

Ole!

It has a reputation for being rather revolutionary, the cream of the art world crop makes a pilgrimage to it, and even Israeli artwork is presented there. The biennial exhibition of contemporary art, currently underway in Havana, is more popular than ever.

Tami Katz-Freiman, Havana

Anyone who paid any attention to world news in the past year is familiar with the name "Elían Gonzalez." Little Elían served many people with varying agendas - for one thing, he became a tool in the struggle between expatriate Cubans living in Miami and American liberals – but no one could have foreseen that he would also turn out to be the most successful means for promoting the Havana art biennial (*Bienal de La Habana*). While it's hard to say whether sympathy, guilt or plain old curiosity was the main catalyst, more than 2,500 Americans, traveling in organized groups and individually, converged on Havana during just the first three days of the biennial, which runs through January 5, 2001.

The seventh biennial for contemporary art (*La Septima Bienal de La Habana*) opened last month. The timing was perfect: The Gonzalez episode appears to have ignited interest in Cuba also among the upper echelons of the art world. The opening was attended by curators from leading museums, such as New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and Metropolitan Museum, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (LA MoCA), as well as by important gallery owners and collectors of the first rank.

They filled the hotels and scurried from event to event in Havana's decrepit neighborhoods. The fact that such a poor nation was able to garner so much professional attention says something not just about outsiders' morbid fascination with poverty, but also about the effective marketing strategy employed by the Cuban government: Art, after all, is a kind of liberal showpiece through which the regime can afford to permit a little innocuous subversion. Moreover, the funding for the event does not all come from Cuba. The participating countries are responsible for financing their exhibits. And even though flights and hotel accommodations were not provided gratis, distinguished guests have been arriving in droves.

The institution that is organizing, producing and hosting the event is the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, named for the most important Cuban painter of the pre-revolutionary period. This is an official organization that represents the government's ideological line; the guiding principles it set

forth for this exhibition are multi-culturalism and solidarity with Third World countries. The biennial has been held every few years (not necessarily every two years, as the name would imply) since 1984.

In the first years of its existence, many works were censored and taken down off the walls. Those were tough years for Cuban artists in terms of freedom of expression. Any artist who dared to express direct criticism – and there were many - was silenced. A good number of them ended up making their way to Miami.

In the early 1990s, the authorities switched tactics and allowed artists more leeway in expressing themselves. Cuban artists began to exhibit in the West and to enjoy the relative advantage of their status as exporters of culture and importers of dollars. The young artists developed sophisticated "adjustment mechanisms" in order to maintain their freedom to travel abroad and return to the country, while simultaneously honing impressive improvisational skills in order to successfully navigate the censorship minefield.

Clever Metaphors

The subversion became more subtle and layered, and concealed within clever metaphors; universal questions such as the temptation posed by the culture of plenty and issues of identity took the place of outspoken political fervor.

Today, the Bienal de La Habana is considered especially bold and experimental. It mainly features artists working in the Third World, though major Western artists also occasionally take part. Fifteen years ago, the organizers declared that this event was to be an alternative to the glib Western model of prestigious international exhibitions that were subject to what the Cubans referred to as "the rigged game of the dictatorship of the international art market," a game in which they purportedly had not the merest smidgen of interest.

"We are interested in the marginal cultures of the peripheries – those ethnic groups that are not part of the familiar, well known discourse," they proclaimed.

As in every such event, a particular theme was chosen and the works by artists from various countries were selected accordingly. In 1991, the theme was "A Challenge to Colonialism"; in 1997, the emphasis was on "Memory." This time, the (perhaps overly) general unifying theme is: "Communication in Difficult Times: One Closer to the Other." "Interpersonal communication is in danger of extinction in light of the global information media (the Internet)," writes Rafael Acosta in the introduction to the catalog. Acosta is a major figure in matters of Cuban culture (some people have sarcastically dubbed him "the

chief censor").

In a political text that does not toady at all to the West, he explains that "Some specialists have already theorized about a new division in social class today, the core issue being not so much the links between men and production relationships, but rather with the level of information – those who can pay for the information – and those whose only possession is hunger and a future of absolute misery."

