

SMALL ISLAND BIG ART

Collectors are opening their eyes—and wallets—to Cuba's new wave of talent.

BY JULIA COOKE

For collector Howard Farber, it was an e-mail from an art professional in Havana that sparked his curiosity. “I’d never received an e-mail from Cuba before,” he says, almost laughing at what was, back then, his incredulity. Contact came after a 2001 trip to Havana, organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which Farber took with his wife, Patricia.

He’d sworn not to buy anything, but began talking to artists, dealers and curators anyway. It was no surprise that he soon broke his promise with a small drawing by conceptual art duo Los Carpinteros.

He felt the calm that hits him after buying a good piece of artwork. It lasted for three weeks. “Then I got the bug, and started going crazy again,” he says. In the intervening years, Farber has built a collection of more than 100 seminal works by contemporary Cuban artists.

But he’s not the only prominent collector looking south of the Straits of Florida these days. Among those with burgeoning Cuban contemporary art collections are philanthropist Beth Rudin DeWoody and developer Craig Robins, to name just a few. As the international eye focuses on Cuba because of its current political

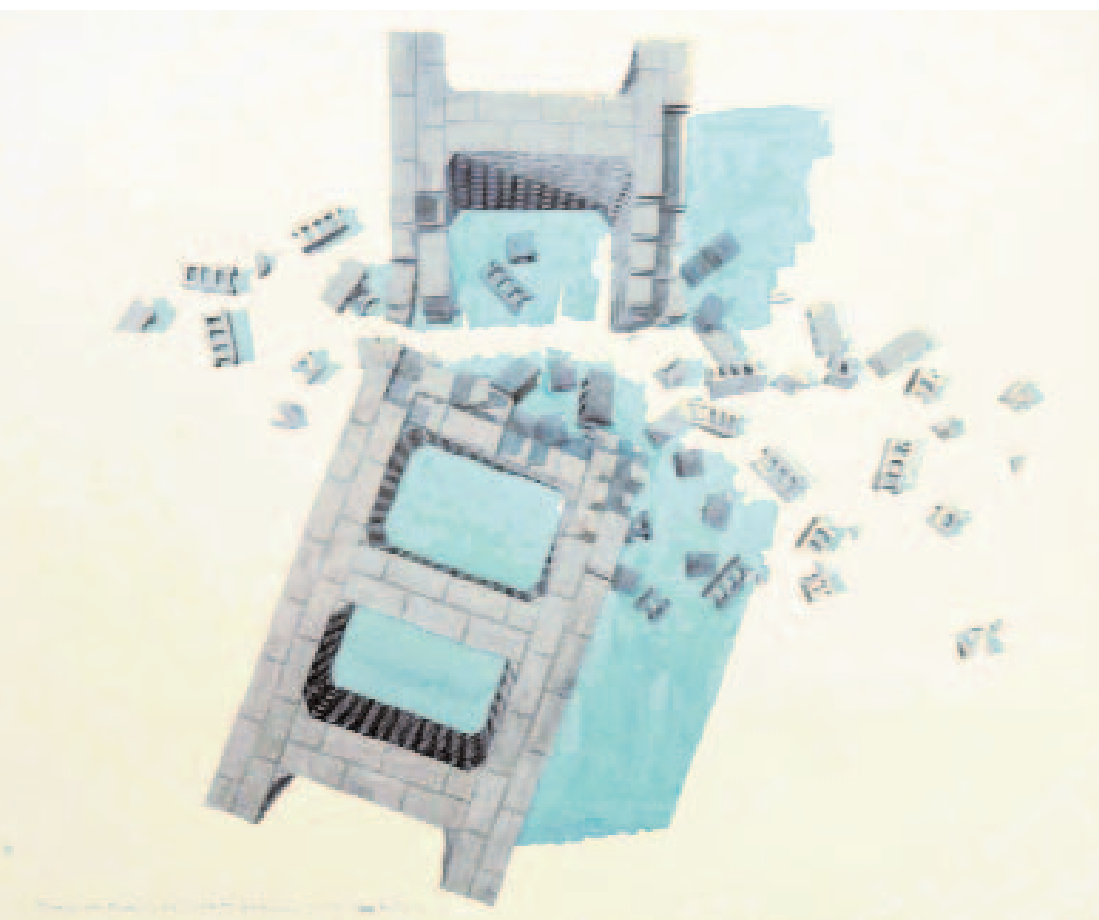
climate, its artwork—much of which combines technical savvy with charged, complex content that draws on drama surrounding life as a Cuban, on or off the island—is garnering attention from collectors, galleries, auction houses and museums alike. Ambitious shows, including last summer’s *Unbroken Ties: Dialogues in Cuban Art* at the Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale, as well as Cuban names on the rosters of top-notch galleries worldwide, seem to bolster their interest.

