

Arts



An international group of ceramic artists converge at Kwantlen University College to share techniques, culture, and knowledge with each other and the public through art making

Language arts

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The cool ceramic studio at Kwantlen University College provides welcome relief from the day's stifling summer heat. A group of artists has returned from lunch and upon the arrival of a curly-haired young woman, begin to sing in a language that's not English, while presenting her with a cake and gifts.

The birthday celebration is natural enough for the artists, who are working together in Surrey for five weeks this summer as part of the Cuban-Canadian Art Collective. But their friendly display – which includes plenty of hand gestures and laughter – is a serendipitous demonstration of what the Proyecto Arte Del Fuego (Art of Fire Project) is all about.

“The whole philosophy is international friendship through the universal language of art,” explains Catherine Merrill, a San Francisco resident who began developing bonds with several high-profile Cuban artists a number of years ago – relationships that have blossomed into an annual exchange of culture, education and art.

Merrill and Cuban artist Antonio Lewis began the project in 2002 and workshops and exhibits have been held three times in various parts of Cuba.

This is the first time the collaborative effort has come to Canada.

Because of the United States' ongoing embargo on trade with, and travel to Cuba, and the more recent ban on all cultural exchange with Cuba last spring, the event cannot be held in the U.S. Merrill can still travel to the Caribbean island, but she has to provide extensive documentation as to the professional and/or academic purposes for her visit.

While the 10 participants – four from Cuba, five from Canada and one from the U.S. – are at Kwantlen for the next few weeks, they'll be presenting workshops, slide shows, and exhibitions on ceramic arts in both Surrey and North Vancouver.

“One of the goals is community outreach ... bringing workshops to the people. Usually, events get concentrated in the big cities,” explains Merrill.

An exhibit in a small gallery space at Kwantlen's Surrey campus last week displayed the



Kwantlen ceramics instructor David Lloyd (left) and Alberto Lescay, a renowned Cuban sculptor work on decorating a large clay vase – one of several that will be completed during a collaboration between Canadian, American, and Cuban artists. EVAN SEAL / THE LEADER

diversity of the participating artists' work – techniques and methods which will be discussed and taught at the various locally planned events. The clay pieces were transported from their respective countries, with at least a half-dozen works lost in the process.

Participating artists include Cubans Antonio Lewis, Xiomara Gutierrez, Alberto Lescay, and Jose Vasquez Xenes, Canadians Alison Petty, David Lloyd, Judy Burke, Cathi Jefferson and Connie Glover, and Merrill.

Petty, the Canadian project's coordinator, is a recent Masters graduate from the California College of Art who works with a combination of porcelain and glass. Glover's work includes large, pod-like vessels, while Burke's features small, but dramatic earthenware vases.

Jefferson and Lloyd, head of Kwantlen's ceramics department, both have functional work on display, with the latter incorporating natural material like rocks into his teapots and cups. Merrill's huge, colourful vases featuring themes of day and night are highlighted with gold.

Lescay is one of Cuba's foremost sculptors of monumental bronze who works in other media as well, while the themes of Xiomara's clay platters are all about the ecology and man's damaging effect on

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nature. Detailed works by Vasquez focus on sexuality, childhood, the loss of innocence, and the use and misuse of power, while Lewis's pieces subtly document the history of slavery or feature Eleggua, the "director" of

the Gods.

"What's amazing is you have this fabulous artwork done with the simplest materials," Merrill says of the Cuban work, which is done with limited access to ready-made materials such as coloured glazes. The

Cuban/Canadian/American collaboration allows the artists to examine the pitfalls and advantages of technology in ceramics.

The directors are looking at the possibility of expanding the Proyecto Arte Del Fuego to Europe and Japan.