



HAVANA TO HOUSTON

A political thaw brings an artistic spring as the MFA presents the largest Cuban art exhibit to hit the U.S. since 1944.

By Michele Meyer

Say adios, Utopia, and hello, Cuba, with the United States' largest exhibit of modern and contemporary Cuban art since 1944. The show, *Adiós Utopia: Dreams and Deceptions in Cuban Art Since 1950*, opens at The Museum of Fine Arts this month. It is one of only a few to ever appear in the United States, tapping into a country largely isolated after Fidel Castro's rise to power in 1959.

Thanks to a thaw in U.S.-Cuban relations, the carefully curated selection gives us a rare glimpse into Cuban culture from the past six decades. "Historically, this exhibit is very important, coming at a turning point in Cuban and U.S. relations," says Mari Carmen Ramírez, MFA's curator of Latin American Art. "The exhibit is extremely rich with exciting and innovative work that was being appreciated all over the world, but [had remained largely] unseen by American audiences."

Three years of diplomacy with authorities and artists enabled the MFA and Minneapolis' Walker Art Center to assemble paintings, sculptures, photography and video installations by more than 50 Cuban artists—four times more than at the 1944 Museum of

Gleixis Novoa, "Sin título, de la Etapa práctica [Untitled, from the Practical Stage]," previously shown in Miami



Raúl Martínez, "9 Repetitions of Fidel with a Microphone [9 Repetitions of Fidel with a Microphone]"

Modern Art show in New York.

"Getting art out of Cuba is not easy without even the basics, like crates, permits and finding planes big enough to transport it," says Ramírez, who's also director of MFA's International Center for the Arts of the Americas. "Our mission is to bring the best art from Latin American countries to the U.S., and we usually focus on things nobody has done before."

The exhibit, which runs through May 21, earns its name from the evolution of Cuba's modern and contemporary art since the Cuban revolution. "Though isolated on an island, artists knew everything happening in Europe and the U.S. and used it as context to address what was happening in Cuba. Their art reflects the story of their lives," Ramírez explains.

Abandoning representational works for line, form and geometry, post-World War II artists expressed "euphoria and hope of an ideal society at the beginning of the communist regime," Ramírez says. The

'60s-'80s became a golden age for posters, politically motivated but supporting the visual arts, in addition to film, dance and theater.

When the Soviet Union and its financial support of Cuba collapsed in 1991, "disillusionment and scarcity fueled creativity," Ramírez says. Artist Tania Bruguera's "Estadística," a huge Cuban flag made of bundles of friends' hair, is a primary example of this time. "Art became dark, but with humor and parody."

Not only that, but Cuban creativity traveled and influenced artists worldwide, thanks to nearly 3.5 million international visitors yearly, she says. In-the-know art dealers from around the world even attend the Biennial, a Havana art fair every other year. And now that United Airlines flies direct from Houston to Havana, local collectors can join them. "It's a smart move to collect Cuban art," Ramírez says. "The market is strong and will only go up in value." ■

See It For Yourself

Need proof Havana's hot? Chanel held its last resort womenswear show on the island. Be among the first Americans to visit via United Airlines' direct Houston-to-Havana flight. Here's where to go and what to do.

STAY Rihanna and Beyoncé have stayed at **Hotel Saratoga** (from \$506 per night, hotel-saratoga.com), known for its '30s glamour and pool with a view. During his visit, former President Obama checked into the 397-room **Meliá Habana** (from \$313 per night, melia.com), which boasts a cigar salon, tight security and easy airport access.

SEE MFA curator Mari Carmen Ramírez says **El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes** (bellasartes.cult.cu) is "a must-see for the best 19th and 20th century Cuban art."

DINE At-home restaurants—*paladares*—are popular. **La Guarida** (laguarida.com) has hosted Mick Jagger, Madonna and Houston art collector Rolando Maldonado. The Obamas enjoyed Cuban-Creole cuisine at **San Cristóbal** (lahabana.com/guide/san-cristobal).

BUY Check out artists' private studios for the best work. "Art must be stamped on the back and have an authentication letter, or you'll be charged taxes at customs," Maldonado says.

BRING Ample cash in euros is favored tender—"good art may cost \$500-\$10,000," says Maldonado—and bring bed linens. "You cannot expect to have basics you find in the U.S.," Ramírez says.

ARRANGE A TOUR For local tours, look to **Elias Events** (713.334.1800, eliasevents.com). Miami's **LAACS Travel** (305.751.2550, laacstravel.com) arranges small trips for art collectors, and **Ponant** (888.400.1082, ponant.com) offers posh eight-night luxury yacht cruises.



Ponant's yacht cruises tour Cuba in style.