

BEYOND THE EMBARGO

Cuba Collaborations

MODERATOR: IDIE ADAMS

PANELISTS: JOEL BENNETT, ANTONIO LEWIS BELGROVE, CATHERINE MERRILL,
WITH WALFRIDO HAU (GUEST PANELIST)

A Synopsis

by Catherine Merrill

PART I: IDIE ADAMS

THE MERE MENTION of the word "Cuba" has always evoked images, in my mind's eye, of tropical color, sultry, dark mysteries, pulsating rhythms, political turmoil and lively people. I grew up in 1950's New York City with Cuban music and dance infiltrating my parents' new suburban home, where they took Latin dance classes in their remodeled basement with several other young couples in the neighborhood. Every wedding, birthday and Bar Mitzvah, I would dance with delight the rumba, the mambo and the cha cha with my smooth moving Dad. The music and dance still intoxicate my spirit. When I saw the movie *Buena Vista Social Club*, I knew that I longed to experience and embrace the culture first-hand.

In May 2001, my husband Alan and I were invited, as visiting artists, to the "Encuentro Terracota" at the Taller Cultural in Santiago, Cuba. I found, to quote Bill Bryson "A third world country with first world people"—big-hearted, intelligent, exuberant people who have suffered much deprivation, yet continue to maintain a personal and patriotic pride and optimism. I saw breathtaking, decaying architecture as well as soviet-built, inhospitable, concrete buildings and 1950s retro remnants of gorgeous vintage cars.

Cubans have a passion for pleasure. At every gallery opening, there were requisite formalities and speeches by officials. Then, glasses of rum and coke would circulate. People would socialize and the band would arrive. Then the coke disappeared and the rum would flow. Dancing would begin, and the night went on forever as everyone—artists, ministers of culture, kitchen help and all—laughed and danced and joined together in good fun, acceptance and harmony. The next morning, everyone would be back in the studio, working all day until the next event.

Art has value in Cuba and it is celebrated. Cuba enveloped us with kindness and generos-

ity and offered us a great gift of the opportunity to work as ceramic artists in the company of contemporary and celebrated international artists who have shared with us their culture, friendships, ideas, laughter, music and, oh yes, the dance. How we danced together, played together, created together and in the simplest, yet most profound way, dissolved any barriers and borders that divided us.

The NCECA Conference theme, *Borders in Flux*, seems more relevant than ever as we stand on the brink of impending global war. Artists can celebrate the multitude of cultural flavors in this world and resist global homogenization. We are at a moment in time when artistic and



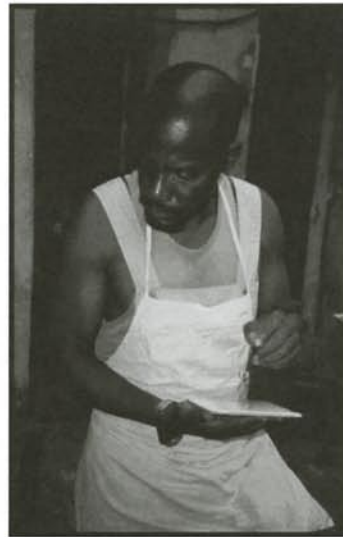
Santiago, Cuba, "Encuentro Terracota" Workshop.

creative interchange between foreign countries can deliver the voice of peace and cooperation that much louder. It is our gift as artists to reach out and to speak out.

I met panelists Catherine Merrill and Antonio Lewis in Cuba during the 2001 "Encuentro Terracota." Another one of the panelists, Joel Bennett, was well known as a visiting artist in Cuba. In the past year, Catherine has dedicated her life to organizing events and raising funds to bring Antonio Lewis to the United States for a series of lectures and workshops in the San Francisco Bay Area as well as to participate in this panel discussion and co-curate the exhibition "Beyond the Embargo," at Tres Gallery in San Diego.



Catherine Merrill, *Terra cotta Vase*, 27"x 10"x 10", 2002.



Antonio Lewis at the "Encuentro Terracota" 2001 workshop.

