

Travel

Edited by Chris Moss
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Cuba without the clichés

Havana is the ultimate photogenic fantasia. On an insider tour **Claire Boobbyer** gets to witness the city's artistic soul

Things in cages rattle me, so when I was invited to see the captives, I braced myself for a gaggle of cooped-up wild animals. Instead, I found a room cluttered with jailed objects: an ancient cash till, old speakers and dozens of paper aeroplanes all imprisoned behind bars.

I was in the Havana home studio of Estereo Segura, one of Cuba's leading avant-garde artists. Keen to escape the Cuba clichés of classic cars, cigars and Buena Vista cover bands, I was visiting his place as part of an insider tour of artists' studios with Art-Havana.

Segura is one of several artists who will take part in this year's Havana Art Biennial (May 11-June 11), a jamboree celebrating Cuban and Latin American art. It also provides a snapshot of how the visual vocabulary of the Cuban capital is changing as art and installations colonise the city's streets, vast plazas, hip haunts and galleries.

The art fest is open to art-lovers, pros and tourists, and is gaining wider fame

each time round, as is Cuban art. After a 50-year absence, last year the Cubans returned to the Venice Biennale – the world's most famous international art festival – with their own pavilion. Cuban art is also notching up million-dollar price tags; a work by Wifredo Lam, a twentieth-century painter influenced by Afro-Cuban traditions, sold for US\$3 million at the 2010 Art Basel Miami Beach fair.

For this year's Havana art fair, a four-mile installation titled 'Behind the Wall' will occupy Havana's famed Malecón seawall-esplanade. Segura is billed to mount there his 'Homemade Submarines' (classic 1950s American cars fitted with wings) and also plans to hoist a huge fibreglass artwork above travellers in the international airport: 'Goodbye My Love' features three suspended large red planes with bulging cartoon hearts replacing the noses of the planes. Migration and exile are themes close to the hearts of Cuban contemporary artists. Leaving the

country legally requires jumping through dozens of bureaucratic hoops; leaving illegally still means braving the shark-infested Florida Straits to try to reach El Yuma in the USA.

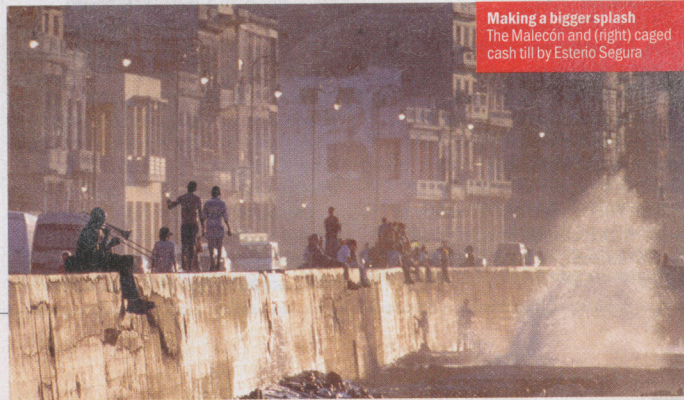
If you can't make it to the Havana Biennial, take one of the Art-Havana tours. I've been writing guides to Cuba for years but I learned more about the island's history and contemporary culture through its art and maverick creatives than I have done on numberless history-themed tours.

Raúl Castro Camacho, known as Memo, showed us canvases from his 'Between Walls' series in his small home studio in the leafy suburb of Vedado. 'The Winner' depicts a painted noughts-and-crosses game in progress, which Memo said alluded to the 1980 exodus when more than 100,000 Cubans legally left the country on boats via the port of Mariel, west of Havana. Since then, many escapees have been *balseiros*, fleeing Cuba on makeshift rafts. 'Migration is a game,' he explained. '[This piece] is about whether you succeed as a *balseiro* or not.'

In his airy Vedado studio apartment, Enrique Baster's dark oils ooze thickly across a painting about barriers within the island. Before 2008, Cubans were not allowed to stay in tourist hotels, a rule overturned by Fidel's brother, now President Raúl Castro.

Baster's large canvas is dominated by the iconic Hotel Nacional, perched on a bluff overlooking the Malecón. The strong cream lines of the hotel sit boldly above a dark, tangled forest sprouting multiple traffic lights flashing red and green signals. It's a powerful

Making a bigger splash
The Malecón and (right) caged cash till by Estereo Segura





Clockwise from left: Liudmila López Domínguez in her home studio; 'Orbis: Tribute to Walker Evans'; and two revolutionary-themed works by Toirac and Marrero



'1869-2006', a series of portraits of Cuba's presidents, at Havana's prestigious Museum of Fine Arts. Beside their portrait of Fidel hung an image of Raúl; beside Raúl was a solitary nail, sans portrait. 'The museum said no to the exhibition because Fidel and Raúl are eternal, immortal,' Toirac told us.

