



# ART REVIEW: Photography from Cuba Looks Behind the 90-Mile Stare

August 26, 2015

by James Croak

The new Southampton Arts Center has eclipsed other regional institutions with a perfectly timed and involving exhibit of Cuban photographs and political posters taken and printed over the past 65 years on the island 90 miles south of Florida. The show was curated by the team of Cubano art historian and professor Iliana Cepero and Pauline Vermare from New York's International Center for Photography, and they truly show their stuff.

For those who have had enough gaudy landscapes and derivative pop art for one season, here is the antidote: a bewildering array of political fantasy that destroyed an island nation, turning a Shangri-La of wealth and developed culture into a dystopia of poverty and fascism. "iCuba, Cuba! 65 Years of Photography," at the former site of the Parrish Art Museum on Jobs Lane, is a place to linger, examining and reflecting on compelling ideas that went way wrong.

The United States opened its embassy in Cuba last week for the first time in 54 years, hence SAC's perfect timing. The travel embargo for U.S. citizens is mostly lifted and savants are heading there in droves to view this strange potpourri of fossil Marxism and superb music and cuisine set against peeling paint and a 1950s time-capsule American car show. Most are hoping to get there before tourist money and capitalism return the island to the vacation paradise it once was, which seems inevitable.

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Unidentified photographer, Hollywood actors Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Taylor at the Sloppy Joe's bar, Havana, 1950s. Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center and the International Center for Photography.

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The present situation is well known: 56 years after a coup d'état replaced another coup d'état with the stated purpose of redistributing wealth evenly among the citizens, Cubanos now earn about \$20 a month, the lowest wages recorded anywhere. The country is a visual wreck of untended buildings and what we would consider classic cars left behind by American ex-pats who fled the revolution led by Fidel Castro. Still crawling out of the cracks is a fascist government that will "disappear" anyone who disagrees with the tenets of the worker's paradise.

We saw this last May when the government sponsored an art fair dubbed Havana Biennial and

twice arrested a participating artist, Tania Bruguera, for her marathon public reading of Hannah Arendt's seminal, "The Origins of Totalitarianism" (1951). Arendt argues that the sole purpose of controlled and central planning is to terrorize and repress the citizens. Bruguera had lived in Cuba all of her life, and knew where the totalitarians lived as well.

"iCuba, Cuba! 65 Years of Photography" contains more than 100 black and white and some color photographs by more than 20 mostly Cuban photographers. They document the economic slide, government violence and Marxism that destroyed this country. This is by no means an exhaustive survey of the mayhem but, even though it is somewhat truncated, by mounting photos along with the blunt and eerie political posters the curators have given visitors a window into a neighbor's world.



"Save Water is a Social Duty" Cuban Poster. Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center and the International Center for Photography.

Film and cameras were reportedly restricted to approved news outlets, which means some of the more revealing photos would likely have endangered the photographer. Either that or the comrades couldn't grasp the irony of playing golf in battle fatigues.



Che Guevara and Fidel Castro playing golf. Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center and the International Center for Photography.

Most of the show photographs are photojournalism and street photography whose value lies in the seminal event being recorded, such as Burt Glinn's *Castro speaks in Santa Clara*, depicting Castro speaking on stage bristling with rifles brandished by grim faced soldiers.



Burt Glinn, Castro speaks in Santa Clara, January 5, 1959. Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center and the International Center for Photography.

There are some fine art entries as well. In these, the value lies in the image's ability to summarize an interior or exterior condition. Many of these images seem to dream of a migration to the comparatively vast wealth and freedom to the North.

In Gilda Perez's untitled photograph, a 1948 Nash Ambassador is parked in front of a sign that inexplicably says "America." The '40s car is missing parts and the sign is in modernist font from the '50s; one only can wonder why the government was so inept that none of this was replaced or updated. It is as if a warm and vibrant population moved into an abandoned city.



Gilda Perez, Untitled, from the series La Habana, 1988. Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center and the International Center for Photography.

Even more pointed is Gory's photograph of a spalled concrete stairway leading down to an open sea. Thousands of Cubans are intercepted by the U.S. Coast Guard each year in rickety boats and anything else that will float, desperately trying to navigate 90 miles to freedom. This photograph says it all, the promise along with the fear of crossing the Straits of Florida to a better life.



Gory (Rogelio López Marín), from the series Es sólo agua en la lágrima de un extraño (It's only water in the teardrop of a stranger), 1986. Courtesy of Southampton Arts Center and the International Center for Photography.

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**BASIC FACTS:** "¡Cuba, Cuba! 65 Years of Photography," August 13 to September 7, 2015, at Southampton Arts Center, 25 Jobs Lane, Southampton, NY 11968. [www.southamptoncenter.org](http://www.southamptoncenter.org)

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