Although careful and tireless planning has gone into obtaining Antonio's visa, our new United States foreign policy, which requires security clearances from twenty-two offices of the Department of Homeland Security, has effectively prevented Antonio from being with us today. Less than two weeks ago, Antonio Lewis sat in Havana, his bags packed with the artwork of prominent Cuban artists for the exhibition. Until today, we held out hope that he might arrive in time for this panel. As creative individuals, it is difficult and disheartening to comprehend that our own government could decimate an entire project through bureaucratic negligence and misguided power.

We learned a fascinating part of the story only a few days before the conference from the Visa Chief at the United States Interests Section in Havana: "Washington feels there is more to process in the case of a professional who has specialized knowledge of different fields and is knowledgeable about ceramics in all its applications." Consider the notion that the United States government now has clay on the list of possible weapons of mass destruction!

Although Antonio was missed, Catherine Merrill communicated his sentiments.

PART II: ANTONIO LEWIS

For more than forty years, Cuba has been subjected to a powerful Embargo by the Government of the United States, that has caused

serious consequences for my country from both a social and economic perspective. This is a strictly governmental policy since the majority of American citizens oppose this unjust and coercive law.

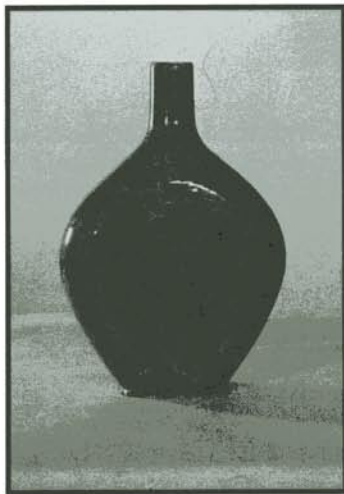
Beyond ideological, philosophical and political connections, the United States and Cuba have maintained cultural links since the Colonial era. For example, the paintings of Wilfredo Lam, notably "The Jungle," have been part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art since the 40s. At the same time, the Fine Arts Museum of Cuba has many canvasses by American painters, demonstrating that art knows neither frontiers, credos nor ideologies.

Recently, there have occurred so many cultural events that demonstrate our countries' will to break the isolation they impose upon us. For example: the recent celebration of American Independence Day, with Cuban musicians, singers and dancers giving their own interpretation of jazz, rock and roll, blues, country and rap. With what admiration has the United States received Alicia Alonso and the National Ballet of Cuba, Chucho Valdes, the Buena Vista Social Club and many other Cuban artists, the ambassadors of the best art and culture of my country? In spite of the blockade, many American visual artists have participated in the Havana Biennale, the events "Todo Ceramica" and "Marmol Sol" on the Isla de la Juventud and the "Encuentro Terracota" in Santiago, to name a few.



Art, like music, is a universal language. The creation of Art offers the opportunity to bring people together working for the greater good and is the one true formula for creative union. Thus, one may reach an understanding of universal truth. One way to fully realize this goal is to bring different creative people together in a shared environment to relate to each other through artistic collaboration. Without doubt, Cuban artists have felt this need to share their creative expression with other cultures, and particularly with Americans.

In spite of the Embargo against Cuba, American artists who have dared to reach across



Antonio Lewis, Crystalline Vase,
14" x 10" x 4", 2002

the miles to work together have contributed so much to the artists of my country, both aesthetically and technically. In the context of studio ceramics, the introduction of new techniques, which are now integral to the way we create, have been of utmost importance. For example, primitive firing methods such as pit-firing based on the experience with Joel Bennett; the use of non-ceramic found objects introduced by Idie Adams and the introduction of terra sigillata and working from a live model demonstrated by Catherine Merrill. Through working with Catherine, a new collaborative project, "The Art of Fire," has evolved.

When the time comes to write the history of contemporary art in Cuba, in spite of the blockade, we must highlight the similarities between us, expressed through our art. I believe that art is the one true path to spiritual union, between both artists and cultures.

PART III: JOEL BENNETT

My interest in exploring Cuban art and a love for Afro-Cuban music motivated me to take my first trip to Cuba. I found a proud people going through a difficult economic situation, but still very resilient and spirited. Their art and music reflected this in a strong and vibrant way. I also discovered a very active emerging ceramic community.

