

## Cuba from the Inside

by Catherine Merrill

In May 2001, I was invited to participate in the 15th annual Encuentro Terracota, an international cultural exchange project at the Taller Cultural Center for Visual Arts in Santiago de Cuba. The art center, located in a converted villa, houses a gallery and studios for painting, printmaking, metalwork, papermaking and ceramics. It is located in Reparto Vista Alegre, a leafy residential district of Santiago with exquisite colonial villas and tropical gardens in various stages of disrepair and reconstruction. In the ceramics studio I worked alongside a young Cuban sculptor, Jose Luis Berenguer. Berenguer observed similarities 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. He invited me to participate in a two-person exhibition with him the following year. The exhibition, "Propuesta de Dos (A Proposal for Two)," was scheduled at the Galeria de Arte Universal in Santiago for May 2002 as one of the exhibitions to be featured during the upcoming Encuentro Terracota 2002.

Antonio Lewis from the Isla de La Juventud, a regular participant in the Encuentro, Professor of Ceramics and technical consultant for both the Taller Cultural and the Fundacion Caguayo, organized a collaborative residency at the Fundacion Caguayo for the two weeks preceding the opening. During the residency we could work together, sharing scientific and artistic experience, to create a body of work that would complement the pieces I would hand carry. This joint project of exhibition and residency was sponsored by three Cuban arts organizations: the Taller Cultural, the UNEAC (Union of Cuban Artists and Writers) 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 contains a production pottery that produces terracotta slipcast 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. His impressive body of work includes the 50 foot high monument to Antonio Maceo in Santiago's Plaza de la Revolution and works in Venezuela and Paris. In exchange for technical support and use of their materials, equipment and facilities, the Fundacion Caguayo requested that Lewis and I present a series of workshops and demonstrations and that I bring documentation to contribute to their library, particularly any information relating to bronze casting.

Thanks to a letter of recommendation from Gerry Williams, combined with my letter to the Office of Foreign Assets Controls in Washington, D.C. and the official invitation, I received a General License which qualified me to take the direct flight from Los Angeles to Havana. I traveled with 140 pounds of luggage that included sculptures, platters, matted and shrink-wrapped drawings for the show, a large assortment of ceramic tools and supplies, materials to promote health and safety, magazines, and the book *Methods for Modern Sculptors* by Fennell & Young. With its clear step-by-step descriptions, diagrams and information on patinas, lost wax, and ceramic shell casting, *Methods for Modern Sculptors* made such a powerful impact at Caguayo that I felt I had brought the Holy Grail. Fernando Yero, director of the foundry, told me that they have been struggling to make 21st-century art with 1950s technology.

In my four trips to Cuba, I have never failed to be moved to tears on several occasions by this combination of heartbreaking shortages of the most basic tools and supplies contrasted with the Cuban artists' unflinching determination to keep moving forward, delightful sense of humor, dedication, and incredible generosity. In these cultural exchange projects, the Americans' contributions are straightforward: access to much needed materials, equipment and current technological information and opportunities to make valuable professional contacts, whereas,

the benefits we receive from the Cubans occur on a deeper more spiritual level.

The first week Antonio Lewis and I set up a work space in the Caguayo "Laboratorio." There we presented demonstrations of terra sigillata and safety measures, emphasizing the importance of using latex and leather gloves and dust masks to pro-



tect the hands and lungs. Using a colored encaustic made from a mixture of melted paraffin, gasoline and pigments, I decorated a large biscuit vase from 2001. I also worked at Lescay's studio in town with his assistant, Juan Santiago Giron. Using the technique of electroplating copper, Giron transformed two small wax torsos into copper sculptures with marble bases. The latter were inverted ashtrays, a typically wonderful example of Cuban resourcefulness and ingenuity.

The second week Antonio Lewis and I presented two one-day workshops. The first, Application and Firing of Gold Luster, took place in the courtyard of Lescay's studio. The participants were Xiomara Gutierrez, director of the ceramics program at the Taller Cultural and originator of the Encuentro Terracota, Berenguer, Lescay, Giron, Lewis and myself. I demonstrated different techniques of gold application. Each participant decorated glaze-fired pieces, then Giron and I loaded and fired the kiln. Gold needs a fast firing to 660°C in a well-ventilated kiln. The kiln switch had two basic settings – ON and OFF. After climbing 200 degrees in the first 15 minutes, I would turn it off for 20, then on again for a half hour, then off again, etc. The firing began at 12:30 and concluded at 4:30 PM. Another heart rending moment was watching Giron unloading the hot kiln shelves the next day with his hands protected only by torn squares of cardboard. The firing was a success! Berenguer's three tiles decorated with fluid images of nudes and fish became part of our show. The following week, Lescay executed a second batch of platters and tiles decorated with gold that he and Giron fired. The work was breathtaking, showing a bold use of gold and dry brushwork consistent with Lescay's painting style, that opens up dynamic new possibilities in the use of gold luster.

