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The Havana Biennial Is Running at Full Throttle

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Inside the 2015 Havana Biennial

Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

Critic's Notebook

By HOLLAND COTTER

HAVANA — With the recent political thaw between Cuba and the United States, changes are already lapping the shores of this island nation and may soon be pounding the great sea wall, the Malecón, that stands between Havana, the open water, and a big-spending, big-building, culturally big-footing neighbor to the north.

Everyone knows that major shifts are inevitable once capitalism begins to flood the socialist zone. And a sense of mingled excitement and apprehension is in the air at the 12th Havana

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Biennial, a diffuse, gradually unfolding, monthlong series of art exhibitions that have been injected into the tissue of this majestic heirloom of a city, adding contemporary warmth to its gorgeously crumbling bones.

Some of those bones remain steel-firm. As if applying a reality check to the biennial's pose of cosmopolitan openness, last weekend the government's censoring forces swung onto action. Their target was the itinerant Cuban-born performance artist Tania Bruguera, who has not been allowed to leave Havana for the past six months on charges of disturbing the public order. As she left her home on Saturday after staging a live reading of Hannah Arendt's 1951 book, "The Origins of Totalitarianism," she was subject to an intimidating police sting and hustled away, literally isolating her from the international art crowd that had come to town.



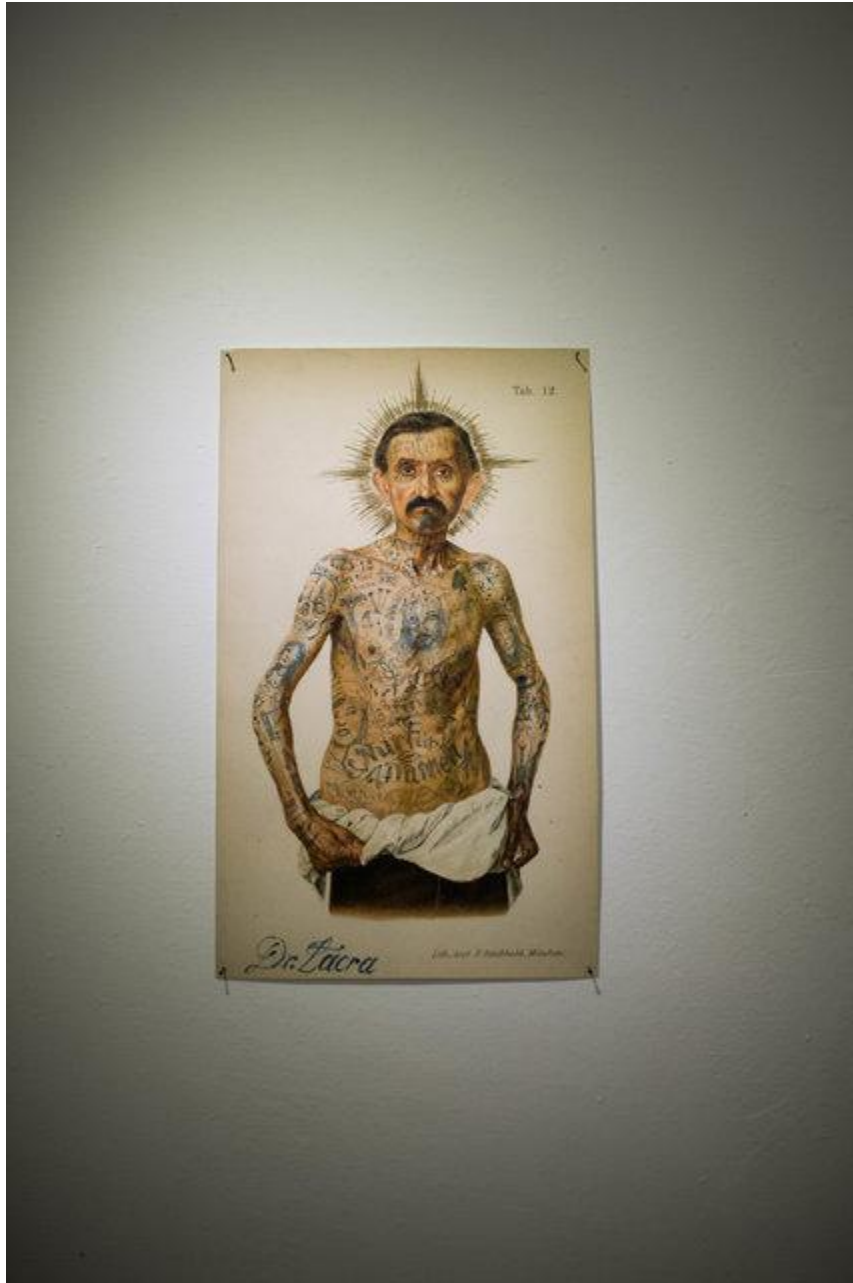
The artist Michelangelo Pistoletto breaking mirrors onstage with a sledgehammer as part of a performance at the San Francisco de Paula church in Havana. Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

