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Yanks chasing Cuban Art

American art collectors compete to be the first in Havana. There they can both make the cut and rub shoulders with the Cuban art world's biggest stars. But beyond oil paintings and sculptures are waiting quite other investments.



PHOTO: ANNA SCHORI

Sandra Dooley takes every month against American visitors in his studio. "Wherever you live in the world so it is difficult to make a living from their art. But in Cuba it seems to be one of the best jobs to have right now," she says.



PHOTO: ANNA SCHORI

The financier and art collector Jonathan Blue already owns a dozen Cuban works in the price range 2000-300000 dollars. Today he visit the artist Carlos Quintanas studio in Havana.



PHOTO: ANNA SCHORI

"You try to create an upper middle class of artists who did not lie with a who question the status quo. It's a brilliant strategy," says performance artist Tania Bruguera, who was imprisoned just before the New Year.



PHOTO: ANNA SCHORI

In a garden in Louisville, Kentucky, is The Chrysler Building. Rather, a much smaller and curvier version of the iconic building in New York. The tower has namely been a basement extension in the form of a coiled fire hose that continues far down below street level.

We consider the sculpture "Chrysler", by the Cuban artist Alexandre Arrechea, on a cell phone picture of a taxi in Havana. Both the phone, the garden and the six meter high sculpture belongs to Jonathan Blue, a 47 year old financier who put a lot of time and money on his growing art collection and now has his sights set on Cuba.

- The sculpture is a metaphor for how the economy can be rolled up and become smaller. And it contains both a Cuban theme and New York, it's very rare to find both in the same work, said Jonathan Blue.

An artistic link stainless steel between the US and Cuba, the former arch-enemies that now seems increasingly relaxed in each other's company. In December it was announced that diplomatic relations were resumed, and in mid-January was eased travel restrictions for Americans. Interest in traveling between the US and Cuba turned out to be huge. Marazul airline, which flies mainly from Miami, received during the last two weeks of January 1300 requests for group travel, compared with 30 during the same period last year.

In March there was also a revival of direct flights between Havana and New York, USA's art capital. It no longer requires any special license to travel to Cuba, but the American who wants

to experience the country still need to have an approved purpose of the trip. Interest in buying art is one of these. Beach Visit prohibited.

Earlier in the day, we have met the gallery owner Alberto Magnan in a hotel lobby in downtown Havana. It is thanks to him that Jonathan Blues Art Collection now includes a dozen works by Cuban artists, purchased for between 2000 and 300,000 dollars.

Alberto Magnan left Cuba when he was seven. Now he is 53, lives in New York where he runs the gallery Magnan Metz, specializing in Cuban contemporary art. He often travels with American collectors to Cuba, where they make a studio visit with the artists represented by the gallery.

On December 17, when news of the new US Cuba policy came, rang Alberto Magnans phone 25 times.

- Everyone wants to be first, he says.

The hotel where we meet is one of the better ones in Havana - on the rooftop, we see Kate Moss have a drink with actor Stephen Fry.

- Americans who travel here, choose a little more expensive options. They would like to be cared for, says Alberto Magnan.

With the current ateljétur are also Rob Penta, a 34 year old lawyer and hobby painters like Jonathan Blue agree to Louisville in Kentucky. The taxi that Alberto Magnan hired us first along the promenade Malecon, after a while, we rainforest outside the window and a little later we pass a training facility for the Cuban Task Force.

We are heading to Carlos Quintana. He's a bit of a Cuban Basquiat, explains Alberto Magnan.

The large canvases are filled with floating heads, bodies in transition between animals and humans, Tibetan monks and crossbones and the occasional flower. Carlos Quintana was admitted to the prestigious School of Art San Alejandro when he was 16 years old. He stayed only four months, the discipline and the scheduled life did not suit him. Now he's 48 and returned to Cuba after eleven years in Madrid. He drinks beer, smokes cigarette and moves quickly between the rooms and the paintings in the beautiful spacious studio.

