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American Accents Being Heard on the Malecón

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HAVANA — In the echoing cobbled walkway of an 18th-century fort that is home to part of the 11th Havana Biennial, an insistent clang emanates from an artwork in which a bronze bird continually hits a boat propeller with its beak. Behind that noise floats the melody of a Cuban son played by a trio. And then, above it all, comes another kind of sound: American voices, crying out in English, “Look at that!” and “I want you to see this!”

Right: “Fly Away,” by Arlés del Río, is part of the 11th Havana Biennial.



For much of the 2000s, President George W. Bush all but shut down travel between the United States and Cuba, and with it the stream of American art lovers who had helped nourish the Cuban art scene. But since President Obama began lifting many of the Bush-era restrictions on travel in 2009, the traffic has been flowing again over the bridge that links the American and Cuban art worlds.

Cuban officials say that more than 1,300 Americans — collectors, curators, dealers and others — have registered to attend this year’s biennial, close to the high reached in 2000, after the Clinton administration loosened years of travel restrictions. Under the recent changes, Cuban-Americans may visit whenever they want, and, as of last year, the United States government has expanded legal travel for other Americans, who may arrive on programs intended to foster contact with ordinary Cubans.

“We’re seeing a lot more foreign visitors this year, and among them a lot more Americans,” said Sandra Contreras, who runs the Villa Manuela gallery here. The change has been a boon, she added, explaining, “Even though we’ve developed markets in Europe and Latin America, American collectors are still our principal buyers.”

For Cuba, the biennial — which opened on May 11 and runs through June 11 — is a chance to experience international culture and show off the country’s own artistic evolution. The event has filled Havana’s exhibition halls, galleries, theaters and streets with sculpture, painting and street and performance art by 180 artists from 45 countries, according to the Wifredo Lam Center for Contemporary Art, which organizes the event. Dozens of Cuban artists are showing work in the official and unofficial spaces.

“You learn a lot from seeing this,” said María Teresa Cañarte, a pediatrician from the eastern province of Pinar del Río who on Tuesday was looking into two square “wells” made by the Chilean artist Iván Navarro, who used neon

lights and mirrors to create an illusion of depth. “A lot of people here don’t get to travel and see art elsewhere. It opens our horizons.”



Left: Roxanne Decyk, from Chicago, at the installation “The Worst of Winter,” by Kcho. Right: “The Conversation,” by Kcho.

There is a smattering of American artists, including Andres Serrano, who has a show at a photography gallery in Old Havana, and Craig Shillitto, whose Paladar Project took 10 chefs to Havana to cook with 10 Cubans in a pop-up restaurant built out of shipping containers.

On May 11 the Russian-American artist Emilia Kabakov, surrounded by a throng of Cuban families, hoisted the sail of “The Ship of Tolerance” on a grassy space next to Havana Bay. Ms. Kabakov and her husband, Ilya, have built wooden ships in half a dozen locations, including Venice and the Egyptian desert, creating the sails from prints of paintings by local children. (She said the boat, which will be kept on land, will remain in Havana and could last a decade or more.)

On the Malecón, the curving sea wall that sweeps along Havana’s northern flank, a set of works by Cuban artists explores the subject of migration and flight, an emotional theme in a country where you have to ask permission to leave and where many have died trying to do so in makeshift rafts and boats.

In “Fly Away,” by Arlés del Río, the silhouette of an airplane cut into a chain-link fence suggests that an airliner has burst through. Esterio Segura’s “Homemade Submarines,” which transforms a vintage Chrysler, echoes the inventive and precarious vessels Cubans made during a mass seaborne exodus in 1994.

Passers-by paused to look at themselves against the backdrop of the empty sea in Rachel Valdés Camejo’s mirror installation, “Happily Ever After No. 1,” and to puzzle before “Nobody Listens,” by Alexandre Arrechea, a sculptural aluminum tree of ears that get smaller and smaller as they approach the top.

Across the bay, the sea-crossing theme continues at a wide-ranging Cuban show at the 18th-century fortress of San Carlos de la Cabaña. Hanging in a room are life-size sharks in human clothing, and the detritus of a shipwreck. It is the work of Alexis Leyva Machado, known as Kcho (pronounced catch-oh), whose small bronze bird pounds its beak against a propeller hanging from a rope, ringing an endless knell, next door.

On the fringes of the biennial, groups of connoisseurs, many of them American, were shuttling among galleries and studios, meeting with artists and snapping up work. Artists occupy an unusual and privileged place in Cuba, where they can not only push the boundaries of political critique further than many, but can also keep much of the money from sales.

Mr. Arrechea said he had received two or three private groups a day, including one from SITE Santa Fe, the contemporary-art space, and another from ArtTable, a New York-based organization that supports women in the visual arts, at his studio in a downtown apartment building. Mr. Arrechea, who is represented by galleries in New York, Paris and Madrid, and whose works generally go for \$5,000 to six figures, said he had sold “a couple of less expensive pieces.”

Frank Mujica, who does pencil drawings of Cuban landscapes, said there had been four groups a day — mostly Americans — arriving at the studio he shares with three other young artists. He sold 12 works on Monday alone, he said.

But this flurry of interest did not just start with the biennial: Over the winter, Cuba's high season, Americans trooped endlessly through artist studios and the Higher Art Institute, Cuba's leading arts school, buying works from students' easels.

"There's a lot of interest in acquiring," said Luis Miret Pérez, director of Galería Habana, one of the city's most respected galleries. He said that he had received several delegations from foreign museums in the last week, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Tate Modern in London, and that he was expecting a group from the Museum of Modern Art in New York later in the month.

Mr. Miret said the travel hiatus with the United States had forced Cuban artists to look to Europe, where they developed a new market and connections with curators and workshops that build their installations.

They emerged from the last decade "more exposed to the outside world," said Nancy Portnoy, a board member at the New Museum in New York. "The processes are more sophisticated, the materials."

Ms. Portnoy was speaking at Galería Habana, where she was looking at "Forbidden Sky," a star map by Glenda León, made from diagrams of the molecular structures of illegal drugs. Ms. Portnoy bought a picture made from strands of hair by Ms. León about a decade ago for \$100; other works from the same series sell for about \$1,500.

Now that they can connect more easily, Cuban and American artists, collectors and curators hope to deepen their ties. Holly Block, the executive director of the Bronx Museum of the Arts, said she would like to see the best American artists taking work to Havana and, one day, an American cultural center here.

Ms. Block, who visited for the first 10 days of the biennial, said, "To be so close and not support the country or its art — it doesn't make sense." She added that she hoped to hold a show at the Bronx Museum in collaboration with the Cuban Museum of Fine Art in 2014.

Mr. Arrechea, who missed his first solo show at the MagnanMetz gallery in New York in 2005 because he could not get a visa from the United States, said it was crucial that the link with the United States remain open.

"There are young artists here who have been waiting for years for the door to open," he said. "If it closed again, it would be a disaster."