The biennial was not originally created with that crowd in mind. Founded in 1984, it was devoted to artists who found no welcome in heavily subsidized European extravaganzas like the Venice Biennale and Documenta. In those pre-globalist days, the Havana show provided a platform not only to artists from Cuba but also from Asia, Africa and South America. Working with a minute budget, it was conceived as a kind of anti-spectacle, with a vision of art as a loose and elusive social experiment, not a brand to sell.

That approach has come and gone over the decades, but has been conscientiously revived in this year's show, which has only the vaguest of titles ("Between the Idea and Experience") and is the

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product of many curatorial hands, led by Jorge Fernandez Torres, director of the Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Center. If the show, which runs through June 22, has any theme, it is Havana itself, and its daily life, into which art has been embedded.



A work by the tattoo artist Dr. Lakra at the Wifredo Lam Center. Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

In general, the kind of shop-window viewing favored by more conventional shows is discouraged here. So is celebrity spotting. Only a handful of boutique names — Daniel Buren, Anish Kapoor,

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Michelangelo Pistoletto — are on the roster. And only Mr. Pistoletto, now in his 80s, gets into the swing of things, as he did with a communal pots-and-pots percussion concert that he orchestrated in front of Havana's 18th-century cathedral.

The major import item, though, is an exhibition, at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, drawn from the collection of the Bronx Museum of the Arts and organized by its director, Holly Block. Titled "Wild Noise," it represents the first art museum exchange between Cuba and the United States in nearly 50 years. (Selections from the Bellas Artes will go the Bronx in 2016.) Most of the work selected — by Vito Acconci, Chakaia Booker, David Hammons and others — is long familiar to New Yorkers, but it's great to be able to see it afresh through Cuban eyes.



Work by Roberto Fabelo at the Cabaña. Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

Cuban art is, of course, what you're in Havana for. The Bellas Artes has fabulous stuff: colonial portraits, first-class Wifredo Lam, and entire careers of Cuban modernists (the painter René Portocarrero, the ceramist Amelia Peláez) barely known, and unknowable, outside their homeland. This is true of living figures too. A survey of the abstract, diarylike drawings of Gustavo Pérez Monzón, born in 1956, is a rare, time-and-space-specific find. Everything in this show is from a single Havana-based collection, that of Ella Fontanals Cisneros. Mr. Pérez Monzón, though on hand for his opening, stopped making art some 30 years ago.

The single biggest concentration in the city of work by his Cuban contemporaries is not, however, in an art museum, but in a public monument, the 16th-century double fortress called Morro-Cabaña set high on a bluff over the Havana Harbor. For decades, the entire biennial was housed here. This year, the fortress's honeycomb of tunnels, vaults and cells is home to an all-Cuban show of some 250 artists and collectives titled "Zona Franca," or "Free Zone."

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A work by Arles del Rio at the Cabaña. Credit Lisette Poole for The New York Times

Diverse is certainly the word for what's here, within limits. Painting and drawing predominate, followed by sculptures, or some blend of all of those. Stylistically the range is wide. In New York, shows on this scale are usually of young and emerging artists. Not so here. Most were born in the 1950s and '60s, when revolutionary Cuba was still young. A lot of what's here feels politically engaged, while avoiding any sharp critical message. Romantic-style sepia drawings by Luis E. Camejo depict Havana as an archaeological site, a latter-day Pompeii. The word "Revolucion," written on a blackboard by Lidzie Alvisa, has been erased and reinscribed countless times, as containers of chalk dust attest. Images of guns recur; in an installation by Jesús Hdez-Güero, the floor is carpeted with spent shells. Consumer culture takes a hit from several artists. Yet most of the work in the show, like most art in New York, is clearly intended for a market in which polish and portability pay off.

