

The Miami Herald

the art of evolution

'UNBROKEN TIES' EXPLORES A CUBAN IDENTITY

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VISUAL ARTS



THE COLLECTOR: Curator Jorge H. Santis, at top with artist Carlos Belancourt's *Ciudad Mágica* (Magic City), has amassed a formidable collection of Cuban art for the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale. Below, he is with the mixed-media *Rosa náutica* (Nautical Compass) by Juan-Si.

The art of identity blurred by politics, exile

'UNBROKEN TIES,' FROM 14

ere and collectors. "Jorge was a gentleman. He got close to us, and he exhibited our work in Fort Lauderdale when no museum in Miami would do it," says Gustavo Acosta, who left Cuba in 1991 and lived in Mexico and Spain before moving to Miami in 1994. "Donating a work to him was a good way to introduce ourselves to the art scene, and Jorge staged good shows."

Acosta's oil on canvas, *Viendo morir y matando* (Watching Death and Killing), is a haunting tribute to survival — an image of the wing of the pigeon he killed in Spain to eat because he had no money.

Unbroken Ties showcases a fascinating assemblage of artists with riveting art and storied lives.

Some left Cuba as children, came of age in exile and developed careers in Miami, Atlanta, Chicago, New York. Some left Cuba at mid-career, as did most of the 1980s generation. Some are second-generation, born in the United States or Puerto Rico to at least one parent of Cuban heritage.

Some remain on the island. One, Kébo, who has a record of supporting the Cuban government, is considered the island's "official artist." The work produced by most of the others on the island can be interpreted as critical of the Cuban regime but also of U.S. policy toward Cuba.

"I tried to balance things out," says Santis, who left Cuba in 1963 and never returned. "It's not an easy show, but it has historical importance. Usually, you see one work here, one work there, or one show with one theme. This one tries to create a narrative using works of art. A Cuban will feel 'That's our history. Good or bad, it's our history.'"

The exhibition opens with a few paintings that reference the colonial period, most notably the spectacular wall-sized oil on canvas *Orilla* (Riverbank, 1995) by Tomás Sánchez. It depicts the lush Cuban landscape that colonial districts wrote about between the 15th and 18th centuries.

IF YOU GO

What: *Unbroken Ties: Discoveries in Cuban Art*

Where: Museum of Art, 1 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale

When: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, except Tuesdays through Aug. 31

Cost: \$10 adults, \$7 ages 6-17, seniors and military, free 4 to 7 p.m. Thursdays
Info: 954-525-5500 or www.moaf.org

Bedia, Gléris Novoa and Rubén Torres-Llorca. There's a seminal piece by Arturo Cuenca — *De la serie, Ciencia e Ideología (Ché)*, (From the series, *Of Science and Ideology, Ché*, 1988-91), a hand-colored photo montage that speaks volumes of the disdain that generation felt toward the revolution's icons and Ideology. The photo depicts the dilapidated scene from behind a billboard with Ché Guevara's image, and an exhortation for "the revolutionary" to be "an indefatigable worker."

CONTROVERSIAL VIDEO

Surely, one of the exhibit's most controversial pieces will be *Requiem*, a video created by Cuba-based José A. Toirac from images of the dead Guevara. Toirac torpously pans, inch by inch, Guevara's bullet-riddled body. The video is shown inside a mausoleum-type enclosure.

Toirac, whose work resides in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art, was awarded a residency at Arizona State University years ago. He defines himself as a "realist" who examines history and mythological revolutionary figures.

Not far from Toirac's piece is another poignant video, *José's Reunion* by Balton Rouge-born Lisandro López-Rey. The work chronicles the emotional meeting of a Miami exile and the daughter he had left behind in Cuba 38 years earlier. The daughter was 11 months old when José fled the island, and she is last



by Ernesto Pujol; memory and light boxes in which fading family photos, trinkets, jewelry and letters are stored, sometimes in drawers that can't quite accommodate their load.

The lightbox piece by Juan Carlos Ballester (*Untitled*, 1995) illuminates a letter from a grandmother who admonishes her exiled grandchild not to forget her or the mother he left behind.

Then, from Inside Cuba, Miguel Florido paints *En un rincón del corazón* (In a Corner of the Heart, 2002), a crumpled piece of paper covered with writing to a loved one far away, the letter's lines stricken through as if the writer had discarded it in the midst of the most intimate act of self-censorship.

Some works are unapologetic darts aimed at Fidel Castro. In the acrylic on canvas *El opresor* (The Oppressor, 1991), exiled artist Julio Antonio, who left Cuba in 1985, depicts a figure emitting a continuous, thorny loop that entraps figures who end up imprisoned in coffin-like

ganda purposes or that seemingly have benefited from his policies. The figure is giving Castro's falling image a final, deadly punch.

CRITICAL THEMES

Most of the artists from Cuba — including Ibrahim Miranda and Sandra Ramos, who have exhibited widely in Miami — deliver work that can be interpreted as politically critical.

In Miranda's *El Férretro* (The Coffin, 1991), a map of Cuba is covered by an ominous black tarp. Is it a coffin or a cocoon? Does it imply death or rebirth? Or is it a reference to the famous blackouts Cubans often endure?

In *La balza* (The Raft, 1998), Ramos draws the shape of the island with red logs, two oars facing south, a faded Cuban flag for a sail. The island/raft floats in the middle of shark-infested waters, which some viewers have interpreted as a reference to the U.S. embargo.

Cuban artists in exile also critical of the reality that surrounds them are represented by works

the Cuban Revolution were once embraced.

In one surreal historical photograph by Raúl Corrales, a bride in white marries a miliciano in fatigues and walks through a court of drawn guns spewing flowers. In Alejandro Aguilera's wood sculpture, two revolutionary figures appear to have saint-like qualities.

Surely, *Unbroken Ties* goes farther than most such exhibitions in the heavy-handedness of its political topics. But Santis asks: "How can you do a Cuban art show and not represent the politics? Everything Cuban is touched by politics."

Still, he has faced criticism. In Long Beach, some members of the museum's board thought the exhibit was too critical of the Cuban government. Now a South Florida, some early reaction has shifted the other way.

Two Miami artists, Attes Rodríguez and his wife Dora, whose works are in the show, canceled their appearances at a Friday media-preview press conference.