

Quiet Subversion

Contemporary Cuban art comes to the Sonoma County Museum

By Gretchen Giles

Cuba is in the air. The island nation may be experiencing a mellowing phase—at least in regards to its relationship with America. During his presidential campaign, Mr. Obama promised to meet with Cuban president Raúl Castro, and there is a sense that the possibility once again exists to match the island with the world.

A small slice of that promise laps up against North Bay shores when the Sonoma County Museum opens a provocative new exhibit of contemporary Cuban art on June 5 with "Polaridad Complementaria: Recent Works from Cuba." Part of a traveling exhibit, "Polaridad" comprises some 60 pieces in all media from an elite group of 24 mid-career Cuban artists.

Cuban-born photographer Javier Machado, now living in Oakland, gets a mini-retrospective of his own, titled "Optic Fiber," in the museum's upstairs gallery, and the institution fulfills its mandate for a local historical viewpoint with "Red Sonoma," a look at communism's past in the North Bay.

Former Cuban president Fidel Castro had an unlikely affinity for the arts. As a result, Cuban children who show early talent are shunted out of pure academic practice into a field where they might more naturally excel. The government sponsors art galleries and, in a largely successful attempt to bring the world to it, Cuba now produces a widely hailed biennial exhibit every two to three years.

Sonoma County Museum education director Jennifer Bethke helped to organize the touring show's stop in Santa Rosa. "You can be supported by the state if you're doing state-friendly art, and not many of these artists are," she explains. "It's not unusual for them to be jailed for short periods of time. In the underground economy, now that Cuba is on the international art market map, it's possible for them to make a living."

Influenced by Spanish, African and Caribbean cultures and motifs, Cuban artists often reflect the nation's international isolation and the constant presence of the ocean. The nearness of America's vast capitalistic riches and its ancillary indifference figure largely. After the Soviet Union began its collapse in 1991, Cuba lost its super-power support and entered what the country euphemistically calls its "special period." Most of the young artists in the "Polaridad" show came of age during this time, and their work is emphatically marked by it.

"This is a generation turning their eyes to the international art world and making criticism of the government, though not across the board, and that's an interesting part of the story," Bethke says. "It's a complicated and interesting ambiguity. There is this pervading sense that this was an opportunity lost or squandered after the revolution, once things turned to a Soviet-style dictatorship."

Machado made his name doing black-and-white street photography in Cuba. Once ensconced in the Bay Area, Machado continued his work in black and white—originally chosen because it's a fairly inexpensive medium—moving into studio portraiture, creating darkly illuminated portraits in which he consciously chooses to emulate Rembrandt's use of light and shadow to limn the images, many of them self-portraits in a variety of masks and costumes, that examine how and where one fits into the world.

"His newest works are these large-scale portraits that are essentially about Cuban identity, Cuban-American identity," Bethke says. "It's an interesting network of issues, as he transitions to being more of an American and less of a Cuban."

Other artists in the show include rapidly rising stars Yoan Capote, René Peña, Abel Barroso and Aimeé Garcia. "In addition to all the political stuff, it's just interesting art," Bethke says of the exhibit. "It's a show that resonates on two levels: the fascinating political questions, freedom of expression, socio-political questions; on the other hand, it's just really fabulous contemporary art."

'Polaridad Complementaria,' 'Optic Fiber' and 'Red Sonoma' open with a public reception on Friday, June 4, from 5pm to 7pm at the Sonoma County Museum. 425 Seventh St., Santa Rosa. 707.579.1500.