To learn more about contemporary Cuban ceramics, I visited La Isla de La Juventud (The Isle of Youth). La Isla sits about sixty miles off the southwest coast of Cuba, and, partly due to its geology, has become a center of both industrial and artistic ceramics over the past fifty years. The Island abounds in natural clays, is the only place where kaolin is found and is the source of some of Cuba's finest sculpture-grade marble.

I visited the "Taller Cultural," a government sponsored art center in Santiago de Cuba. The center houses ceramic and sculpture studios, facilities for painting and printmaking and a gallery. I showed a short slide presentation on my work and was invited to participate in an annual international ceramic event, the "Encuentro Internacional Terracota."

In May 1997, I returned to Cuba as a participant in this wonderful event, where twelve foreign artists worked together with the same number of Cuban artists for two weeks. My work is predominantly burnished and pit-fired. Unlike other regions in Latin America, Cuba does not have an indigenous ceramic tradition. The Europeans introduced ceramics during colonial times. In my explorations, I never discovered burnished and primitively fired clay work on the Islands. During the Encuentro, I was thus invited to introduce these techniques. Everyone experimented with burnishing a piece; then we took a weekend outing to a local beach for a pit-firing celebration.

In 1999, Denver ceramist Kathy Holt and I were invited to participate in the third bi-annual "Encuentro Todo Ceramica," on La Isla de la Juventud.

The month long event, similar to the one in Santiago, was the idea of Dutch ceramist, Bien Velds and Cuban ceramic artist, Idilio Lopez and included artists from France, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Chile and Argentina. The main sponsor was the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists



Walfrido Hau, Idie Adams, Catherine Merrill and Joel Bennett, *Beyond the Embargo* panel.

(UNEAC). Working alongside artists from other countries, with vastly different backgrounds and experiences, allowed for an educational and artistic growth very different from working with the familiar. The international language of art helped to break down the barriers of politics, ethnicity, customs and rituals that separated us. With this language, we can work towards creating a better and peaceful world!

PART IV: CATHERINE MERRILL

In May 2001, on the recommendation of Joel Bennett, I attended the 15th annual “Encuentro Terracota,” at the Taller Cultural. In the ceramics studio I worked alongside a young Cuban sculptor, Jose Luis Berenguer. Berenguer observed common themes and techniques in our work: we use the figure to express a personal mythology and are interested in developing rich surfaces through layering textures, engobes and glazes. Berenguer invited me to participate in a two-person exhibition with him the following year.

Antonio Lewis organized a collaborative residency at the Fundacion Caguayo for the two weeks preceding the opening of the show. Our goal was to work together to create a body of work that would complement the pieces I had to hand carry. This joint project of exhibition and residency was sponsored by three Cuban arts

organizations: the Taller Cultural, the UNEAC and the Fundacion Caguayo.

The Fundacion Caguayo is a “center for the applied and monumental arts” housed in a huge corrugated metal building fifteen miles outside of the city of Santiago. One-half of the space contains a production pottery that produces terra-cotta slip cast ware for hotels and restaurants and the other comprises the largest bronze foundry in Cuba and the Caribbean. The president of Caguayo, Alberto Lescay, is Cuba’s foremost sculptor of monumental bronzes, a painter, ceramist and member of the National Assembly.

Lewis and I set up a workspace in the Caguayo “Laboratorio,” where we presented demonstrations for the workers. At Lescay’s studio in town, I worked with his assistant, Juan Giron. Using the technique of electroplating copper, Giron transformed two small wax torsos I had brought into copper sculptures with marble bases. The latter were inverted ashtrays, a typically wonderful example of Cuban resourcefulness and ingenuity.

In my four trips to Cuba, I have never failed to be moved to tears by the combination of heartbreaking shortages of the most basic supplies contrasted with the Cuban artists’ unflagging determination to keep moving forward, delightful sense of humor, dedication and in-

credible generosity. In cultural exchange, the Americans' contributions are practical, whereas the benefits we receive from the Cubans occur on a deeper, more spiritual level.

Antonio Lewis and I also presented two workshops to small groups of Cuban artists: "Application and Firing of Gold Luster," and "Working with a Live Model." For the latter, Lescay had chosen an outdoor meeting place at Caguayo, known as "Baragua." This project became a synthesis of Lescay's vision, my figurative sculpture workshops and Lewis' event, "3x3x3." Our experience at "Baragua" underlines the transformative nature of collaborative cultural exchange. By bringing together artists from different aesthetic, technical and cultural backgrounds, a new experience is synthesized that becomes more than the sum of its parts. The culmination of this beautiful day was the collaborative painting of a large vase by myself, Lescay and Tamayo, which achieved a visual unity although our individual styles are very different.