Undeterred, the couple proposed a second exhibition, portraits of the First Ladies of Cuba from 1902 to 1952. 'The museum didn't like this idea either because the government doesn't have First Ladies but everyone knows Fidel is married. It's "top secret", though.'

Their third proposal got the go-ahead from the Museum of Fine Arts. It was called 'Orbis: Tribute to Walker Evans', and paid homage to the American photographer who captured Havana in the 1930s. The artists made gold-leaf altar pieces of Evans's photographs on recycled scraps of old doors.

Not all Cuban artists are focused on the themes of revolution and twentieth-century redux. William Pérez and Marlys Fuego work out of a cavernous ex-government warehouse. The former's 'Cuban Landscape 2' is a synergetic metal model of two chunks of the island which, with the buzz of electricity, rock back and forth. The phallic palm tree trunks atop the two

land masses heave in sexual motion, as an electric motor's power courses through the work. Fuego, whose talent lies in erotic art, was preparing a collection of priapic soft-to-touch sculptures for 'Pink', an exhibition at Galeria 23 y 12, Vedado, in September. Velvet, petite and studded with sequins, the phallic creations and sex toys reminded me of pincushions – and a potential line in naughty cupcakes. And Liudmila López Domínguez, working out of her home studio on Centro's busy San Lázaro street, is fascinated by shoes. Bronze heels and a gorgeous shoe studded in sequins in the colours

representation of the tourist-resident apartheid that visitors rarely witness.

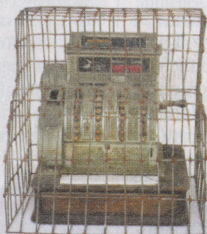
'The forest is difficult to go through,' Baster told us. 'The traffic lights are saying you can go; no, you can't go; yes, you can go... up to the Hotel Nacional.'

In 1961, Fidel Castro famously told writers and artists who had voiced fears about freedom of expression: 'Within the Revolution, everything goes; against the Revolution, nothing.' Censorship is rife in Cuba and one artist told us he had been asked to tone down his work – in particular pieces featuring Revolution imagery – before an exhibition was allowed to go ahead. But, while he altered his art to secure a show at one of Havana's galleries, others have evaded censorship storms by showing their work abroad.

The studio flat of José Angel Toirac and his wife Meira Marrero in tumbledown Centro Havana has the air of a shrine. Glancing around, I got the impression Toirac and Marrero were obsessed with the rebel leaders of Cuba's 1959 Revolution. The walls of their den are covered with paintings and photos of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in variations on the bearded-man theme. But Toirac and Marrero have been censored and their story is compelling.

The art duo had planned to showcase

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Migration and exile are themes close to the hearts of Cuban artists



CLAIRE BOOBYER/ESENCIA EXPERIENCES



of the Cuban flag decorate her apartment. Her plan for the Havana Biennial is to 'open' a shoe shop fitted with shelves laden with footwear art designed by fellow Cuban artists.

Havana is too often a subject for the voyeuristic gaze. But, as any visitor who looks beyond the rum, revelry and broken facades knows, life here is not just a pretty picture. As we stepped out of the studio at the end of our one-day tour and into the living canvas of the city, the artists' work could be connected with the reality. But, unlike the coffee-table clichés, it urged a deeper understanding of both the city's dynamism and its moral decrepitude.

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Eat For penthouse dining in 1950s retro surroundings, try the new **Café Laurent** (257 Calle M between Calles 19 and 21, Vedado; +53 7 831 2090), pictured, with its tender lamb and seafood dishes. **Atelier** (511 Calle 5 between Paseo and 2, Vedado; +53 7 836 2025) is in a beautiful renovated mansion.

Stay **Villa Porteria** (Calle 4 No 310 between Calles 13 and 15, Vedado; +53 7 833 8670) is stuffed with antiques alongside work from Cuba's leading modern artists. CUC\$40 per room per night.

Tours **Sussette Martinez Montero** (+53 7 267 7989/sussem@gmail.com) offers half-day and one-day tours: CUC\$35-CUC\$50 (excluding transport). UK tour firm **Esencia Experiences** (www.esenciaexperiences.com) organises an 11-day trip to the Havana Biennial. From £1,990 per person including flights. See also www.bienalhabana.cult.cu

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