



# Cuba Opens Up to the Art World

BY ANNE HORTON | APRIL 16, 2009



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Cuba's 10th **Havana Biennial** is an overwhelming, scattered affair. For starters, like the past several editions, it's not a biennial at all, but rather a triennial, though no one has bothered to update the name. Further complicating matters, the event is spread among several venues, exhibition hours are not always honored, and it's often hard to tell whether the many shows and performances taking place around the city are part of the official biennial or not. But there certainly is a lot to see.

The main exhibition opened March 27 and runs through April 20. Directed by **Rubén del Valle Lantarón**, head of Cuba's National Council of Fine Arts, the show was organized on a shoestring budget of \$500,000 by the [\(/artists/wifredo-lam-5857\)](#) **Wifredo Lam** [\(/artists/wifredo-lam-5857\)](#) **Center** and installed in the crumbling **San Carlos de la Cabaña** fortress overlooking the sea from the top of Havana's beautiful El Morro park.

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Featuring some 161 artists from 45 countries, the exhibition comprises mostly installations and, in keeping with cost restrictions, videos, which are inexpensive to ship. Two of the most popular pieces seem to be Zimbabwean artist **Dan Halpern's** *Space Invaders* (2008-09), an installation of the large red and white plastic zipper bags used to move large amounts of stuff on the cheap and colloquially referred to as "African bags"; and an installation by Colombian artist **Maria Elvira**

(<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Maria+Elvira>) from her 2007 “Serie Cultivos” of a wooden bed painted white and topped with growing grass where a blanket should be. Among the video offerings there are also two standouts: *Big Boss I Love You* by Chinese artist **Chen Xiaoyun** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/4427/chen-xiaoyun/>), who, together with a motley band and broken down instruments, plays the Chinese national anthem; and Korea-American artist **Yong Soon Min** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Yong+Soon+Min>)s video of a one-day road trip she took through North Korea in 1997, which features a voice-over reading from **T.S. Eliots** “Ash Wednesday.”

At the bottom of the mountain is the so-called Collateral Biennial, a subset of the main event, which appears to have even more appeal. By far the major attraction is “**Chelsea Visits Havana** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Chelsea+Visits+Havana>),” an exhibition of 33 artists at the **Museo de Bellas Artes**, curated by New York dealers **Alberto Magnan** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Alberto+Magnan>) and **Dara Metz** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Dara+Metz>). The show, which opened March 28, has been so well received that the BBC suggested it might occasion a thaw between the U.S. and Cuba. One of the strongest installations is *Free Station*, for which artists **Matthew Ritchie** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/154715/matthew-ritchie/>) and **James Case Leal** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=James+Case+Leal>), both from **Andrea Rosen Gallery**, beamed a faint signal showing urban catastrophes to televisions both inside and outside the museum. A humorous counterpart, via **Lehmann Maupin**, was a mixed-media portrait from **Tim Rollins** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/156588/tim-rollins/>) and K.O.Ss barnyard series presenting **John McCain** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=John+McCain>) as a puppy and **Sarah Palin** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Sarah+Palin>) as a moose.

The museum also has an exhibition of work by homegrown artists (</artists/wifredo-lam-5857>)**Wifredo Lam** (</artists/wifredo-lam-5857>), **Raoul Martinez** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/118212/raoul-martinez/>), and **Jose Bedia** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/5855/jose-bedia/>). Visitors to the museum are greeted by **Roberto Fabelo** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/58994/roberto-fabelo/>)s very off-putting giant cockroaches, which can be found scaling the museum and lying belly-up on the sidewalk.

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Get access to this story, and every story on any device with our Basic Digital subscription. Elsewhere on the streets of Havana, Cuban artist **Jose Emilio Fuentes Fonseca** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Jose+Emilio+Fuentes+Fonseca>)s delightful herd of life-size elephants made of metal plates could be found, captivating adults and children alike.

And then there were the happenings. On March 28, Cuban artist **Alexis Leyva Machado (Kcho)** invited many of his artist friends to join him at the Convent of St. Francis in the heart of Old Havana. Of his motivation, he explained: “I wanted to call these friends... who see art not just as something aesthetic, but as a weapon to achieve transformation, exchange, negotiation. I wanted to make each one a very special invitation letter, in their own language.... Any work begins with a first step and that was the first step.”

A few performances also stood out. Chinese artist **Cai Guo Qiang** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Cai+Guo+Qiang>), who presented fireworks for the Beijing Olympics last year, exploded a fishing boat, and New York-based **Duke Riley** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Duke+Riley>), after investigating the history of the Irish in Cuba, staged the island’s first St. Patrick’s Day parade (this was on March 19, before the biennial kicked off). In protest of New York’s policy of excluding gays from its traditional celebration of Irish pride, Riley arranged for **Ferrah**, Havana’s favorite transvestite, to lead it.

But arguably the most powerful event at the biennial was Cuban performance artist **Tania Bruguera** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Tania+Bruguera>)’s presentation at the (/artists/wifredo-lam-5857)**Wifredo Lam** (/artists/wifredo-lam-5857) Center on the evening of March 30. Standing behind a podium, she invited anyone in the standing-room only audience to come to the microphones and speak for one minute. Cubans rushed to the occasion, shouting “Libertad,” while actors placed doves on their shoulders (a reference to Castro’s 1959 victory speech when a bird landed on his shoulder, suggesting divinity to his supporters).

Indeed, “Libertad” seemed to be on the minds of many visitors to the biennial, particularly the countless Americans who, thanks to a recent easing of **Bush**-era restrictions by President **Obama**, swooped down on the island in great number — enjoying a warm reception from locals eager to know when the embargo will end.



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