The artist shows Jonathan Blue one of the paintings as Alberto Magnan interrupts and reminds him that the board had already been sold to another collector. Another work downstairs has been bought by a cousin of a former US president.

No transactions made on the spot, Alberto Magnan brings the sold turbines to the United States when he received the certificate required for export. The actual transaction takes place then via the gallery in New York.

We leave Carlos Quintana and goes on to Roberto Diago whose work revolves around racism in contemporary Cuba, the scars of slavery and his own roots in present Nigeria.

Even Roberto Diago studied at the San Alejandro and artist is the only profession he ever had.

- It is one of the unique things about Cuba, life here lets us live in the arts. We do not pay taxes, rent, health care or education.

The Cuban Revolution has always kept the art high and talented students can be admitted to prestigious schools at a young age. But it is also an important source of income for the country as works of art, along with books and music, have been exempted from the US trade embargo. In the extreme economic downturn in the 1990s after the collapse of the USSR, gave the Cuban state artists right to retain a large portion of their income. Many also got a visa to participate in exhibitions abroad. Artists were able to live more freely than most other Cubans - an effective strategy, many chose in contrast to previous generations to stay in instead of moving abroad.

Roberto Diago receives collectors every week in his stately 1,920-century house and sees the big American interest as an opportunity for Cuban art to be more visible.

Do you see any dangers?

- We must not allow the market to eat up the Cuban art. Because Cuba has been closed as long as collectors want to have it all. It needs artists to be prepared so as not to damage the quality of the art.

A few days later we meet another gallery owner, Michelle Wojcik, who is in Havana with a dozen art-Americans. Most have found her through the mall Cubana as she runs in Boston and Provincetown in Massachusetts.

- The schedule is packed, everyone is tired at the end of the day, she says with a raspy voice.

Michelle Wojcik previously worked for a research center focused on the US embargo. During a trip to Havana she was drawn to the art scene.

What was your first impression of Cuban art?

- I was fascinated by how sophisticated it was. It was amazing to see how such works could be produced at a place with limited access to materials.

Some of Michelle Wojciks group has brought oil paint and other materials to artists they visit.

In the afternoon the park group's large tourist bus outside the Sandra Dooley studio. 50-year-old Dooley did not begin painting until she was 35, now supplies her colorful reflections of their own everyday lives her whole family

- Wherever you live in the world, it is difficult to make a living from their art. But in Cuba it seems to be one of the best jobs to have right now. I am a living example of that, she says.

Can the increased interest in Cuban art create a bubble?

- We'll have to wait and see. Right now it's a boom. We have been so isolated for so long and Cuba is why a forbidden fruit that everyone wants their share.

Insulation decreases gradually. One of Cuba's most famous artists, Kcho, started a few weeks ago to offer free wifi in their Cultural Center in Havana. Sandra Dooley can now check their emails on the phone and soon to Internet in homes as possible. She points to a painting.

- That disguise myself using Facebook.

Many visitors to Cuba describes it as a journey through time to the 1960s. Does that mean that neither art has evolved in 50 years? Not at all. On Bildmuseet in Umeå is now underway exhibition "The spaces between" showing drawing, painting, printmaking, installation, photography and video works by 14 artists Havana. The idea is to tell you about the social and economic reality for people living in the midst of a historic change.

Art commenting society is not uncommon. Sandra Dooley's studio colleague Guillermo Estrada Viera use of expired ration cards.

- Rationing booklet itself is filled with emotion. It is a daily reminder of the lack of supplies, he says.

Ration cards are still living for many. Poverty in Cuba is large and income inequality has increased. Anyone who works with tourism, or art, may withdraw the same money in a few days as a doctor gets a monthly salary. It is difficult to live solely on the state salary of about 160 dollars per month. Meanwhile, education, health care and often even free accommodation. The literacy rate and life expectancy is significantly higher than in comparable countries.

