



caribbean communism

the last resort: 10th havana biennial



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There is one important similarity that links *La Bienal de la Habana* to the mothership in Venice—the fact that you don't really go there because of the show. Modern Cuba itself is an elaborate cultural construction that makes the best efforts of socio-politically aware artists look a bit limp. Likewise the city of Venice is one of the world's greatest art exhibitions, and nothing that a curator comes up with can offer serious competition.

Like Venice, Havana is a legendary destination. Just as conscientious cultural tourists sip Bellinis coffee at Caffé Florian where Casanova used to be a regular patron, in Havana they drink *mojitos* at La Bodeguita del Medio, which was Ernest Hemingway's favourite bar in the 1930s and stay at the grand hotels built by the American Mafia in the 1950s. They can be photographed in the same locations where Che Guevara was photographed (or just buy the t-shirt). Cuba was on the boil politically, socially and intellectually for most of the twentieth-century and remains committed to the principles of the 1959 Revolution, despite Russia's backdown in the 1962 missile crisis and the efforts of the USA to starve the country into submission with the ongoing trade embargo. Foreign visitors to the *Havana Biennial* may expect it to offer something as radically feisty as the country's recent history. In fact, however, it doesn't.

It's easy enough to understand why when you consider that Havana was only into its third *Biennial* when the Soviet regime underpinning Cuba ideologically and economically started dissolving in 1989. The country is too small to function independently, and has always been under the patronage of a bigger nation; successively Spain, the USA, then Russia. (Venezuela is currently being courted for a similar relationship in the future.) Cuba doesn't want to remain in isolation, and neither does the *Biennial*. It has abandoned its original charter of providing a Third World alternative to the capitalist art extravaganzas elsewhere (a sensible move considering that Third World art is now so much in demand at international shows in New York, London and Berlin). For the tenth *Biennial*, representation has been widened to include Western Europe and the USA. *Biennial* Director Rubén del Valle Lantarón, in his catalogue introduction, describes the Cuban Revolution as the "natural creator" of the *Biennial*, but alludes to the current crises in both pure capitalism and pure socialism. "Cuba," he writes, "deliberates upon how to continue developing its emancipating project under totally adverse conditions."

The subtitle of this year's *Biennial*, "Integration and resistance in the global era", neatly summarises the dilemmas being faced not just by the arts intelligentsia, but the whole country.

Despite two devastating hurricanes late last year on top of everything else, the exhibition is splendid by any international standards. The majority of the works genuinely reflected the buck-each-way subtitle by examining various paradoxes inherent in the globalisation of economics and of culture in general. There wasn't a preponderance of that colourful Third World scruffiness we all found so appealing at Brisbane's first *Asia-Pacific Triennial* (in works by artists now likely to have dealers in New York). There was less anti-American propaganda than you'd see in Europe, or America for that matter. (Of course anti-Cuban propaganda was likewise hard to find because it would involve a severe jail sentence for the artist.) Any visitors disappointed that Havana's *Biennial* has come to resemble everyone else's should remember that it's influenced them as much as they've influenced it.

Of the fifty or so countries represented this year, Cuba emerges as the most impressive. As in the Olympics, you always expect the home team to win, but the Cubans haven't done this simply by force of numbers, although that helps. The best of contemporary Cuban art is engagingly clever, and often technically inventive. It doesn't have the glibness of Jeff Koons, but it doesn't have the glibness of sloganeering either.

Like Venice, Havana is crumbling, which adds a picturesque element to some of the installations around town, but the old fortress that provides the principal exhibition venue (where the works of all the invited Australian artists are displayed) looks as solid as a rock. The white stone architecture and lime-washed interiors provide long rows of big, linked, gallery spaces. It's less atmospheric than the post-industrial wastelands that you often need to wander through in search of the *Biennale of Sydney*, but a lot more practical. All the sites here can be reached easily on foot, with the exception of the main one (accessibility not being an attribute prized in fortresses), and on the way you pass through areas of magnificent architecture and extreme squalor (frequently combined in the same location). My only complaint was that the excellent free map clearly indicating the locations of all the sixteen *Biennial* sites failed to mention that the most remote one was also the most important. After a couple of days visiting components of the *Biennial* at various institutions in the central part of town the only Australian art I'd seen was a Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser installation included in the French travelling exhibition *Latitudes*. I was starting to feel that the Cubans regarded us as fairly peripheral in their scheme of things.

