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When you visit Cuba, don't go for the cigars and classic cars—go for the art

"Primavera," dedicated to Cuban women, by Rafael San Juan, in the 2015 Havana Biennial. (AP Photo/Desmond Boylan)

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This is the third in a series of four dispatches this week on the US-Cuba opening.

HAVANA, CUBA—The Fábrica de Arte Cubano, or Cuban Art Factory, is a haven for hip Havana nightlife. The former oil factory has been transformed into the kind of art gallery/event space/bar/cafe/screening room/concert hall that marks post-industrial urban revitalization from Berlin to Bushwick.

A visiting American peers into an artwork at la Fábrica de Arte Cubano.(Quartz/Tim Fernholz)

On a weeknight during the Havana Biennial, the city's regular celebration of art, it is crowded. People are looking at works by Cuban artists, listening to a jazz combo improvise around Eric Clapton standards, or watching an animated film upstairs. Next door at Cocinero, the musician Carlos Varela snaps a picture with a fan before sitting down to dinner while, on the rooftop bar above, patrons drink rum cocktails next to an installation by the local artist Damián Aquiles.

This year marked the sixth edition of the Biennial. Once offered as a third-world counter to capitalist art, this year's effort celebrates a mix of global voices both critiquing and embracing consumer culture. Contemporary work by international artists dotted the city: Blue cubist structures shared space with an installed sand beach and cabañas along the city's seaside promenade, and a giant ball of saran wrap lurked in the courtyard of the national museum.

Cuba has always punched above its weight in fine arts. Cuba has always punched above its weight in fine arts. Back when it was a world-class vacation destination, it spread its music and dance traditions abroad. After the 1959 revolution, its artists served as a connection to the US when most other forms of contact were limited.

Varela, for instance, has a fraught relationship with the Cuban government, due to his outspoken lyrics. But now that both Cuba and the US are drawing closer again, artists are both a vital bridge between cultures and an example of how Cubans can benefit directly from the US's opening.

A US artist brought a skating rink to Cuba in the name of art—and fun.(Reuters/Enrique de la Osa)

For the Biennial, the US artist Duke Riley, who has a history of using art to play with Cuba's political conventions, replicated the ice-skating rink from the 1964 World's Fair in Flushing, Queens, so that Cubans could try their hand at (synthetic) ice skating during the sweltering month of May.

"Historically, Cuba had a hockey team in 1929 called the Tropicales. They had ice rinks and skaters like Sonja Henie skated in Cuba," Alberto Magnan, the New York-based Cuban-American gallerist who helped organize the work, told Quartz. "The other aspect is that Cuban kids have probably never seen an ice-skating rink—it was also about teaching the younger generation about ice skating and what could possibly be in the future."

A giant sculpture sits in Havana's La Cabaña fort during the Bienal.(Quartz/Tim Fernholz)

Magnan, who has represented Cuban artists since he first returned to the country of his birth in 1997, helps collectors from the US and around the world identify promising artworks. A long-standing loophole in the US restrictions allowed Americans to buy an unlimited amount of "informational materials" in Cuba. That enabled a community of artists to emerge as cosmopolitan class. Successful artists can sell their work to foreigners and keep most of that money.

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"It's still secret that artists live in Cuba very well, from the money they make from foreign sales." Some American collectors are expecting closer US-Cuba ties to bolster the prices of Cuban art. Magnan says he doesn't believe the art's value is benefitting from Cuba's perceived isolation; yes, he says, Cuba has a mystique in the US due to the embargo, but it doesn't extend to buyers from Asia and Europe. Still, he says, Cuban artists are talented, and if the embargo ends, they will benefit.

"They are very well trained, very well educated, know how to talk about their art really well. If anything, more Cuban artists will become more household names or recognizable, and at the same time, anyone that's not really good probably will not make it," he says. "I find it still undervalued compared to some of the other art that is selling, so I'm telling my clients that they should keep a percentage of their art in good Cuban artists."

The striking architecture of Cuba's Instituto Superior de Arte.(Quartz/Tim Fernholz)

Cuba's socialist ideal began with basic services but never neglected fine arts.

Famously, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara decided during a game of post-revolution golf to convert the Havana Country Club into an international art school, the Instituto Superior de Arte, or ISA. Its curvaceous red-brick architecture, intended to showcase the new Cubaafter the revolution, provides an impressive backdrop for all the talent on display. But it is also unfinished and, in some places, crumbling.

Nonetheless, many of Cuba's professional artists received free training at ISA, which is actually multiple schools—for the visual arts, music, modern dance, and ballet. A network of other arts-focused schools for elementary and high-school students dot the country, and economists estimate that many thousands of **The investment in training these artists is part of Cuba's socialist identity.** Cubans earn their livings as performers, artists and writers.

The investment in training these artists is part of Cuba's socialist identity, and has clearly allowed Cuba to develop a more sophisticated artistic culture than other countries of comparative wealth. But this training in self-

expression can expose more than the government has bargained for. During the Biennial, one ISA-trained Cuban-American artist, Tania Bruguera, was detained by the government after she planned a pro-democracy performance; she is now returning to the US as a New York City artist in residence.

Snorkels hang from the ceiling in one installation.(Quartz/Tim Fernholz)

At La Cabaña, the colonial fort overlooking the city, stone chambers have been converted into galleries for Cuban and international artists to display their work. It's a far cry from the structure's more controversial uses as a military prison and execution site for both the dictator Fulgencio Batista's reactionary forces and Castro's communists.

During my visit, the only military presence at the fort was a group of young people on their mandatory national service, who were carousing cheerfully in a bar and restaurant, guarded by an enormous metal robot scultpure.

In a nearby room, the artist Arles del Rio had hung hundreds of snorkels from the ceiling. In another, Reynier Leyva Novo commented on law and art in Cuba by filling in the precise amount of ink needed to print various documents—the laws that liberalized the economy, Castro's famous defense of his first coup attempt, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*—into squares on a wall.

It's no surprise that many Cuban artists are inspired by borders and restricted movement, creating works that depict Caribbean drug smuggling or international conflicts.

"The political situation definitely unites the artists, from architectural to sculptural to painting," Magnan says. "Remember Cuba is an island, there's that island thought process that goes, 'you're surrounded by water and can't get out unless there is a way out.' I think that's very important in Cuban art."

You also find plenty of American pop-cultural figures tucked into new contexts; one work depicts an imaginary selfie taken by Raúl Castro and Barack Obama.

Another student's portrayal of US-Cuban relations on display at ISA stuck with me: The iconic American, Homer Simpson, sits on his couch next to Elpidio Valdés, an equally classic Cuban cartoon character, and says "Whew! At last we can talk in peace." Valdés replies, "Haha. I still can't believe it." It's a start.

A student's artwork on display at the ISA