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"The Cuban Art Revolution"

By: Kelly Crow

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Collectors are betting the next hot art hub will be an island most Americans still can't visit. Now, some U.S. art lovers are finding legal ways into Cuba to shop for works -- before the market gets too crowded.

John Crago, an agricultural exporter from Colorado, took a business trip to Cuba last spring. He came back with 60 paintings, from island landscapes to abstract works, rolled up in his carry-on luggage.

With art from Asia and Russia in demand, some in the art world are betting on Cuba to be the next hot corner of the market. Prices for Cuban art are climbing at galleries and auction houses, and major museums are adding to their Cuban collections. In May, Sotheby's broke the auction record for a Cuban work when it sold Mario Carreño's modernist painting "Danza Afro-Cubana" for \$2.6 million, triple its high estimate.



Cuba Avant Garde Inc. CHINA IMAGE  
Like Piranesi's etchings of 18th-century Rome, Mr. Garacoia's photographs of Havana's crumbling architecture never lapse into nostalgia.

Now, with a new Cuban president in power and some hope emerging for looser travel and trade restrictions between the U.S. and Cuba, American collectors and art investors are moving quickly to tap into the market. Some are getting into Cuba by setting up humanitarian missions and scouting art while they're there. Others are ordering works from Cuba based on email images and having them shipped.

The collectors are taking advantage of a little-known exception to the U.S. trade embargo with Cuba: It is legal for Americans to buy Cuban art. Unlike cigars or rum, which are considered commercial products, the U.S. government classifies Cuban artworks as cultural assets, and Americans can bring them into the U.S.

Getting into Cuba to buy the art is a trickier proposition. The U.S. trade embargo, in place since shortly after Fidel Castro's 1959 communist revolution, has severely limited visits to the island by American art buyers.

The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control says it gives out only about 30 travel licenses a year to Americans who ask to travel to Cuba to scout for "informational materials" like art. Typically they are curators or art dealers.

Other collectors are taking advantage of legal loopholes to get into Cuba to shop for art. The Treasury Department, for instance, gives out travel licenses to Americans who pledge to do humanitarian, scholarly or religious work in Cuba.



Percy Steinhart, a Palm Beach, Fla., maker of luxury tuxedo slippers, created a one-man foundation a few years ago, securing a humanitarian license to deliver gym clothes and dress shoes to disabled Cuban children. But he also used the trip to visit the studio of Kcho, one of Cuba's most popular artists, and paid \$3,000 for a pair of the artist's drawings, including one showing people using stilts shaped like oars to wade into the sea.

Ben Rodriguez-Cubeñas, a New York collector, helped form a charitable group called the Cuban Artists Fund in 1998, which allows him to visit Cuba about once a year. He buys several works per trip. "It's the forbidden fruit," he says.

Mr. Crago, who takes licensed agricultural trips to Cuba, has bought 130 works of art, paying anywhere from about \$300 for a dreamy landscape by a lesser-known artist such as Danya Diaz to \$30,000 for a modernist abstract painting by Aguedo Alonso, a Cuban art star.

A spokesman for the U.S. Treasury Department says such moves may "seem contrary to the spirit of the rules" but are nevertheless legal.

Even those who gain illegal access to Cuba by flying first to Canada or Caribbean islands and then booking a flight to Havana using a Cuban or Mexican airline -- a practice that can carry a fine of \$15,000 to \$65,000 -- can legally buy artworks once there, says Michael Krinsky, a New York lawyer who specializes in art and embargo law.

Market watchers expect American demand for Cuban art to surge if travel or trade restrictions are loosened through diplomatic talks between Cuba's new president, Raul Castro, and the next U.S. president. The likelihood of that scenario could depend on who is elected to the U.S. presidency in November. Last month at a debate, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama said that if elected, he would meet Mr. Castro "without preconditions," though he would first seek "preparations," including progress in Cuba on human rights. Sen. Hillary Clinton said at the debate that she would push for reform in Cuba but only meet with Mr. Castro if there were evidence of changes there. Republican Sen. John McCain has consistently said that he wouldn't hold diplomatic talks with Mr. Castro.

Cuban art embodies a pluralistic mix of Spanish, African, and Caribbean influences and motifs. Wifredo Lam, who died in 1982, is considered Cuba's Picasso, and Cuba's current contemporary art stars include Kcho, Manuel Mendive and the art duo Los Carpinteros. These artists tend to favor found objects like weathered woods and scrap metals. Cuban art has long addressed themes specific to the island, such as isolation and the sea: Rafts, towers and oars are frequent symbols. Lately more of the art has also tried to address global concerns like immigration and the economy. Photographer Juan Pablo Ballester, now living in Spain, hires porn actors to pose in Catalanian police uniforms as a sly political critique.

In Havana, artists must give up to half their sales to the government and must gain approval to travel or show anywhere off the island. A smattering of state-owned commercial galleries across Cuba sell to tourists. Some of Havana's top dealers also show at art fairs in Paris and Germany.

Cuba began trying to differentiate its art market from the Latin American pack as early as the 1980s, with a biennial in Havana that drew curators and collectors from around the world. These exhibitions -- now typically held every two to three years as government funds permit -- have nurtured ties

between Cuban artists and galleries worldwide, including in the U.S. In New York, Tomás Sánchez's scenic paintings now sell for up to \$700,000, double his asking price five years ago, according to his dealer at Manhattan's Marlborough Gallery.

