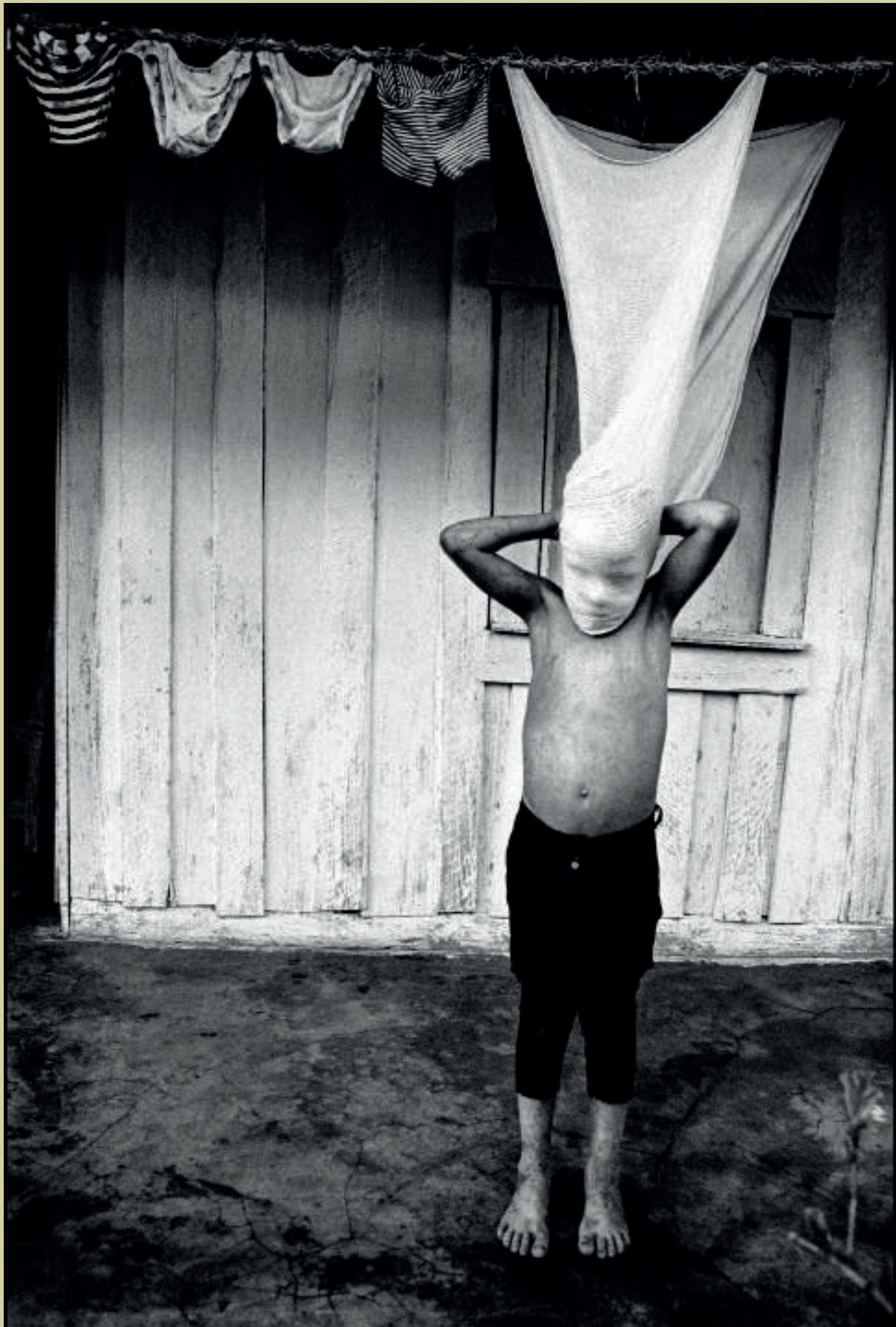


**RAÚL CAÑIBANO:
CHRONICLES OF AN ISLAND**

13 SEP - 17 NOV 2019

**THE
PHOTOGRAPHERS'
GALLERY**



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Habana, Cuba, 1992 from *Ciudad*

Chronicles of an Island marks the first UK solo exhibition for **Raúl Cañibano** (b. 1961, Havana). One of the most respected photographers working in Cuba today, his award-winning work focuses on the country's people and lives in a post-revolution era and reflect his close ties to, and love for, his homeland.

Raised in the rural province of Las Tunas on the eastern side of Cuba, Cañibano worked as a welder until 1989, when a visit to an exhibition of Alfredo Sarabia's surrealist photographs at the Fototeca de Cuba inspired him to pursue a career in photography. Largely self-taught, Cañibano quickly joined the generation of photographers coming into being in the 1990s following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, who were interested in documenting the effects of the economic crisis on the livelihoods and experiences of 'Cubanos'.