More important, "Zona Franca" does what an outsized, broad-spectrum group show can sometimes do: It takes you inside a complex and tremendously energetic culture at a particular moment. It also takes you — and this is less common — physically inside a piece of history, namely a 500-year-old chunk of Old World colonial architecture designed by men who wanted to keep the New World both under their thumb and at a distance. Havana is full of such history-inflected places.

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An installation by the Senegalese artist Momar Seck — a cloud of airplanes made from commercial packaging and buzzing an immigrant’s suitcase — brings us into Casa de Africa, a wonderful museum in Old Havana devoted to Afro-Cuban religions central to Cuban culture. To see a project by the Belgian conceptualist Koen Vanmechelen, who chose genetic engineering as his medium and has used it to reintroduce a species of chicken once common in Cuba, requires a visit to the Museum of Natural Science at the University of Havana, a highly atmospheric environment featuring bright-eyed tropical birds preserved in antique vitrines.

Atmosphere is like scent here: enveloping and emotional, also fragile, intangible, easily lost, which may be why artists and curators in the biennial are so intent on creating and preserving it. Alexis Leiva Machado, called Kcho and known to be one of Fidel Castro’s favorite artists, has converted his studio in the scrappy Barrio Romerillo section of the city into an art museum, and further spread art out into the neighborhood, giving ordinary life there the thrill of a treasure hunt: Go to the local market for your government-rationed groceries, and you’ll find a pretty Amelia Peláez pot on display among sacks of rice.

A group show called “Montañas con una Esquina Rota” (“Mountains With a Broken Corner”) is set in what was once an assembly plant for buses and bicycles. In 2002, the plant caught fire. It’s now a roofless shell but with symbolic meaning for local people. Like Havana itself, it’s a space at once deeply distressed and generous: a broken box filled with beautiful light.

And, thanks to the biennial, it’s shot through with art: a thin silver necklace placed in a crack in a plaster wall by Tatiana Mesa; a stack of kindling arranged near a burned-down fire by Ariel Schlesinger; a tiny Zen garden in a patch of sand by the Japanese artist Shimabuku) — installations so small that unless someone told you, you wouldn’t know they were there. Once you do know, you feel them as much as see them.

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Atmosphere isn't necessarily positive. The harassment of Ms. Bruguera, which began last December when she announced plans to give a prodemocracy performance in Plaza de la Revolución, an ideologically sacred site, poisons the air. (If she leaves Cuba, she forfeits her right to return; if she stays she risks criminal prosecution. Once the biennial crowd has moved on, any support she has will be gone.) And there is, in some quarters, uneasiness about the future of Cuba itself, fear that the embrace of the United States will put the island's cultural identity, including its identity as a failed utopia, on the line. (Last week, a State Department team that included Senators Al Franken and Tom Udall was in town for talks on tourism and trade, and toured the Biennial.)

The opening week festivities culminated on Sunday, at dusk, in one of the biennial's most popular features, an exhibition of outdoor sculpture organized by Juan Delgado Calzadilla and installed along the length of the Malecón. Some of the work is jokey (the American artist Duke Riley built an ice-skating rink); some, like Rachel Valdes's sky-blue cube of some translucent material, simply beautiful.

But the Spanish artist Carlos Nicanor seemed most attuned to the mood of the moment. Mr. Nicanor's piece consisted of a kind of Yellow Brick Road made from yellow-painted wood plaques. One end of the road lined up with the distant facade of a tall building that had been a bank headquarters in the 1950s, a hospital since the revolution, and was rumored to have a fortune in gold still locked in a vault. The road then ran across the promenade to the seawall, climbed it, and spilled over its edge. When I was there some passing kids, amused by the dangling dead-end, began pulling plaques loose and tossing them, like toy rafts or bullion, into restless waves that are carrying unimagined changes to their world.