

Cuba Part Two
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Word count 1174

The April/May trip to Cuba with Joe Scarpaci began as a dream of mine to share with other BRAA members. On departure day only four of the final travelers were from BRAA. However, the art theme for the itinerary never wavered and art was certainly what we got.

Little did we know during the planning stages that our dates, April 26-May 3, would put us there in the thick of the 13th Havana Bienal (biennial) featuring 300 artists all over the island. We found many small galleries as we strolled through old Havana and later Matanzas. We drove by large outdoor installations from a giant orange giraffe to magnificent light installations on the waterfront. We had a pre-arranged English-language docent tour through sections of the enormous and beautiful National Museum of Fine Art with Dr. Luz Merino of the Instituto de Diseño Industrial in Havana.

There was never a day without being exposed to art.

What made this trip extra special were the visits to private home galleries of several artists Joe personally knew. I am sure no other “docent” could have gotten us entry to these incredible locations.

Our first stop was the home/gallery/workshop of Remberto Ramirez, a sculptor, painter and silversmith - (www.remberamirez.com). As with all the homes we entered, the artist’s work was apparent from the moment we stepped inside. We walked through the small house to the garden and his workshop.

High walls surrounded us. Vines and flowers hung overhead. The small, organized space was maxed to the fullest for storage both on the patio and in his workshop. The only thing seeming out of place was a fishing pole stored on the front edge of a workshop shelf. Fishing is popular and necessary along the beautiful eight-mile seawall. A tiny, modern washing machine was tucked into a corner.

Remberto’s animated discussion of his art was translated by Joe. We were handed intricate pieces of handcrafted silver jewelry to examine. One of our travelers bought a piece. Remberto answered questions about his artwork, how he got materials, where his ideas come from, and the challenges of living in Cuba. In one room of their house hung a large American flag.

From there we travelled a short distance to the home of curator Victor Manuel Quijano, a man who spoke rapid fire English. As a curator of other people’s art, his home contained hundreds of canvases. A large quantity was stored in a space shared by their tiny kitchen and what appeared to be their business desk. (Only one home we entered had a lot of space.) This Vedado neighborhood was filled with small homes, some well maintained, some neglected. All had tall chain link fences, locked gates, beautiful greenery and exotic plants around them.

I never felt unsafe in Cuba. Why all the fences and locks? “Burglars,” said Joe.

Much of the art we saw was dark or anguished, perhaps a sign of years of turmoil under Communist rule. One piece I remember well in the curator’s home was about three feet square and covered in hundreds of fairly large nails and gray paint. It was so dark and hard-edged that I could only wonder who would buy it.

Finished at Victor's place, we said goodbye at the locked gate and walked across the street to one of the most beautiful home restaurants of our trip, L'Atelier. We enjoyed the view from the rooftop restaurant and its fascinating hanging sculpture featuring old manual typewriters.

The next day, we visited the most incredible artist of our trip. Estereo Segura's home/studio is in El Cerro, a borough of Havana once considered high class but now, according to Wikipedia, one of the poorest areas of the city. Estereo is considered the second most successful artist in Cuba and it only took seconds to understand why.

His success enabled him to purchase the hacienda style home from its original owners and rehabilitate the old structure. Once a larger summer home, lots had been sold off over the last century. It provided more than ample space for his large works, offered a heavily-fruited mango tree in the center, and allowed him to host two other artists. He spoke excellent English and had studied art in both Cuba and Europe. His unique business card says you can get his work at www.esteriostudio.com, but I have never been able to get the link to work. Something political going on here? His work is a large mix of 3D and 2D pieces, fascinating and imaginative, many with a political bent, an at least one creation was quite controversial.

Estereo's visiting artists work in 2D painting and in recycled and functional metal creations including a small helicopter on the front lawn of the house. As the artist sat in the pilot's seat and started the blades turning, several young boys ran to the fence to watch.

Our third day on the island was a busy one. We did a fascinating walking tour of old town Havana with Joe narrating into our portable headsets and toured the splendor of the National Museum of Fine Arts, founded in 1913 and containing Cuban art from colonial times to contemporary. In this modern museum, we were treated to a large piece by Estereo, confirming that visiting his personal space was, indeed, a real honor. Former curator of the museum, Luz Merino, PhD, was our excellent tour guide.

The next morning, we headed east out of Havana to the city of Matanzas. This hour-long drive let us see the changing country side and witness the many challenging variations of transport average Cubans use to get around. The various trucks and buses did the job but certainly not in comfort. The fancy old American car taxis famous in Havana city did not often appear in the countryside. Hitch-hikers solicit rides by waving both the more valuable CUC currency (premium) as well as the less alluring national peso (worth 95% less than CUCs).

Matanzas was a much smaller, picturesque town on the water. Our first stop was a wonderful artisan bookstore where a small group of people created beautiful books from scratch while sitting in an old open-air building that fronted a canal and plaza. Cubans call Matanzas both the Athens of Cuba (for its culture) and the Venice of Cuba (for its canals). I parted with \$60 American dollars to purchase a unique book about heritage. Nearby were two wonderful galleries and a giant metal giraffe in fluorescent orange. While I admired that, a nearly blind street kitten wrapped itself around my ankles. While we did see a fair number of street cats and dogs in both Matanzas and Havana, most of them seemed in decent health. We never saw an abundance of droppings from them. While the two cities were very old and obviously in need of care, we did not see much in the way of trash or smell bad odors.

There was always beauty to be found among the faded facades.

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