

11^a Bienal de La Habana

11^a Bienal de La Habana, Cuba May 11 – June 11, 2012

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11^e Bienal de LA HABANA

Lalie DOUGLAS

Heading to Cuba, I carried with me certain expectations of what I would see there, based on the theme of the biennial and my previous acquaintance with Latin American art. The art of Latin America has long held an attraction for me; strong conceptual works expressed through the combination of a simplicity of materials and a daring directness. The theme of the biennial, *Artistic Practices and Social Imaginaries*, promised works that move beyond the usual gallery spaces and are integrated into the social fabric of the city. I expected a Mecca of public interventions and off-site works, but as in all things one must never make too many assumptions.

True, there were performances and many did take place on the streets and other pieces were integrated into the cityscape, but the majority of the work still resided in gallery or museum-like settings. As a first-time visitor to Havana and unfamiliar with the busy streets, I found these works the easiest to locate and that may have skewed my perception. A strong showing was the series of large-scale sculptural pieces set out along the length of the Malecon, the sea wall around the bay, but as this grand promenade acted as a continuous, dramatic pedestal for the works, ultimately it read as a traditional presentation.

Among the performances *Conga Irreversible* by Los Carpinteros, the artist duo otherwise known as Marco Antonio Castillo Valdés and Dagoberto Rodríguez Sánchez, was striking.

This performance took place on the Prado, a double boulevard divided by a raised central paved area that is lined with shade trees and benches for sitting. This lively place is filled with tourists and locals sitting in the shade and even children who come here from the schools facing the Prado to play games at recess. Imagine the reaction of these daily users of the space when suddenly a mass of dancers and musicians dressed in black and silver appeared and made their way backwards up the tree-lined space. Full of energy, music and joy, the "parade" swiftly moved the length of the Prado, the marching band and dancers carefully

advised by spotters as they danced backwards, surrounded by a happy crowd. After a few fleeting, marvelous minutes they reached the end of the boulevard near the sea wall, where they turned and, still dancing backwards, returned down the street between the cars and buses and eventually dissipated. I was told later that not only were they moving generally backwards but also dancing the steps and playing the music in reverse. The choice of black for the costumes, which usually would be brightly coloured, was also a reversal of the norm.

Despite the relaxing of economic restrictions taking place in Cuba, the ideals of the revolution are still very much present in the thoughts of the people and come into play in the reading of *Conga Irreversible*. This was made clear to me by a different work, Montreal artist Carissa Carman's *Walking Backwards: Surreal Estate*, which took place at MAC/SAN. (See below) As she explained to me, her performance, which for her was a simple act to heightened awareness between her and her onlookers, was critiqued for suggesting that the revolution was going backwards. While inadvertent in her work, this message is at the heart of the very playful *Conga Irreversible*.

The economics of the island also leads to works that are not as polished as what one would see in North America—but have a directness that results in strong work. The work *Submarino hecho in casa*, an extended installation and series of drawings by Esterio Segura was exhibited in the Villa Manuela now turned gallery space. This included a small car on which several ink-jet prints of a similar car had been taped. Each photograph was augmented by simple sketches of possible modifications to turn the car into a submarine. I could not help thinking that in North America, full scale variations would have been fabricated at great expense, while in fact, this very simple version sufficed to convey the concept.

The Submarine pieces, along with many of the other works by Cuban artists focused on themes, which after a few days began to reoccur with numbing frequency: the hardships of the revolution, the distance between Havana and Miami, the longing to leave as well, in the case of

the submarine, the ingenuity of the Cuban people to improvise and reuse.