Nelson Herrera, director and curator of the biennial event, accuses the Western world of alienation that is the result of technological abundance: "Today, you surf the Internet to search for the meaning of life," he writes. "The computer virus is infecting all of us." In the catalog, he proposes an alternative to globalization – a return to unmediated communication between people: "Here in Cuba, people talk with one another, they laugh together and have sex." This attempt to hawk innocence and human solidarity to the West by co-opting the nostalgic aura of the movie, "Buena Vista Social Club," is a bit clumsy. The irony only increases when you reflect on the fact that an entire exhibition based on the concept of "communication" is being staged in a place where using the Internet is against the law. The select few in Cuba who have sufficiently demonstrated their vital need to be linked to the outside world receive special permission to connect to the Internet – provided they're fortunate enough to have a telephone line. The authorities understand an artist's need to be connected in order to build a flourishing career in the West, but in order to enjoy such munificence, an artist must get on the government's good side.

The Israeli Presence

A total of 170 artists from 42 countries are represented at this year's biennial. Most notably absent are China, Russia and the Eastern European countries. The exhibits are scattered around the city; the majority are in the Habana Vieja (Old Havana) area and across the bay in the fortress area, the barracks area, and along the island's seawall.

Israel is an official participant this time. Unsurprisingly, the works of all four Israeli artists – **David Reeb, Benni Efrat, Guy Raz** and **Eliezer Sonnenschein** – selected by Herrera during his visit to Israel, have political connotations. Efrat is showing four works from his "Stamps" series, some of which were shown at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art a year ago. The works are enlargements of fictitious stamps representing different countries (such as Somalia and Israel), depicting parts of children's bodies engaged in "dangerous games."

Reeb is exhibiting a series of works dealing with censorship. Raz is presenting "On the Road to Efrat" ("Baderekh le'Efrat") – two huge photographs of the tunnels that lead from Jerusalem to Gush Etzion and Hebron.

Sonnenschein is showing an amusing and cynical work that pokes fun at the art world, particularly in terms of the context in which it is exhibited. He has constructed a room that resembles a stage where visitors to the biennial are awarded the prize for outstanding artist by the fictitious "Channel 500." The first visitors who entered the exhibition space received a certificate of merit, along with a hug and a kiss.

Sonnenschein: "Everything that happens in the art world is fictitious. The emperor is naked and I'm the head tailor." He stresses that he did not have Cuba specifically in mind when he came up with the work conceptually. After spending two weeks in Cuba, what were the Israeli artists' impressions?

Guy Raz: "Seeing an impoverished nation like Cuba successfully mount a biennial exhibition of this size, with a catalog and symposium – granted, with generous outside assistance - shows that with a little vision and a lot of effort and faith and professional people, goals can be realized."

The works that Raz is showing tie into the communication theme somewhat indirectly: "In the Israeli context, the tunnels and bypass roads epitomize the idea of avoidance of contact. The Israeli highway hewn into the mountain beneath the Palestinian village only heightens the question of communication. The photos appeared on the official Cuban television channel and I presume that, in Cuba, they understand the political and metaphorical meaning of tunnels and bridges."

No Castro, Please

"It's interesting to visit a country with such a defined ideology," says David Reeb. "Besides the vast difference, I also found strong parallels to Israel. The biennial interested me particularly in terms of how the Cuban artists cope with the special conditions of the place."

Reeb had an opportunity to directly experience the ideology of his hosts. After being officially invited to participate, he created a series of works that related to the exhibition's theme and sent photographs of them to Cuba. The series, "Hand Made in Israel," comprises 12 paintings of media icons and symbols, including, among other things, the CNN logo, an airplane, the Tel Aviv coastline, the Western Wall, a camel, Jesus on the cross, and even a portrait of Fidel Castro in profile.

