shoulders to her confidently slashing legs, a proud, perfect whirl of motion.

That Cubans often dance as naturally as they walk is a cliché, but it remains true. Dancing is as innate to Cubans as is music. More so, in a way. Almost all Cubans dance, albeit primarily in social or Afro-spiritual celebrations. As many good musicians as there are in Cuba, the people on the dance floor will always outnumber those onstage. Thank the tropical humidity. And the island's African inheritance, where dancing and drumming, movement and rhythm, are a basic response to and expression of living.

So Cubans have tremendous, insatiable, natural physical talent. I was in a Miami theater in 2008, watching Taras Domitro, who'd just defected from the National Ballet of Cuba, soar in a grand jeté when, hovering mid-leap, he defied physics and just went up, as if on an invisible jet blast. My mouth and those of several other dance critics next to me dropped open simultaneously, as we turned to one another, asking "Did you see that? Did that just happen?"

Professional dance in Cuba essentially dates from the Revolution. That's when Alicia Alonso began receiving the state support that enabled her to turn the National Ballet into one of the island's key cultural institutions. It's also when Ramiro Guerra Suárez founded Danza Contemporanea de Cuba, the country's first modern dance troupe. The training of talented children in state conservatories and the elevation of Afro-folkloric and Santería ritual dance into respected genres with their own rigorous techniques also happened after 1959.

(Just an aside here: Afro-Cuban dance is *hard*. Just try to follow in the abruptly

THE WHOLE EVOLUTION IN DANCE IN THE LAST HALF-CENTURY SIMPLY PASSED CUBA BY. ISOLATION AFFECTS DANCE MORE THAN OTHER ART FORMS.


sharp, indecipherable—to non-Cuban ears—rhythms of rumba. I danced professionally in New York City in my 20s under the best ballet and modern teachers in Manhattan. But when I took an Afro-Cuban dance class in Miami, basic moves, like steadily shimmying my shoulders while my feet hit a syncopated three in between, had me totally flummoxed.)

But the rapid institutionalization of what had been primarily a natural part of

life created something of a paradox for Cuban dance. Cuban dance is respected as an art form; the island has ballet and folkloric companies, and, since the '90s, a number of modern and even Spanish troupes. But its choreographic and creative achievements don't match its physical ability. Cuban modern dance has long been an odd mix of old-fashioned Graham technique (Suárez studied with Martha Graham in New York City) and Afro-Cuban movement. Merce Cunningham, postmodernism, pretty much the whole evolution in dance in the last half-century simply passed Cuba by. It's not hard to understand why. Isolation affects dance more than other art forms; music and visual images travel far more easily than the teachers, choreographers, performances and interaction that transform dancing.

That's all starting to change. Malpaso, a new company started by former Danza Contemporanea members Osnel Delgado and Daileys Carrazana González (with Fernando Saez), has worked with major choreographers Ronald K. Brown and Trey McIntyre, while Delgado's own fluid, kinetically intense and layered choreography has been praised in the company's increasingly frequent US tours. *Showroom*, by DanzAbierta's Susana Pous, is conceptual dance theater based on the conflicted inner life of cabaret dancers.

"Part of our mission is to be exposed to American audiences who are really demanding," says Malpaso executive director and third cofounder Fernando Saez. "Because if you're not challenged enough, it can be like performing for a mirror."

Cuban dancers' joyful physicality, the way life spills out of their bodies, already makes them something to see. If they start to spin off ideas the way they spin off moves, now, that would really be something. 

DANCERS FROM THE DANCE
Showroom, by DanzAbierta's Susana Pous, is a conceptual study of the inner lives of Cuba's cabaret dancers that turns clichés inside out.



GELSEY STOLL