For the second workshop, Figurative Ceramic with a Live Model, Lescay had chosen an outdoor meeting place at Caguayo, under the trees, with work tables and a thatched hut wired for electricity, known as "Baragua". This project became a synthesis of Lescay's vision, my figurative sculpture workshops and 3x3x3, an annual event organized by Antonio Lewis, where 3 artists work with 3 studio technicians to create a body of work in three days. The experience of "Baragua" underlines the transformative nature of these collaborative cultural exchange projects. 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 participants were the model Adriana, Israel Tamayo – painter,



printmaker and Director of the Taller Cultural – Lescay, Lewis and myself, with the technical support of Virgilio Montero. I had prepared underglazes and brought sketchbooks and pastels to share. From the Isla, Lewis had brought a beautiful range of colored clays, under glaze chalks, glazes, biscuit vases and platters on which to draw and paint. Virgilio had prepared an assortment of leather-hard greenware: tiles, platters and a three foot tall vase.

Freeing artists working in clay from all technical preparation enables them to create in a way that is particularly dynamic, focused, and productive. This day was a uniquely beautiful artistic experience and a feast for the senses:

working outdoors, with the model as our muse, enjoying the soft breezes and songs of the birds, listening to world music, with abundant bowls of tropical fruit for refreshment. Each artist absorbed and shared the collective creative energy. Inspiration flowed from one to another, growing with the progress of the day. The culmination was the collaborative painting of the large vase by Lescay, Tamayo and me which achieved a visual unity although our individual styles are very different, showing the power of the common language of art to break through external differences of nationality, politics, race, culture and ethnicity.

Rather than feeling like a visiting foreigner during these four weeks, I felt as if I was continuing my working artist's life in a parallel universe that was shaded in a different palette of colors and moved to the different rhythms that were Cuba. I spoke mostly Spanish, ate my meals with a Cuban family. People were always incredibly open and hospitable making me feel a part of their community. I spent Mother's Day week-end in the small city of Guantanamo, staying with relatives of a colleague. On their television we watched Jimmy Carter's arrival in Havana. Seeing him and Castro standing side by side in front of the flags of our respective countries seemed to augur an era of hope for peace, soon to be destroyed by Bush's declaration that the country of these warm and generous people was a state that sponsored terrorism.

May 21st and 22nd, Berenguer and I worked with the director of the gallery, painter Gretel Arrate, curators and staff of the Galeria Universal to install our show. The opening was scheduled for Tuesday May 22nd. Berenguer showed figurative platters, tile wall pieces and sculptures. His atavistic world of yearning heads, fantasy birds, fish and baby monsters hatching from eggs, whose inhabitants, except for the voluptuous nudes, are all different aspects of the sculptor, recalls

the worlds of science fiction. Like all exhibitions, the elements came together just in time: painted pedestals, mounted wall pieces and drawings, labels and catalogue. The gallery, which rarely shows ceramics, glowed with strong and positive energy. The reception opened with artists and dignitaries lined up in a row making speeches and then became quite crowded and lively for the next five hours.

Here I would like to offer a Cuban perspective on this exhibition in the following, which is paraphrased from the opening remarks by Jorge Montoya Rivera, professor of the Philosophy of Art Criticism at the University of Santiago:

"Albert Camus said:

"Each generation, without a doubt, believes itself destined to recreate the world. These words come to mind when we encounter the works in this exhibition, "Propuesta de Dos." Catherine Merrill and Jose Luis Berenguer are each searching through different techniques for a way to remake their different worlds. The genuineness and value of these offerings lie in the freedom and boldness with which these artists address the act of creation. 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. The key lies in the metaphors used by Catherine and Berenguer which are the leitmotif of the works displayed here. She plays with movement, the elements of the natural world and the human figure, both male and female. His forms come from a fantasy world both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic. Jose Luis Berenguer's ceramic works demonstrate a mastery of his craft through the complex layers of ceramic elements and fragments that cover his pieces giving strength and harmony to a complex concept. This exhibition is a celebration of human expression and nature in a wide range of forms full of imagination and fantasy, that represent the hope of these two artists to make the world anew." (1.)

Berenguer and I believe that through this exhibition and the publicity that showed our work, our names, and our flags side by side we were saying 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.

From these cultural interchanges emerge levels of change and growth both simple and profound. New projects are continually born and grow, expanding infinitely like ripples in a pond. The Clay and Glass Arts Foundation of San Francisco is sponsoring a California-residency for Antonio Lewis in March 2003 for a series of educational and cultural exchange programs that will include a panel presentation; Beyond the Embargo: Cuba Collaborations at the 2003 NCECA Conference in San Diego; a group show at the Lauren Carrera Gallery

in San Diego of Cuban and American ceramic artists who have participated in cultural exchange programs; a workshop at San Francisco City College; and slide lectures and panels at the Art Academy of San Francisco and Santa Rosa Junior College. Further projects are being developed in Cuba for 2003 and 2004. Sadly we cannot change American foreign policy but "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.

*I. Translated by Michael Ruiz*

#### NOTE

The Taller Cultural hosts the Encuentro Internacional Terracota in Santiago de Cuba every spring from May 15 to 31. Applications are due December 31st.

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