For two days Berenguer and I worked with Gretel Arrate, the director of the Galería Universal, curators and staff to install our show, "Propuesta de Dos." We demonstrated that a Cuban and an American artist can work one-on-one in harmony because what we have in common is much more significant than our differences. Berenguer showed figurative platters, tile wall pieces and sculptures. The inhabitants of his atavistic world of yearning faces, fantasy birds and fish, represent different aspects of the artist. The reception opened with remarks by Jorge Montoya, professor of the Philosophy of Art Criticism at the University of Santiago:

Albert Camus said, 'Each generation believes itself destined to recreate the world.' These words come to mind when we encounter the works in this exhibition. Catherine Merrill and Jose Luis Berenguer are each searching for a way to remake their very different worlds. Although their points of reference are based on aesthetic assumptions that follow different paths, their artistic intentions are united in a way that is both coherent and organic and represent the hope of these artists to make the world anew.

Sadly we cannot change American foreign policy but, through "Beyond The Embargo," we

can try to create a peaceful world, at least for a little while, where ceramic artists from America and Cuba can work and grow together, little by little, opening the aesthetic and political borders that separate our two countries.

CATHERINE MERRILL received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Kansas City Art Institute, is an instructor at Walnut Creek and presents lectures and workshops at colleges and art centers including the UNEAC in Cuba, the Honolulu Art Academy, Kansas City Art Institute and San Francisco City College. Her work has been shown at over 100 national and international exhibitions. She has been published in *Ceramics Art & Perception*, *The Studio Potter* and *The Art of Contemporary American Pottery*.

IDIE ADAMS is a ceramic artist and educator living in Chico, California. She was invited to Cuba in May 2001 as a visiting artist where she participated in the "Encuentro Terracota" in Santiago de Cuba. She holds a Master of Arts from Northern Illinois University. As Chair of the Fine Arts and Communications Department at Butte College, Adams also coordinates the ceramics program and previously directed the college art gallery. During two sabbaticals, she studied ceramics and art in Southeast Asia, Europe, Mexico and New York. Working in clay and "reassigned" found materials, she attributes a direct link between her travels, cultural influences and her art.

ANTONIO LEWIS BELGROVE is a ceramic artist, specialist in industrial technology, professor at the Instituto de Arte Wilfredo Lam, director of the group *Coherencia*, and technical consultant for the Taller Cultural and the Fundación Caguayo. He presents conferences and workshops on the theme of "Technology Serving Art" and has participated in residencies focusing on investigative research in Germany, Bulgaria, Russia and Guyana. Belgrove has participated in more than fifty national and international exhibitions, including the VII Biennale of Applied Arts and the V and VI Biennal de Ceramica.

JOEL BENNETT has been a ceramic artist working in Sonoma County, California, for twenty-nine years. He is on the faculty at Santa Rosa Junior College. An award winning ceramist, his work has been represented in galleries as well as in corporate and private collections worldwide. He has participated in four international "Encuentros" in Cuba, has brought Cuban ceramists to the United States for cultural exchanges, and has written articles about Cuban ceramics that have been published in *Ceramics Monthly* and *The Studio Potter*.

BEYOND THE EMBARGO

Cuba Collaborations

by Scott Dooley

THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT has imposed a harsh embargo on Cuba for over 40 years. But artists, with the ability to remain outside the influence of international politics, can act as a bridge between communities. In spite of governmental sanctions, Cuban, American and other international artists can gather to find a path to collaboration. The annual "Encuentro Terracota" in Santiago de Cuba provides such an opportunity. The panel at the 2003 NCECA Conference, "Beyond the Embargo: Cuba Collaborations," was an eye opening experience and presented powerful insights into how collaborative work among artists in such a setting is mutually beneficial and allows for artistic growth. It can also provide a greater understanding of our artistic selves, helping one reflect on the value of art within our culture and how such issues as technology affect our artwork.

