

Isolated innovation

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Artists dismantle past perceptions of Communist Cuba with innovative and inquisitive works

By Sophia Carvlin-Miller

Like any general title, the words "contemporary Cuban art" are limited in conveying the idea they represent. Confluencias, the National Hispanic Cultural Center exhibit these words subtitle, encapsulates far more complexity, talent and insight than can be described in a few words. The show includes works from 40 artists living on the small island that has been such a point of contention in American politics.

What many people may find surprising when they see curator Juan Delgado's selections is that, despite the U.S.-imposed embargo on Cuba, its artists maintain a strong and deliberate connection to innovations in art. Like contemporary artists around the globe, the artists represented in Confluencias make use of technology, mixed media and popular culture images to reflect on their world. None of the art in the show could be described as regressive, backwater or out of touch, even though the island has often been portrayed as all of these things in the past 60 years.

The common American perception of Cuba as an isolated dictatorship stuck in the past is quickly put to rest when one sees forward-thinking works like Luis Garciga's video, "Destinos posibles." The video chronicles conversations with Havana pedestrians who answer the question, "Where would you like to get in life?" in exchange for a free taxi ride from the artist. The answers are often lengthy and reflective. Many of the riders say they would like to use their education or talents to accomplish a dream. Another common desire is to be in a position to help others. The video gives the viewer not only a sampling of what Cubans think about and what they want in life, but also shows a glimpse of contemporary Cuban life — what people wear, how they speak, what they carry. This insider's view shows a dynamic, colorful place not unlike other large cities in the world, contrasting the bleak picture painted of Communist life in Cuba during the Cold War.

Tey Marriana Nunn, director of Visual Arts at the NHCC, said in a recent interview that the show comes to the United States appropriately at a time when the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba is being re-evaluated by American leaders.

"It's something we don't often see here," Nunn said in a recent Local iQ interview, of the wide range of works presented in Confluencias. She noted that many of the artists in the exhibit have shown internationally in Europe and Japan but are still largely unknown in the United States.

Confluencias is the second incarnation of an exhibit that travelled throughout Mexico between 2006 and 2009. And with changes in leadership happening in Cuba, many of the works express a sense of growing connection to the rest of the

world. Abel Barroso's "Puente de la Globalización (Globalization Bridge)" is comprised of a model suspension bridge built against a wall onto which a projector flashes the images of the most famous skylines around the world. Toy cars drive on the bridge toward the images and a box beneath the bridge holds models of the Third World as it moves toward the developed world. Subtitled *The Cold War is Over, Let's Enjoy Globalization*, this work exemplifies what Nunn says is a sense of Cuba as part of the larger world.

"[Cuba's] artists are trying to find [their] place in the world," she said, adding that the sense of juggling the past and present is an important theme in the exhibit. The challenges Cuban artists still face — the U.S. embargo, limited access to materials and technology — does not allow them to rush forward uninhibited. However, if *Confluencias* is any indication, Cuba's top artists are managing the tempered momentum with a large dose of grace and creativity.

Confluencias: Inside Arte Cubano Contemporáneo

Through May 16

National Hispanic Cultural Center Art Museum

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