With the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control enforcing the trade and travel embargo since 1960, Americans are hard-pressed to find legal ways to head to the island of 11 million, almost 230 miles south of Miami. But art, unlike rum, tobacco or even tourism, is not classified as a commercial product. As a cultural product, artwork is legal for Americans to collect in Cuba, whether through international galleries or on the ground there. Some visitors wrangle Treasury Department licenses for humanitarian or religious work, while a handful of businesspeople fly down there through a loophole in the embargo that grants specific permits, on a case-by-case basis, for the trade of food and medicine.

Ben Rodriguez-Cubeñas, co-founder and chair of the charitable Cuban Artists Fund (CAF), built his collection through interna-



Top: Armando Marino's *La Patera*, 2002; below, *La Montaña Rusa*, 2008, by Los Carpinteros



Above: *Bloques de Bloques Parcialmente Destruído (Vista Aérea)*, 2008, by Los Carpinteros;
Opposite: Damian Aquiles' *Infinite Time, Infinite Color, Infinite Memory*, 2001

tional galleries, like Magnan Projects and the George Adams Gallery, and occasional humanitarian trips to Havana on behalf of CAF, which supports cultural exchanges and individual Cuban artists living in Cuba and abroad. He has bought work by primarily living artists, including Damian Aquiles, Yoan Capote, Iván Capote and Miami-based José Bedia, as well as what he calls the “forgotten generation:” artists who were born in Cuba but have resided elsewhere for the majority of their lives, such as Carmen Herrera, Agustín Fernández and Luis Cruz Azaceta. “If you can physically take it with you, it’s not hard,” Rodríguez-Cubeñas says. “It’s one of the few things you can bring back.”

But if a buyer can’t manage a trip to Havana to transport the work personally, or if the work is too large, says Farber, they often bounce to third countries before hitting their final destination—in his case, his Miami Beach or New York City homes. “These artworks travel more than I’ve ever traveled in my life,” he says.

Farber, a consummate collector who takes evident pride in beat-

ing other buyers to new work that moves him, spent the 1990s immersed in Chinese art, some of which he auctioned off for a hefty profit margin at Phillips de Pury in October 2007. The same impulse draws Farber to Cuban artwork: “You have to hunt for the works at this point because they’re not in the mainstream yet.” Farber tends to purchase one to three pieces of work per month, 99 percent of which he buys based on seeing a digital image. These days, he’s especially impressed by artists Carlos Estévez, Armando Mariño, Los Carpinteros, Pedro Álvarez and Carlos Garaicoa.

Cuba’s art scene combines first-class artistic training (Havana’s Instituto Superior de Artes ranks among the top art schools worldwide) with the idiosyncrasies of local life. “Cuban art has a high level of aesthetic and conceptual quality,” says Havana-born artist Marta María Pérez Bravo. Interest in Cuban art began to crescendo with the institution of the Havana Biennial in 1984. Since then, it’s maintained a steady, if low-volume, buzz, says Mexico-based Pérez Bravo, whose mystical, minimal photographs show recreations of Afro-Cuban religious traditions and symbols.

Among those idiosyncrasies is the fact that, while the Havana art scene brims with talent, sophistication and thoughtful reflections on Cuban life, communication between Cuba and the rest of the world is complicated at best. Thorns are even larger when dealing with the United States. When New York gallerist Sean Kelly began working with Marco Castillo and Dagoberto Rodríguez of Los Carpinteros, who turn unexpected materials into clever sculptures and drawings about Cuban sociopolitical realities, he sought and received a Treasury Department license that allows him and his employees working on shows with the artists to visit Cuba, says Kelly. But Los Carpinteros—who have had shows and residencies at museums and galleries around the globe—were not granted visas to go to New York to mount or attend their solo show at Kelly’s gallery in March. The works in the well-received show were manufactured in Florida and New York.

“The biggest disappointment is that the artists themselves have never seen some of their work. It was a very bittersweet day when we had their opening and they couldn’t be here,” Kelly says.

With an uncertain future clouding both political and art-market predictions, collectors of new Cuban art are gambling on an unproven entity. But one thing is certain: The drama and allure that have hovered around Cuba since before Fidel Castro’s 1959 revolution inspire copious amounts of creative expression. Odds are, that’s not going to change anytime soon. **AB**

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