

Exhibit to showcase 24 Cuban artists

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Twenty-four artists, mostly young, with a compelling interest in social issues, an understanding of how art influences perception and a commitment to it as a vehicle of change.

If that sounds like a recipe for dynamic, unsettling, cutting-edge work, you would not be mistaken.

Opening Friday at the City Gallery at Waterfront Park and running through March 28, the touring exhibition "Polaridad Complementaria: Recent Works From Cuba" serves to introduce North America to a new generation of Cuban artists whose impact already is being felt.

"The exhibition is composed largely of recent works, much of it having been shown at the Havana Biennial Art Exhibition in 2009," says Charleston native David Furchgott, president of Washington, D.C.-based International Arts & Artists, which develops and circulates fine art exhibitions to institutions throughout the U.S. and abroad.

Curated by the Centro de Arte Contemporaneo Wifredo Lam, Havana, and mounted by IAA, the exhibit showcases the work of two dozen of the island's established and rising artistic talents. It features more than 40 works of painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, video and installation art that underscore "the serious aesthetic and conceptual concerns that characterizes Cuban art today."

"These artists are not all accessible to audiences in the United States," says Furchgott. "North Americans are not always aware of this contemporary work, as most of it has not been circulated here. To be able to see an exhibition of current work of this magnitude is remarkable. Some of these artists have phenomenal reputations in other parts of the world but are little known in the U.S. One of the illusions we have here is that just because we have imposed an embargo on Cuba, everyone else has, too."

Apart from garnering international recognition, many of the artists have participated in fairs and biennials abroad. All have shown their work in Europe and Latin America and have been featured in various editions of the Havana Biennial. Among their number, Rene Pena, Abel Barroso, Aimee Garcia, Yoan Capote, Eduardo Ponjuan, Lazaro Saavedra, Sandra Ramos and Roberto Fabelo also have exhibited in the United States.

Often compared to American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe with regard to the use of light, Pena explores "the relationship between individuals within society and the struggle for their own identity."

Employing wood as a medium, Barroso carves three-dimensional pieces while using varied printing methods to "create a conversation about technology and the Third World."

For his part, Duvier del Dago melds drawing with handmade 3-D designs "examining the unattainable," whether in the realms of the material or idealized.

Together, working in diverse media and exploring multiple themes, they and their compatriots forge a narrative of contemporary Cuba. Through this exhibit, they also attempt to open a gateway for dialogue and cultural exchange between Cuba and the United States.

IAA was established to help facilitate such purposes.

Founded by Furchgott, son of Marcelle and the late Max Furchgott of Charleston, IAA is a nonprofit arts service organization "dedicated to increasing cross-cultural understanding and exposure to the arts internationally, through exhibitions, programs and services to artists, arts institutions and the public."

IAA's exhibitions most often are commissioned in whole or in part by museums and cultural organizations. Its inaugural exhibition was held here in 1996 during the Spoleto Festival USA.

Furchgott notes that the idea of bringing the exhibition to the U.S. originated in Charleston.

"We had hoped to bring this exhibit to Charleston at the beginning of last year but could not get everything in order in time," he says. "In fact, the idea on the part of Ellen Dressler Moryl, who I've known for years, and the city's Office of Cultural Affairs, was to have had the exhibition open in Charleston."

Serving as co-curators of "Polaridad Complementaria" are Margarita Sanchez Prieto, curator, researcher and art critic at Centro de Arte Contemporaneo Wifredo Lam in Havana, and Jorge Fernandez Torres, director of the Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Centre and curator and art critic of the Havana Biennial.

The former is a recipient of the National Prize of Curatorship at the 2000 Havana Biennial and has curated various exhibitions while lecturing extensively on Cuban and Latin American art throughout South America, Europe and Canada.

The latter, also a professor of contemporary art at the Higher Institute of Arts, has curated more than 15 major exhibitions in Cuba, Spain, and Central and South America and was a member of the Commission for Cuban Cultural Development of UNESCO in 1997.

Both have authored respected texts on Cuban art.

As to the literal meaning of the exhibition's title, Furchgott says he will leave that for the audience to interpret.

"The idea is that it can be interpreted in several ways, but is 'complementary' in the sense that things can be viewed both in terms of the way we feel about Cuba and the way the artists and people of Cuba see things."

Following its Charleston run, the exhibition travels to the Housatonic Museum of Art in Bridgeport, Conn., where it will open Aug. 15.