

Cuban Art On the Move

BY Roger Atwood POSTED 04/01/11

Provocative show on race will travel to New York.

In 2004, curators at a Pittsburgh contemporary-art museum known as the Mattress Factory planned to bring in artists from Cuba for a group show. The exhibition would be called “Cuba: Artists in Residence.” The Bush administration prevented the artists from coming, but the curators ended up keeping the exhibition’s name as a protest.



Armando Mariño's installation *The Raft*, 2010.

With more relaxed travel rules now in place, the museum brought nine of the 13 artists to install their works in an even bigger show of contemporary Cuban art, which opened in October 2010. (The four others had either died or were unable to come for personal reasons.) The show, focused loosely around the issue of race in Cuba, will move to New York’s 8th Floor art space in Chelsea in April.

Titled “Queloides,” a reference to scars left on the skin from trauma, the show is thematically complex. Works by such artists as Douglas Pérez, Juan Roberto Diago, and Manuel Arenas refer to the black experience on the island and expose or ridicule stereotypes—many by no means exclusive to Cuba. Other works offer provocative takes on poverty, overcrowding, and migration. A sculpture by Armando Mariño titled *The Raft* (2010) features the empty body of a 1950s Plymouth with its wheels replaced by a forest of barefoot black legs.

The exhibition was first seen in Havana last April at the Centro Wifredo Lam, where reactions were decidedly mixed. “Some Cubans saw it as a bunch of grumpy young blacks who wanted to call attention to their work,” says Alejandro de la Fuente, a Cuban history professor at the University of Pittsburgh who cocurated the show with artist Elio Rodríguez Valdés. De la Fuente told *ARTnews* he was not allowed by Cuban authorities to attend the Havana opening and that the exhibition was ignored by Cuba’s official media because the subject of racism is still taboo. Some independent blogs and websites in Cuba, however, spoke warmly of “Queloides.” After the exhibition closed, Primavera

Digital posted a blog entry saying the show “tore down prejudices through visual statements.” Strong reviews greeted the show in Pittsburgh as well, with the city’s *Post-Gazette* calling it “startling, a bit surreal, and certain to stimulate the imagination.” The *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* wrote that it was “not a ‘black project’ or a project ‘for blacks,’ but a cultural project by a multiracial group of artists who share similar beliefs and concerns about racial justice and equality.” News of the show’s critical success in Pittsburgh “has trickled out” in Cuba, de la Fuente says.

The exhibition’s name pays homage to two group shows, also called “Queloides,” in Havana in the 1990s that focused on the subject of race. At the time, says de la Fuente, many of Cuba’s advances against racial discrimination had slipped due to the economic disruption caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite this topicality, both shows were overlooked and largely undocumented by art scholars, he says. Part of the motivation behind the third edition of “Queloides” was to “reinscribe the previous exhibits in the history of Cuban art,” he says.

The New York venue that will host the show is owned by Donald and Shelley Rubin, funders of the Rubin Foundation and best known for their interest in Himalayan art and in cold war ephemera, ranging from Viet Cong posters to Maoist didactic paintings. The couple ventured into Cuban art about two years ago and now own more than 400 works, says Rachel Perera Weingeist, curator of their collection and deputy director of the Rubin Foundation.

The New York version of “Queloides” will be smaller than the Pittsburgh show because of reduced space, says de la Fuente. Because of the truncated size, “It will actually be closer to the original Havana version,” he says. “It was small, but it made its point.”

Roger Atwood is a correspondent for ARTnews. A selection of his articles can be read at rogeratwood.com.

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