How will the changing relations with the United States to influence the Cubans life?

One person who lodged the issue is performance artist Tania Bruguera. She is one of Cuba's most internationally known artists and had his breakthrough at the Havana Biennial in 2000. This year it's time for a new biennial but Bruguera is not invited.

On 30 December last year, she planned a performance at Revolution Square in Havana. She wanted to give people the opportunity to for a minute airing opinions and ask questions about the changing relationship between the US and Cuba. She sought permission but got nothing. She still continued the preparations, was arrested and thrown in jail for a few days. Tania Bruguera's passport is still detained while waiting for the prosecutor to decide how to proceed with the case, which may take up to a year. She is one of thousands of Cubans who have in recent years been imprisoned because they expressed ideas that suited those in power. We are doing the interview on her roof as the risk that we are intercepted is less there than in the apartment.

That many artists live a good life in Cuba is no coincidence, says Tania Bruguera.

- You try to create an upper middle class of artists who did not lie with a who question the status quo. It's a brilliant strategy.

The art is allowed to take up certain social problems but only those who have approved, she says. Previously, it was taboo to talk about people's emigration from Cuba, today it is a very common artistic theme.

- And it is possible to talk about the consequences but not causes. You can talk about that you are angry, that is not enough money. But not on why your pay is so low.

If the American influx of collectors is large today, it will multiply during the Havana Biennale. Tania Bruguera, who now mainly live in the US, according to collectors and institutions who visit Cuba has a responsibility.

- I think the Biennale can be a dangerous avalanche. It is a one-time thing - they come here, they take the stand. It is very irresponsible, there should be a preparation and aftermath. They must also realize that the artist they buy or make rich will become an important person in Cuba.

She suspects that there are other motives than the admiration of the art behind the interest in Cuba.

- If I'm going to be a bit cynical, I believe that many of those who come here see art as something to invest in before it gets too expensive. Others are bored and want to travel to a new place. A third group uses art as an input to the Cuban financial world. Many will first hit as art buyers, then they begin to buy property and do business with Cuban institutions.

Neither Jonathan Blue and Rob Penta hymlar with that in the future they hope to do business in Cuba. Jonathan Blue is the CEO of a venture capital company and he believes that over time may be necessary to look at areas such as oil, logistics and media. The lawyer Rob Penta has clients who see opportunities in infrastructure, especially telecommunications.

- When it is legally possible, I know that there is interest, he says.

But, says both of them, now they are here for the art and nothing else. Meanwhile, art purchases in itself of course an investment.

For me it is 80-90 percent love for the work, 10-20 percent is linked to whether I believe it will increase in value. I have learned to just buy an artwork if I really love it and will do it even if it is not worth a dime. It is good advice. But when more Americans are interested in Cuban art, an artist Roberto Diago absolute increase in value, says Rob Penta.

We say goodbye to the artist and his wife and makes us ready to jump into the taxi again. Jonathan Blue and Rob Penta's two-day visit to Havana is over and they have to rush to the

airport. They talk about the feeling of authenticity and genuineness that many artists in Cuba given them. Jonathan Blue is also close to the artists a big part of the allure of Cuba.

- Contemporary Artists in New York lunching with billionaires, not with us. The greatest artists in the United States has become so big and famous that they are difficult to approach. Roberto Diago today has rock star status in Cuba, but he's still an amazing, down to earth person.

The sun shines over the big house when I ask Alberto Magnan if there is a risk that the changed relationship with the United States attracts Cuban artists to move north. He does not believe it.

- Because there is a foreign market, artists live well here, why move? They move to New York, they become part of the big international art world, one of perhaps 100,000 artists. Here are the elite. The collectors can come here instead.

We must not allow the market to eat up the Cuban art. Because Cuba has been closed as long as collectors want to have it all.

See a slide show from the exhibition "The spaces between" Bildmuseet Umeå.