

OPEN HANDS

CUBAN AMERICAN CULTURAL EXCHANGE

by Catherine Merrill

For 15 years, the *Taller Cultural Center for the Creation and Promotion of the Visual Arts* in Santiago, Cuba has been hosting the annual *Encuentro Internacional Terracota*. The event is an international ceramic residency that brings professional clay artists from all parts of the world, in a spirit of cultural exchange, to work together, sharing techniques and ideas. The program consists of an exhibition, hands on work in the studio, slide lectures and round-table discussions. This is complemented by a variety of social, cultural and recreational activities that offer the visitors a broad picture of Cuban society.

I was selected to participate in the 2001 event, May 15-31, along with twelve Cubans, three Americans and one participant each from Belgium, Spain and Chile. With typical warm and generous Cuban hospitality, the *Taller Cultural* provided everyone with shared housing, meals and transportation, allowing us to experience their culture directly, build friendships and focus on our creative work, free from the normal barriers of economic and political differences.

I was also invited to present a one day workshop: *Figurative Ceramic Sculpture*, working with a live model. Aware of the severe shortages faced by Cuban artists, I chose to focus on techniques for achieving rich surface treatments using the simplest materials and equipment, with an emphasis on polychrome terra sigillata and colored clays. The majority of the Cuban participants, forced by necessity to make do with whatever is available, also paint and sculpt in wood, metal and bronze as well as clay, turning hardship into an advantage. Their artwork, primarily organic sculptural forms and platters painted in dynamic linear patterns, reflects the influence of Africa and Santeria.

On several evenings we attended exhibitions of the participants, including *Ambivalencia*, a solo show of disturbing and erotic lifesize wax sculptures by Caridad Ramos, and the annual *3x3x3* show curated by Antonio Lewis, in which three visual artists and three ceramic technicians, in the space of three days, work together, exchanging knowl-

edge and experience, to create a body of work. *3x3x3* featured platters, vases and wall-pieces by Alberto Lescay, painter and sculptor of monumental bronzes, Israel Tamayo, graphic artist and director of the *Taller Cultural* and Nelson Dominguez, painter and ceramic sculptor from Havana.

The day we worked at the Caguayo Fundacion was an unforgettable experience. Established in 1995 by Lescay in an impressive, well-equipped industrial building on the outskirts of Santiago, Caguayo is divided into a production pottery and a foundry for casting monumental bronzes. Smiling, Lescay led our group into the studio space where the Fundacion had provided us with 50 thrown terra cotta platters in varying sizes, three 3 1/2 foot tall vases, plus everything necessary for decorating: brushes, multi-colored engobes and stains, dishes of glass beads, found objects and small bronze fragments. Everyone jumped in with enthusiasm, including the non-artists in our retinue: the reporters and officials. Cuban artist Eduardo Troche and I collaborated on one of the large vases, creating a painting in the round of figures in a tropical landscape.

Responding to each other's marks, carving, adding relief and color, like an improvised dance the piece developed a life of its own, until you couldn't tell where his work began and mine ended.

Through the experience of cultural exchange, each year the artists participating in the *Encuentro Terracota* become ambassadors of good will creating an expanding network of alliances and projects. With support from the *Fundacion Caguayo*, individuals and organizations in the US, Antonio Lewis and I are working on developing a line of studio ceramics of authentic Cuban design using local and non-toxic materials. I am also preparing for a duo exhibition with Cuban ceramic sculptor Jose Luis Berenguer during the 2002 *Encuentro*. The devastating international tragedy of September 11 underlines the importance of programs such as these that foster creative collaboration, interchange of ideas and, above all, friendships between individuals whose governments are enemies.



Catherine Merrill with Eduardo Troche, Santiago Cuba, May 2001

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