

## CHAPTER 30

# Cuba's Globalized Art World and Evolving Art Market

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*Abstract: The contemporary Cuban art market was vibrant and thriving between 1997 the year of the V Bienal de La Habana through 2003, with 2000, the year of the Septima Bienal de La Habana, being the peak year. The American market, at that time probably the largest buyers of Cuban art, was greatly responsible for the enormous quantity of works sold. The number of museum and gallery exhibitions given the young talent of the '90s as well as the increasing number of Americans traveling to the island in those six years exposed Cuban artists to numerous collectors and curators. Ironically, the increase in demand by this time had an inverse effect in the overall quality and development of a lot of work which may have had an equally inverse effect on sales. The calamitous events of 9/11 also set in motion a reversal of the growing economic art boom resulting in diminished sales and American exhibitions with the nadir coming when the U.S. government virtually eliminated all cultural and education licenses to travel to Cuba. As well, the change in the official currency in Cuba, from U.S. dollars to the Peso Convertible created a sudden increase in the prices of works of art as artists began charging for their works in the official national currency. What ensued was a beginning hesitation on the part of some buyers who felt prices were becoming too dear.*

This lecture addresses the issue of the contemporary Cuban Art Market. The art market is here defined to include sales of art, both private and public (auction), as well as exhibitions in galleries and museums as it is these last two that drive the sales.

The height of the contemporary Cuban art market as iterated in the abstract was between the years 2000 and 2003. There was a precipitous decline in both number of exhibitions and sales subsequently due to a variety of factors which will be discussed in no particular order of importance as there was overlapping of events and circumstances (recalling the old dilemma of what came first, the chicken or the egg).

The escalating sales during the late 1990s and very early 2000s affected the artists and their production. As demand increased, artists began to “supply” more rapidly to make more sales. What you witnessed was a diminuendo in the quality of the work being produced as it had to be done more quickly to meet demand. Others (artists) began riding on the coattails of the more successful artists pushing virtually anything and everything they could. Collectors began to note this shift in quality causing a greater scrutinization of quality and “worth.” Obviously, the talent was still there, undiminished, but great work takes great time.

The seemingly “unfettered” access Americans had to Cuba diminished greatly by 2003 when the then-administration (the terrorists in the White House) severely enforced laws restricting travel to Cuba which saw far fewer Americans, then the biggest collectors and supporters of Cuban art, followed by less interest in Cubanismo and thus a reduced focus on Cuban art.

When the White House administration put Cuba on the list of terrorist countries in 2004 it virtually prohibited the artists in Cuba from entering the U.S. by denying them entry visas. This resulted in the cancellation (“postponement” was the word being used) of many planned exhibitions in museums and galleries here in the U.S. since it was becoming impossible to get the artworks here, let alone think about their return after a show. Artists also began refusing to exhibit as they wanted to be present for their shows and knowing they could not come they opted to “wait.” Many are still “waiting.”

Yet another contributing factor to the shift in the contemporary Cuban art market occurred also in 2004 with the change of the Cuban currency from the U.S. dollar to the CUC or Peso Convertible. Because of the exchange rate, the prices of the artists' works first increased by 10%, virtually overnight, and then just a few short months later with yet another exchange rate hike the increase in prices became almost 20%! There is nothing worse for an artist's market than to bring enormous changes (upwards) in price. As the dollar weakened, and the Euro began to be accepted in Cuba, many artists started charging in Euros which, in a number of cases, has caused an even steeper rise in prices.

For the well-established younger artists, particularly the artists of the '90s, their markets are still relatively strong with prices for their work

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remaining stable, however, there has been a very noticeable drop in their overall income, none more so than the past three years, compared to the “art-rush” days of 2000. Sure, there are a handful of contemporary artists doing brilliantly well, selling strongly, but in sheer numbers they represent a tiny percentage. As well, one does not see large numbers of the young emerging artists of today in exhibitions outside of Cuba as one did in the late 90s and early 2000s.

Curiously, the auction houses, such as Sotheby’s, Christie’s, Phillips, etcetera, still do not sell the work of many contemporary Cuban artists. Going back through auction catalogs of each for the past eight years there are perhaps three or four names that show up fairly consistently and that’s about it.

The state of health of Cuban art is actually just fine! The artists haven’t lost their talent, the pool of young talent growing up and coming out of the brilliant art schools hasn’t diminished. It has just been a difficult period for obvious political reasons, and only political. There is finally a very healthy contemporary Cuban art scene in Miami which for several years now has been showing more work by artists still living on the island, a decided shift from the 1990s. This has been and is a healthy sign.

Two shows which opened in the past two months, one at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts titled “Cuba: Art and History From 1868 to Today” and another at the Boston University Art Gallery titled “Surrounded By Water” (curated by one of today’s lecturers sitting here, Natania Remba) are reminders that the state of Cuban art is indeed healthy and has not gone wandering. The noticeable decline in overall sales of work being produced by artists still living on the island is temporary. The very near future bodes very well for a resurgence when access to Cuba and to the United States resumes.