That may in fact be true, but aspects of Australian art are thoroughly pertinent to the theme of integration and resistance. Australia's representation here was far from tokenistic.

Australia first participated in the *Havana Biennial* in 1991, when a group of indigenous artists was invited. The curatorial theme that year was colonisation and neo-colonisation, and Cubans possibly see us as a prime example of both.

They continue to be more interested in the work of non-Anglos from Australia. This year's list of Australian invitees is comprised of indigenous multi-media artist Tony Albert, indigenous photographer Darren Siwes, Australian performance artist Danius Kesminas (with his Indonesian band), Chinese/Australian painter and installation artist Guan Wei, South African/Australian multi-media artist Michael Goldberg plus Anglo-Australian ceramist Gerry Wedd. Cuba (thanks to the Revolution) must be the world's most successful example of a racially harmonious society, with no apparent hostility or inequality between people of African and European appearance. But you don't hear much about the original inhabitants of the island. Unable to resist, they got well and truly integrated (those of them who survived).

The resilience of indigenous Australians, especially in the context of visual art where as far as the rest of the world is concerned they are the principal Australian players, is clearly intriguing to Cubans. 'Integration' may not a term you hear much in relation to indigenous Australians because it has connotations of assimilation, which has come to be widely recognised as offensive in Australia. 'Resistance', however, conveys the political dimension of the cultural survival and revival of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people.

Opposite: Darren Siwes, *Gold Puella*, 2009
Photo courtesy the artist and Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide
Above: Michael Goldberg, *La Fuerza del Deseo/La Fuerza de la Necesidad (The Force of Desire/The Force of Necessity)*, 2009
Photo courtesy the artist



Tony Albert's large format, colour photographic self-portraits with his friends (including Richard Bell) posing as rich and dangerous gangsta rappers put aside the whole business of injustice and genocide and got down to scaring the hell out of whiteys, mainly by looking considerably more cool.

There seems to have been some shrewd humour on the part of the exhibition designer. Albert shared a space with another photographer, Rablaci from Spain, who makes large format colour photos that sensitively represent the integration of Man and Earth (the man having evidently been buried under a blanket of leaves and dirt). Various different photographs show the man's back (tattooed with a mystical symbol), hand and mouth protruding rather alarmingly from the forest floor. Leaves are strewn all around the gallery walls to stress the point. Many persons of European extraction hanker after the sort of mystical spiritual oneness with nature that they attribute to indigenous peoples, and an awful lot of artists of European extraction have attempted to achieve it over the years (mainly in the 1970s) by burying themselves in dirt.

Tony Albert is one of a Brisbane group of stridently indigenous, stridently urban artists who use the term "ooga booga" to describe purely white constructs of Aboriginal spiritual oneness with nature, especially when constructed for the benefit of curators and collectors. Fortunately, the hip blak artifice at one end of the room and the earthy white sincerity at the other were kept apart, but it must have seemed to Albert that a bit of 'ooga boogery' was going on next door. The photo of hairy legs amidst tree trunks ought not to have been allowed to stray onto his side of the dividing wall.

The determination of Australians from migrant backgrounds to keep their original cultural heritage strong is easier for Cubans to identify with because they have vigorously maintained musical and religious traditions from Spain and Africa. Havana also has a strong Chinese heritage and a large Chinatown with street signs in Chinese characters, but it appears to consist primarily of restaurants and Kung Fu academies operated by people who, to a foreigner, no longer look ethnically Chinese.

Guan Wei's cute yet monstrous pink hominids come directly from avant-garde painting in China at the time he settled in Australia late last century. For the *Havana Biennial* they were added to a serenely Chinese ocean that he painted onto three walls of his display space, where the floor was strewn with islands of sand, a random scattering of personal effects, some luggage and a ship's lifesaving ring. Flat screen monitors showed dangerously big but hypnotically beautiful waves breaking. The installation embodied how Guan Wei integrates a contemporary international repertoire with the Chinese qualities in his work, while resisting the danger of becoming another artist on the global circuit doing earth and video rooms.

It was titled *Rising Sea Level*, and was based on his 2007 installation of the same name. The 2007 work, however, was about global warming and showed islands being submerged. This time, it was clearly about refugee boat people. That would seem to be a significant Third World issue, but Cubans will tell you that nobody wants to escape except criminals. It's an awkward topic here, so it was left to the Australians (not only Guan Wei, but also Gerry Wedd) to broach the subject.