Reeb was asked by the organizers to make a "small concession" and to substitute another "symbol" for the painting of Fidel. Naturally, Reeb refused to remove Fidel from the series, and instead decided not to submit it in its entirety. After some agonizing, he sent a new series of works instead – consisting entirely of text inscribed on canvas – relating to extreme cases of censorship in South Africa and Czechoslovakia.

The series of new paintings was ironically titled "On Censorship in Other Places." Amazingly, the Cubans did not censor any of the paintings in the new series, though they appear in the catalog under the name, "Untitled."

Reeb's story is understandable in light of the political sensitivity arising from Israel's first participation in the event. "It's not a good idea to stir up too much attention in such a sensitive period," explains Herrera apologetically.

"The theme of the work is the manipulation of information," says Reeb, adding in regard to the fact that the name of the work was deleted: "I deliberately did not tell them of the work's title because I anticipated that it might prevent the work from being shown."

Artistically, the general quality of the biennial is somewhat mediocre overall; the gap between the major, established artists and the younger ones who are just starting out is quite noticeable.

One work that stands out is the sardonic installation entitled, "Café Internet Tercer Mundo" ("Third World Internet Cafe") by the young Cuban artist, **Abel Barroso**. With just the right touch, Barroso has transformed the cafeteria of the Castillo del Morro (which was built as a defensive fortress and formerly served as a prison) into an Internet cafe of the kind found in every tourist city. He has furnished the cafeteria with office equipment, a fax machine, a portable computer, a camera and a printer. But, on closer inspection, one realizes that all of these technological products are really made of wood and papier-mache.

Near the Castillo del Morro, a number of exhibits are being shown in the 18th-century fortress named for San Carlos de la Cabana. Here, too, a few artists have managed to circumvent the strictures of censorship to say something unique. One such artist is **Annette Messager** of France. She chose the northernmost room of the fortress, from which one can look out on the cannon that defended the island in the 18th century, as well as on a 20th-century Russian missile. The floor installation she created is made of cannonballs that were formerly scattered about the fortress area and from stuffed birds lent by a museum of natural history. The menacing black cannonballs appear to be transformed into a playground for the winged specimens, which have

been dressed by the artist in specially sewn masks and clothing.

Neon and Nudity

Luis Gomez also has an excellent work – a spectacular neon installation – at the Wifredo Lam Museum. And William Kentridge, a well-known South African artist, presents a stimulating animated film entitled "Procession."

Another impressive work is the sound installation entitled "Witness" by British artist **Susan Hiller**; it was previously exhibited in London. Hiller has designed a dark room in which hundreds of earphones hang by plastic threads from the ceiling at various heights. Upon entering the room, the effect is akin to walking into a planetarium full of twinkling stars. A low, murmuring sound is heard. Put on a pair of the earphones and you'll hear eyewitnesses from different places in the world describing in one of 10 languages (including Hebrew) the moment at which they saw an unidentified flying object.

The promising Cuban artist **Tania Bruguera** has opted to present her performance in a vaulted space whose floor she has covered with sugar cane. Due to the absolute darkness, only two people are allowed to enter the performance space at one time. While wandering through the large, tunnel-like space, one gradually comes upon – from a distance of just a few centimeters – four naked men situated a little bit apart from each other; it's not quite clear whether they are engaged in scratching or stroking. The only source of light emanating from the vaulted ceiling was a television monitor on which a pastiche of propaganda films starring Castro - culled from the one and only channel in Cuba – continuously played.

Not surprisingly, the performance scheduled for the day after the opening was canceled "due to the male nudity," which most likely was another way of saying that someone wasn't too pleased about the use made of the propaganda segments.

Microphones as Metaphor

In Cuba, the word "censorship" can be somewhat flexible in meaning. There was one incident related to the **La Galeria DUPP**, a group of students who have worked with the artist and teacher **Rene Francisco** over the past year. They planned an outdoor project consisting mostly of sculptures made of old microphones to be installed on the wall along the Havana boardwalk, a main traffic artery. The argument cited in the rejection of the project was that the department in charge of preserving the city's appearance objected to it for aesthetic reasons. It's clear that someone higher up wasn't keen on the subversive metaphor.