Catherine Merrill, Joel Bennett and Idie Adams presented reflections on their experiences from their collaborative projects in Cuba. All three have participated in the "Encuentro Terracota," which is held every May. The "Terracotta Encuentro" invites twelve international artists to collaborate during this two-week-long event held at the Taller Cultural Center in Santiago de Cuba. Antonio Lewis Belgrove, a well-known Cuban ceramic artist who helped organize this and many other events such as the "3 X 3 X 3," planned to attend the NCECA Conference and be a part of this panel. However, even after months of intense planning, the new policies of the Homeland Security Administration stopped his entry into the country. He was denied a visa because he was seen as a potential threat due to his knowledge of ceramic materials. The panelists' frustrations and disbelief in the turn of events was evident. They worked closely with Antonio Lewis in Cuba over the past few years and felt he was an integral part of the panel. Even in the face of this last minute change, the panel was able to have a Cuban art-

ist, Walfrido Hau, as the fourth panelist. He is currently working in California, and, along with his wife, Catherine Schmidt Maybock, has also participated in the "Terracotta Encuentro." The panel, as a whole, discussed the current artistic culture in Cuba and the possibilities for bridging the current political deadlock between the two countries.

Several issues were brought up by the panelists during their presentations and the discussion period that followed. The most notable of these was the spirit of sharing and growth that is possible in a collaborative setting. This growth is strengthened by the differences in knowledge and abilities that are shared during a cultural exchange. Collaboration is often overlooked in the current art climate in the United States. American artists are pushed to create individualized works that are our own statements. We often miss out on the freedom and spirit of sharing ideas, techniques and the joy of collaboration.

During the "Terracotta Encuentro" the panelists gave workshops to share technology and techniques from their experiences as artists working in the United States. Joel Bennett shared his knowledge of primitive decorating and pit-firing techniques. Idie Adams helped expand the possibilities for ceramic art by introducing the potentials for the use of non-ceramic, found object materials. Catherine Merrill shared her expertise with terra sigillata and knowledge of figurative clay construction. The panelists were empowered by what they received in return. They were shown the power of an art community that is nurtured and supported by a government. Cuba actively supports its artists and they have a strong standing in the Cuban society.

Due to the United States embargo, materials are often hard to find. This has caused the Cuban artists to be more creative in problem solving and forces them to work in a range of

materials. They often have to remain flexible and work with the materials they have available. This message is especially important to artists in a wealthy nation where materials and technology are bountiful. Limits can push artists into a direction that produces more creative and interesting artwork.

The panelists all expressed a connection to the passion and celebration of art in Cuba. The sense of celebration through music, food and art creates a different working environment for artists. Coming from a technologically overridden country like the United States, working in Cuba allowed them to strip away the "extras" and focus on other aspects of art making. It is easy to be mesmerized by mastering technological predictability. However, it is not a requirement for making good art and can oftentimes become a hurdle.

The exchange made possible by the "Terracotta Encuentro" allowed artists to bridge the gap that has been artificially created by years of governmental policy and the embargo. In the truest sense of collaboration, both the Cuban and American artists learned and were able to grow through the collaborative experience of the "Terracotta Encuentro." It provided the opportunity for the artists to reconnect with the flexibility and creative spirit of art making.

The panel was earnest in its statements about the value of their collaborative work in Cuba. Our countries are only ninety miles apart. However, due to governmental policy, there is much less cultural exchange than there could be. This represents an artificially closed border that should be more open for the exchange of ideas and cultures. We have much to learn from each other, both as artists and as people influenced by our different cultural perspectives.

After the individual presentations, the heightened sense of sharing continued during the panel discussion. The panelists were more than willing to help interested artists learn about Cuba and explain the intricacies involved in traveling to Cuba. The panel's expertise, gained from their combined experience of more than eight trips to Cuba, was passed on to the audience. The warmth and spirit of celebration was further kindled by the sharing of rum during the discussion period.

SCOTT DOOLEY received his Master of Fine Arts in ceramics from Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, in May 2000. His work has been published in *Ceramics Monthly*, *Clay Times*, and *Pottery Making Illustrated*. He is currently an assistant professor of art at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio.

Around the Conference



Angela Vinson and Cayce Kolstad.

Glen B. Blakley