It came as a big surprise to me to discover that although the type of stridently agit-prop work I was expecting to see a lot of was essentially absent, one terrific example was provided (in parody) by the Australasian contingent. The Punkasila Group, masterminded by Danius Kesminas, filled an exhibition space with political cartoons and big painted banners of their exploits, in the style of Indonesian propaganda billboards from the heady Soekarno-Suharto days (emblazoned with emphatic but fundamentally meaningless slogans such as: "If video is the new sculpture, and software is the new painting, PUNKASILA is the new bomb!") Members of the group are depicted in camouflage combat fatigues brandishing guitars in the form of automatic weapons. They also produced a banner paying fulsome tribute the fact that 2009 is the fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, just as the Cuban government has produced a banner, currently on display in streets all over Havana. (Elsewhere in the *Biennial* this important fact is acknowledged with somewhat more dignity.) Punkasila's banner also commemorates the 1960 visit to Cuba by President Soekarno and the 2009 "mission to Cuba of the Indonesian Australian rock combat group". The true feelings of Danius Kasminas and his colleagues toward the two most ruthless and controversial leaders of the Indonesian Republic are probably a lot less simplistic than the style they adopt in their installation. Punkasila's ability to be subversive, polite to their Cuban hosts and extremely funny all at the same time made them one of the highlights of this *Biennial*.

At a time like this, the politics of money is inevitably preoccupying the whole world and nowhere more so than in Cuba, where the USA stopped trying to wage military war after the bungled 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, but has been waging economic war ever since. Money, more specifically the symbolism of currency, provides an instantly familiar context in this *Biennial* for Darren Siwes' large colour photos of Australian coins from the year 2010 bearing the profiles of indigenous monarchs. USA currency was adapted in comparable ways by other artists exhibiting concurrently. Perhaps the most poignant example was Kosovo artist Islej Xhafa's room-sized US\$100 note woven as a rug in Afghanistan.

Depicting Aborigines as the rulers instead of the ruled is in keeping with the Cuban refusal to acknowledge even the possibility of defeat. Darren Siwes proposes the divine right of indigenous Australians to rule by representing them in images of European neoclassical formality that take on extra resonance when displayed in the fort built by the Spanish colonial rulers to protect their prime Caribbean land-grab. There's an undeniable element of wry humour in these works, but also a seemingly effortless overturning of everything familiar, just by flipping a coin.

Siwes is very much in synch with the subtle but complex ideological layering of this *Biennial*, which matches the meticulous strategising suddenly being required of the Cuban government. The old British and Spanish colonial masters have long since ceased to be of any real consequence, the current global colonial master, however, the USA has only very recently started to look shaky with the collapse of its money markets. It now has more important things to worry about than punishing its neighbour for getting uppity half a century ago. Cuba may be on the verge of establishing a workable relationship with the USA, without being forced into ideological submission. Just as indigenous Australian artists have navigated their way from a position of weakness to one of strength within the colonising culture, by asserting their separateness.

While Guan Wei has resisted abandoning his Chinese heritage, Gerry Wedd, at first glance, seems to have totally adopted it in *Willowland*, his group of blue and white porcelain objects. They look charmingly authentic until you notice that a tree of skulls is included with the miniature bridges, walls and swallows. It's then that the little pleasure barge filled with concubines starts to appear more likely to be an overloaded boat of Iraqis or Iranians. That part of the world was the source of cobalt used in the best Ming ceramics, and the similarity of Persian and Chinese blue and white ceramics is one of the earliest examples of international style, long before the Dutch and Germans got in on the act. The willow pattern china that Wedd alludes to became the globally industrialised version. His work reflects the way trade routes have affected the world, including the routes of people traffickers, which generally follow identical lines. Understated as it is, *Willowland* throws intense light on how tightly enmeshed the world's interconnectedness has become.

This brings us back to international trade. Michael Goldberg's work dealt with what that term suggests to us right now. On the outside wall of his space was a text panel explaining the Standard & Poors 500 Index, the thermometer of capitalism, which indicates the state of the American stock market and "the general sentiment of the global economy". Inside was a chaotic mess of sheets of paper printed with the logos of the biggest American corporations and beaming portraits of executives. This covered the entire floor. The general sentiment of the global economy did not look good. The work conveyed a distinct sense of the mighty having fallen.

Cuba has very good reasons for being in two minds about becoming a fully functioning participant in the global economy. Resolving the conundrum of integration and resistance is not going to be easy.