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Free Bird: Duke Riley Riles the Law

Also: Marc Dennis's Paintings Are No Joke

By **R.C. Baker** *Wednesday, Nov 20 2013*

In February 1962, President Kennedy asked his aide [Pierre Salinger](#) to quickly — and quietly — obtain 1,000 Cuban cigars. The nervous underling managed to buy up 1,200; when he informed JFK the next morning, the president smiled and, according to Salinger, immediately signed the "decree banning all Cuban products from the United States." Since then, critics have contended that the embargo provision of the "Trading with the Enemy" act punishes ordinary Cuban citizens more than the repressive Castro regime. Sizing up this absurd Goliath vs. David grudge match between the U.S. and Cuba, multimedia artist [Duke Riley](#) took matters into his own hands and tucked them under the wings of some trusted comrades.

Riley trained 50 homing pigeons to make the roundtrip journey between [Key West](#) and [Havana](#), half of them equipped with video cameras, the other cadre fitted with small harnesses designed for smuggling very specific goods. The resulting videos are serendipitously beautiful — Havana's geometries of rooftops, highways, baseball fields, and coastal plazas flash by in tropical greens, blues, and pastels. Occasionally, nearby pigeons are caught in the juddering frames, conveying a kinetic joy of flight very different from the controlled arcs airline passengers experience. In 1986, Ukrainian-born artist [Ilya Kabakov](#) created an installation featuring a seat attached to huge springs in a room with a massive hole in its ceiling, implying that a man had catapulted himself into space to escape Soviet oppression. Riley captures a similar sense of reckless yearning in these videos: The birds complete the journey that citizens on both sides of the ideological divide dearly wish to make.

There is a long history of smuggling between our nations; rumrunners back in the day used homing pigeons as a clandestine messengers. Riley expanded on this tradition when some of his pigeons managed the return trip carrying



Riley's flying circus

Cuban cigars obtained from off-the-record island sources. This contraband has been sealed in bricks of resin, annotated with the names of the fliers who completed the perilous mission, including "[Pablo Escobar](#)" and "[Pierre Lafitte](#)."

Although some of Riley's collaborators did not make it back, several of the journeyers still reside in the pigeon loft that has been

transplanted from Key West to the gallery. All of the participants are commemorated in highly individualized gouache portraits on rusty, ragged-edged tin slabs, a blend of tenderness and damage that pretty much sums up a half-century of futile longing across the [Straits of Florida](#).