In the end, the authorities agreed to have the microphones exhibited in the Castillo del Morro, an area visited only by tourists who come specifically to see the artwork. Despite all this, La Galeria DUPP was awarded the UNESCO prize, given for the first time this year to artists from this exhibition. The prestigious prize was shared by a trio of young and talented artists calling themselves "**Los Carpinteros**" (two months ago, they also took part in the "Havana Nagila" project in Tel Aviv).

The trio presented one of the more ambitious works on display. Next to a tourist restaurant on a site overlooking Havana from the opposite side of the bay, they built "The Transportable City" – 10 tents precisely modeled after various types of public buildings, such as a parliament building, a school, a hospital, a factory, a church, a lighthouse and a prison. This transient urban horizon makes an ironic statement about exile and wandering.

Of the five Arab artists participating in this event, four currently reside in Dubai and one hails from Egypt. Most prominent among them is **Youssef Dweik**, a Palestinian born in East Jerusalem (his name appears twice in the catalog, once under the heading "United Arab Emirates," and once under the heading "Palestine"). His complex and interesting paintings, which comprise a series entitled "Homage to the Homeland of Canaan," feature written motifs that appear to represent an ancient language; his style is somewhat reminiscent of the early works of Israeli painter Mordechai Ardon.

Vicenta, the Maid

In addition to the main biennial exhibitions, about 40 other exhibits have opened throughout the city. Among the most notable: a retrospective at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes of Cuban art from the 1960s to the 1990s; two shows by **Jean Michel Basquiat**; an exhibit in tribute to the Brazilian conceptual artist **Helio Oiticic**; an exhibit in memory of the young artist **Belkis Ayon**, who committed suicide a year ago; and an impressive solo exhibit by the successful Cuban artist, **Alexis Levia** ("**Kcho**").

Despite the abundance of official events that have been organized, the most powerful experiences are to be found at the unofficial sites, in the neighborhoods less familiar to tourists, in people's homes. In nearly every artist's home, some kind of exhibit or artistic event is going on these days. One particularly winning example is the show by seven artists at "Vicenta's House," a crumbling 19th-century villa which still retains a few remnants of its former glory. Vicenta, now a gaunt, 80-year-old black woman, worked for many years as a maid for Maria Teresa Alvarez, a rich and childless woman of Spanish origin. The lady of the house died shortly after the revolution and bequeathed the grand villa to Vicenta and her husband.

In those days, the fact that a maid had inherited her employer's fortune served the regime's ideology and thus she was not asked to share the property with others. Vicenta has been living in the house for close to 50 years, and has never done any renovations or made any repairs to preserve the structure. The tapestries covering the salon walls were hung there in honor of Maria Teresa's 1940 wedding. Vicenta's bedroom and the kitchen, in the rear of the house, have remained virtually unchanged since the time they were built 200 years ago.

The young Cuban artist **Angel Delgado** is exhibiting his work in the dining room that was adorned with a portrait of Che Guevera from back in the revolutionary days. Delgado once spent six months in jail for urinating on a newspaper that had Fidel's photo in it. His artwork is based on his memories from prison: The huge wooden table is arrayed with tin trays topped with daily prisoner rations carved out of soap. The day after the opening, an emissary of the regime who was not fond of the connection made between the hero of the revolution and the artist's political past, arrived on the scene. After a bit of negotiation, a compromise was reached – Che Guevera's portrait was taken down from the wall and the exhibit was allowed to remain open.

Cuba is a country full of paradoxes. Besides the big question of freedom of expression, there are some more mundane problems that must be dealt with on a regular basis: How to construct exhibition rooms when the right kind of nails are not available, or, how to put on a video installation without electricity, not to mention any more advanced technology.

But, as always in Cuba, a disadvantage is somehow turned into an advantage. The great admiration and respect which inspire visitors witnessing the tremendous effort that went into mounting this event makes them willing to overlook the long lines, the disruptions, the dearth of information, and the sometimes deficient organization that are a part of it.

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