

# Art in Cuba—Then and Now

by Catherine Merrill

In 1965, yearning for adventure, I joined a trip being organized from New York City to Havana, protesting the ban on travel to Cuba. Eighty-five "Heroic Students and Artists," as we came to be known in Cuba, flew on El Al Airlines to Paris, where we walked down long corridors and through a forbidden doorway to board a plane for Czechoslovakia. Retracing our route over New York, we landed thirty hours later at José Martí Airport, where crowds of cheering, uniformed youth bearing flowers greeted us. For the next two months we were guests of the Cuban government, visiting every place of interest from Havana to Santiago.

Soon tiring of apartment blocks and factories, I appointed myself cultural ambassador and arranged for visits to art schools, galleries and museums. My first stop was Cubanacan Art School in a converted country club near Havana. I was astonished by the

quality of the work, particularly the painting—expressive, contemporary, and mostly devoid of political content. I also visited a movement class taught by a modern dancer, Lorna Wilson, who had left New York for Castro's Cuba to teach children dance.

On that first trip I felt a strong sense of euphoria among the Cubans, fueled by the profound social changes taking place. "Theater Brigades" traveled the island in caravans, performing plays for rural workers' co-operatives. After a spirited performance of "Playboy of the Western World," a glowing, impassioned man told me, "I used to be a bank teller. I always wanted to be an actor and here I am living my dream." At an art school in Santa Clara I met a doctor burning with the same fiery light. He said, "The revolution has taken away my family's estates and I'm free to do what I love. I've never been happier." At the Institute for Animated Film, under the direction of a brilliant 22-year-old film maker since the previous directors had fled to the U.S., I found an electric atmosphere of experimentation and innovation.

The pervasive Soviet influence was a sharp contrast. Marxist-Leninist signs and slogans were everywhere. We stayed at a kibbutz-like boarding school in the Sierra Maestra, where the Collective brought up children apart from their families. We attended workers' meetings and a mass rally led by Raul Castro, and met Che Guevara. The Cubans were trying to preserve some autonomy while dependent on Soviet economic support. On the whole, the government stayed away from the visual arts. In a famous manifesto, Castro had encouraged artists and writers, saying their benefit to the country was second only to the revolutionaries.

After this transformative experience I hoped to go back one day to see how the promises of this time had unfolded. In April 1999, the 40th anniversary of the 1959 Revolution, I finally had the opportunity to return. Although still illegal and overly long, the 12-hour journey was easier than my earlier voyage. On Mexicana Airlines I flew from San Francisco to Cancun, where I picked up the Havana tickets at the Air Caribe flight desk. I bought a \$15 tourist visa to use instead of my U.S. passport, which was stamped upon arrival at José Martí Airport. DiverMex Travel in Cancun will handle these reservations and will meet you at the airport with vouchers.

## OPEN HANDS

for the Cancun-Havana round trip, hotel stay and ground transportation. Since American credit cards are useless in Cuba, I carried the money I needed for my entire stay worn in a money belt in cash and Thomas Cook travelers checks.

I worried about what I would discover, after all the reports of poverty and decay, but I soon adjusted to dark streets, potholes, poor food and shortages of paper and water. As before, my dominant impression was of the vitality and warmth of the people, the seductive rhythms of the omnipresent live music and, even with such limited resources, the exceptional creativity of all media—music, ballet, theater, film, painting, sculpture and ceramics. During my visit, the events and contacts I had carefully planned for never worked out, while each day fortune brought the most wonderful adventures. On both trips, an open mind and the ability to speak conversational Spanish were my best asset as a traveler; personal encounters stand out as highlights.

In the Luyhano district of Havana, I met two women ceramic sculptors who rented out the back room of a private home for their studio, where they were making scores of stylized, brightly painted terracotta figurines—little dancing couples I had seen in the windows of the tourist shops.

In a gallery on Calle Obispo in Old Havana, among lush paintings of huge flowers and beautiful women, I showed a postcard of my sculpture, "The Green Man," to Isabella Rodriguez, co-owner of the gallery with the distinguished painter Orlando Yanes. She invited me to have a show there in March 2001, saying she had dreamt of my sculptures the night before and that fate had brought me to their door.

In Trinidad, an exquisite small city restored by UNESCO, I visited the "Casa del Alfredo, Hermanas Santander," an open-air pottery run by the brothers Abel Santa Maria and Julio Amelia Santander. Julio told me they were fifth-generation potters in a family that emigrated from Spain 110 years ago. They make their classically-proportioned pots, primarily vases and covered jars, from a local micaceous clay that throws well. To economize on fuel, the pots are unglazed, decorated with burnished terra sigillata in three colors, cream, iron red and chrome green. They single-fire in a wood kiln to 900°C. Julio said that they sell everything they make and plan to add electric-fired glazed ware.

This poem, on the back of their business card, has been an inspiration to me:

"Cuando se descubre la belleza,  
Hay que hacer la día tras día.  
Cuando se conoce el valor del  
esfuerzo, la voluntad y la sonrisa  
Sabemos porque el amor recrea  
la maravilla."



ABOVE: Catherine Merrill at Museum of fine Arts, Havana, Cuba, 1965. BOTTOM: Fidel Castro, Cuba, 1965.

Once we have discovered beauty,  
/we must create it day after day.  
/Once we have known the value  
of /our effort, our will and a smile,  
/Then we know why love/ creates  
a miracle.)

In Trinidad I began to ask the hard questions and was appalled to learn of the severity of rationing and shortages these brave and cheerful people endure. My cab driver told me he had been a doctor, but since there are too many doctors he became a taxi driver. He earns more money in dollars from tips and has better access to things like chickens, eggs, soap, shaving cream and toothpaste. He assured me, however, things were getting better little by little; for a year or so there had been

no cooking oil at all.

On my last day, Yanes, Isabella and her brother Pedro, their gallery manager, invited me to lunch in Old Havana. On her way, Isabella took us to a homeopathic pharmacy whose walls were lined floor to ceiling with a beautiful collection of 19th-century French porcelain apothecary jars. Over lunch, Yanes told us that at the time of the Revolution he left a promising career as an abstract expressionist painter in Paris to come home and found and direct the Art School of Cubanacán that had so impressed me thirty years before. Out of gratitude, the Cuban government had given him the art gallery.

Yanes acknowledged that the current situation in Cuba is full of problems, "but," he said, "the deprivations people have to face now are nothing compared to the unspeakable poverty, disease and suffering of before. I've changed my style of painting, because I believe that when people go through hard times, they need to look at pretty pictures."

Technically, it is not traveling to Cuba that is illegal, but spending money there, i.e.: "trading with the enemy." I was careful that my few purchases did not have "Cuba" written on them. However, upon arrival late at night in San Francisco after a fifteen-hour flight home, I must have looked like the other weary tourists returning from a Mexican vacation and was neither questioned nor had my luggage searched. For those who prefer to travel legally, Global Exchange, based in San Francisco, runs a variety of tours

to Cuba and handles all visas and permits. If a group of fifteen or more potters should wish to travel to Cuba, they also offer customized tours.

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