Works by Cuban artists aren't necessarily less expensive in Havana than in New York or London. With international interest in Cuban art on the rise, Cuban galleries now charge international prices, and many insist on payment in euros.

But collectors who meet and form relationships with artists in Cuba may get a small discount and are likely to get first dibs on the best new work -- before it reaches galleries in Europe or New York. This type of access is particularly valuable for Americans competing with European and Latin American collectors who have been coming and going freely in Cuba for years. Cuban dealers say that Americans now make up more than a third of their buyers; some dealers put the figure as high as 80%. The U.S. government generally does not allow Havana-based artists to visit America.

Travelers hoping to take artwork home from Cuba must bring it to Cuba's Ministry of Culture, along with a small payment and a letter from the artist or gallery attesting that the work isn't stolen or wanted by any Cuban museums. Ministry workers then issue a letter of approval allowing the work to leave. Collectors say Cuban customs officials at the airport invariably ask to see these letters and will confiscate any undocumented artworks; customs officials on the U.S. side rarely ask.

Not everything gets out. Clyde Hensley, a Florida art dealer, says two years ago he tried to bring back a painting by the artist Quiala from eastern Cuba depicting a Chinese rice cooker with wings descending onto a Cuban landscape -- at a time when the Chinese were boosting their investments in Cuba. He was denied a letter of approval. Ultimately, he returned the painting to the artist, who got the necessary approvals from the ministry's branch office in Guantanamo and sent it along with a relative who had permission to visit family in Florida.

Prominent American collectors of Cuban art include software developer Peter Norton, philanthropist Beth Rudin DeWoody, developer Craig Robins and Howard Farber, a Miami collector. Mr. Farber made his fortune as co-owner of the Video Shack chain. In the 1990s, he spent \$2 million scouring China and buying up canvases by contemporary artists such as Fang Lijun, Wang Guangyi and Cai Guo Qiang for as little as \$10,000 apiece. Last October, he auctioned off 45 works at Phillips de Pury for \$20 million. British collector Charles Saatchi was among the buyers.

Now, Mr. Farber is buying up to three Cuban works a month, priced anywhere from \$7,500 to \$140,000. The catalyst, he says, was a "magical" visit he made to Havana seven years ago on a cultural tour led by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He says he sees parallels between the rebellious art made in China following the Tiananmen Square protests and art made during pivotal periods in Cuba's revolutionary history.

Unable to get permission to return to Cuba, Mr. Farber says he has largely relied on email to cultivate a network of artists and dealers in Havana who send him digital images of art for sale. He says the cost to ship one sculpture from Cuba to Miami can top \$10,000 because the seller often needs to send the work on a circuitous route that might include stops in Nicaragua and London before reaching him in Florida. Mr. Farber says he has never found a cargo company that would agree to ship a large sculpture directly from Havana to Miami.

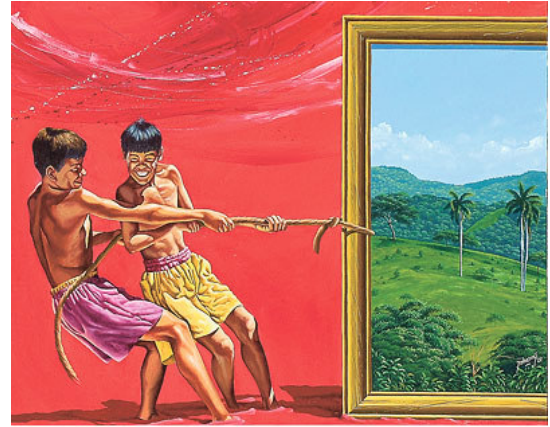
Art experts are still divided over Cuba's market potential. Carmen Melian, Sotheby's director of Latin American art, says that the markets for China, India and Russia benefit from the vast population and recent wealth creation in those countries. By contrast, Cuba's wealthy diaspora established itself in Miami decades ago, and its seasoned collectors are just as likely to buy contemporary stars like Richard Prince as Cuban works, Ms. Melian says. Some Cuban-Americans are also reluctant to buy works by artists who stayed in Havana during Castro's tenure, though Miami private dealer Jose Alonso says that if the Cuban art market blossoms, collectors won't worry about Castro ties.

Yoan Capote, a popular 31-year-old artist living in Havana, came of age during what Cubans call the "Special Period" of economic crisis in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recently, his conceptual sculptures have won attention from dealers in the U.S. and, in 2006, a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. For one piece, titled "Nostalgia," he built a brick wall inside a suitcase.

He first met American buyers through a string of museum-led tours during a spell in the late 1990s when the U.S. travel restrictions were loosened, a trend that ended sharply after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Now, he says, Americans are beginning to trickle into his studio again, and he and his peers are "preparing now for a time when Cuba will change."

For him, that means strengthening ties with the local, government-owned Galeria Habana, which until recently he overlooked in favor of his New York and European dealers when selling major works. His local dealer Luis Miret last month found an American buyer who paid about \$44,000 for "The Island," a seascape he made by weaving together thousands of bloodied fishhooks. He says the city's two other top galleries are also positioning themselves to handle an influx of high-end visitors.

"Maybe we'll lose our exoticism," he adds, "but I think we can develop another kind of attraction."



Arte de Cuba

Quiala, 'Cambio de Color' (2001)