Coming from Montreal, where there is an ongoing discussion about the standard of living for artists and the recent backlash against spending public funds on art projects, it is interesting to note that in Cuba, artists form an elite. They have a noticeable increase in access to consumer goods, but most importantly they have some internet access (ordinary Cubans have none) and greatly increased permission to travel, live abroad and make money from the sale of their work. Their role as cultural ambassadors for Cuba has led to this interesting situation. The abridged version is this: the generation of artists in Cuba in the 80s produced innovative work, which rocketed Cuban art onto the world stage. While most of these artists moved to other countries, the artists that followed in the 90s and the new century reaped the benefits, going on to have successful international careers actively promoted by the state. But the side effect of this phenomenon is a commercialization of the art scene in Cuba. The gutsiness and drive of young artists coming out of the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) has become standard and seems to grow from the curriculum, the school acting as a machine to produce international artists. They are not reacting against the politics and hardships rather they are encouraged to put it into their work as this is what is expected of Cuban art. In the end, it is the artists who choose to do more personal works that in fact are bucking the trend.

MAC/SAN

Like a biennial within the biennial the MAC/SAN project stood out as a more sincere, grassroots expression of the biennial's theme. Growing out of the LASA-laboratorio artistico de san agustin, the Museo de arte contemporaneo de San Agustín is an experiment in what a contemporary art museum can be. Physically, MAC/SAN is the shell of a building, huge columns hold up a second floor/roof, without walls of any kind. A metal staircase, built in a few days by a team overseen by an engineer, leads to the rooftop and a social art project: cafe mac san and drying

racks for teaching local farmers to use their surplus fruit crops to make dried mango and pineapple as an extra source of income. Under the large roof MAC/SAN TV tapes interviews with artists, visitors and locals, which later are to be circulated via USB keys. Two weeks of programming made up of performances and intervention projects with the local community took place. One of these was Carissa Carman's performance, *Walking Backwards: Surreal Estate*, in which, by the simple act of walking through the streets of the community, she opened dialogues with the inhabitants, as they reacted both with curiosity and concern for her as she walked, coming out to warn her of unseen hazards or to walk with her, experiencing their community in a new way. Another project was *Cubic-OH*, a dance performance Alex Morales (Columbia/France) developed, working with a group of non-professional local dancers who trained intensively along side Alexis Povea Dreke, renowned Cuban Hip Hop dancer from the 80s and promoter of the Break Dance movement in San Agustín, who suffered a tragic accident at the peak of his career and can no longer dance. This dance performance began at MAC/SAN and made its way to the abandoned community centre, where the whole community came out to watch/participate with the dancers in a performance that rivaled some professional productions I have seen, set against the decaying concrete of the community centre.

The LASA Workshop is under the leadership of Candelario, an artist who now focuses his energy on using art as a way to benefit his community. The workshop approaches businesses and designs murals and so on for them, creating local jobs and training artists. The funds generated in this way and supplemented with international arts funding are used to program international residencies at LASA. ←

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Montreal artist Lalie DOUGLAS creates objects, installations and performances, which question our expectations of how art should be presented both inside the gallery and outside in public spaces. She has exhibited her work in Quebec and internationally and she holds an MFA from Concordia University.



LOS CARPINTEROS,
Conga Irreversible, 2012.
11ª Bienal de La Habana.
Photo: Ignacio BARRIOS.
© Los Carpinteros. Cour-
tesy: Sean Kelly Gallery,
New York.



Glenda LEON, *Sueño de Verano* | *Summer Dream*, 2012. 11^a Bienal de La Habana.
Installation. Digital print on plastic textile,
chairs, tables. 24 x 6 m, 16,5 x 5 m. Photo:
G. LEON.



Carissa CARMAN, *Walking Backwards: Surreal Estate*, 2012. Caminando Hacia Atras Desfile. 20 days Performance, MAC/SAN, San Augustin, Cuba. 11^a Bienal de La Habana. Photo: LASA.



Esterio SEGURA, *Submarino hecho en casa*, 2012.
11^a Bienal de La Habana. Photo: Lalie DOUGLAS.



Alex MORALES, *Cubic-OH/ órgano HU-rbano*, 2012. Performance at MAC/SAN in collaboration with a group of dancers and actors from San Agustín. Photo: Lalie DOUGLAS.