His first photograph, depicting the shadow of an equestrian statue cut off in the middle to reveal a linear arrangement of modern lamp-posts against a stark, cloudless sky, established both his aesthetic and political concerns. The unique composition hints at his surrealist influences, while also evoking the island's turbulent past and present impending socio-economic change.

Because of the restrictions on imports and the absence of darkrooms in Cuba, Cañibano transported his precious negatives to the UK in a cigar box to produce the silver gelatin prints on display here. These limited editions have been made exclusively for The Photographers' Gallery in collaboration with master printer Robin Bell, who has worked with such masters as Elliott Erwitt, David Bailey and Don McCullin.

This exhibition presents a selection of works from two on-going bodies of work, *Ciudad* and *Tierra Guajira*, chronicling life in the city and the countryside.

With special thanks to exhibition liaison, Dr James Kent (Royal Holloway, University of London).

BIOGRAPHY

Cañibano lives and works in Havana, Cuba. His first solo exhibition, *Lonely Hunter*, took place in 1993 at the Fototeca de Cuba in Havana. Since then his photographs have been exhibited internationally in Mexico, Canada, Brazil, the US, Spain, Greece, Italy, Belgium, and Japan. In 1999 he won the Grand Prix in the Cuban National Photography Exhibit for his project on the life of rural workers, *Tierra Guajira*. He was one of eleven photographers selected for the *Cuba, Si! Cuba, Seen* retrospective of 50 years of Cuban photography at the Royal National Theatre in London in 2000. His work is part of the International Center of Photography's collection in New York.

Selected Solo and Group Exhibitions

- 2018 *Esencia*, Centro de Arte Tomas y Valiente, Madrid, Spain
- 2017 *Art x Cuba: Contemporary Perspectives since 1989*, Ludwig Forum for International Art, Germany
- 2017 *Cuba is...*, Annenberg Space, Los Angeles
- 2017 *Doble Play: Fotografía Cubana*, Foto Museo Cuatro Caminos, Mexico
- 2017 *Cuba! Cuba! 65 Years of Photography*, International Center of Photography, New York
- 2016 *Kuba Libre*, Kunsthalle Roscock, Germany
- 2016 *Under the Cuban Sun*, Throckmorton Fine Art, New York
- 2015 *Aquí nos vemos: Fotografía en América Latina 2000-2015*, Centro Cultural Néstor Kirchner, Argentina
- 2014 *Arte Cubano*, Frankstone Arts Center, Melbourne, Australia
- 2014 *De lo sublime a lo ridículo*, Fábrica de Arte Cubano, Habana, Cuba
- 2014 *Retrospectiva: 20 años*, Nimes, France
- 2013 *The Island RE-PORTRAYED, 1992-2012, a retrospective vision*, Aluna Art Foundation, Miami
- 2012 *El agua, lo masculino y lo femenino*, Museo de Bellas Artes, La Habana, Cuba
- 2009 *En la Ruta*, Fototeca de Cuba, Habana, Cuba
- 2009 *Tierra Guajira*, Galería Albertina, San Cristóbal de las Casas, México
- 2008 *Tierra Guajira*. Centro Cultural de Artes de Alcorcón. Madrid, España
- 2000 *50 Years of Cuban Photography*, National Theatre, London
- 1998 *100 Years of Cuban Photography*, Casa de las América de Madrid, España
- 1997 *3 Cuban Photographers*, Venice , Brussels, Tokyo
- 1995 *First Contemporary Art Salon*, Museo de Bellas Artes, Habana, Cuba
- 1993 *Cazador Solitario*, Fototeca de Cuba, Habana, Cuba

The big picture: a window on a Cuban childhood

The big picture
Photography



Tim Adams

🐦 @TimAdamsWrites

Sun 22 Sep 2019 07.00 BST



Raúl Cañibano's magical photograph of rural Cuba captures his longing for the countryside of his youth.

This image is included in the first UK exhibition by Cuban photographer Raúl Cañibano. It forms part of a poignant series on rural life in Cuba that he began in the 1990s. The picture is typical of his work, which concentrates on fleeting, almost magical realist images of daily life. Here, a child views caged birds through an opaque window. The photographer is on the inside with the birds, looking out, raising pointed questions about the nature of artistic freedom and its discontents.

Cañibano, now 58, was not always a photographer. Born two years after Castro's revolution in the sugar farming region of Cienfuegos, he grew up to be a welder working in civil aviation. He was nearly 30 when a visit to a show of surrealist photographs inspired him to pick up a camera. At first, he photographed weddings at weekends, but eventually he gave up his day job and moved out on to the streets.

His vocation did not arrive at a good moment. The US embargo on trade with Cuba, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, meant that materials, which had mostly come from East Germany, were in short supply. Cañibano had to work with expired photographic stock, and was thus limited in the number of pictures he could take, which made each composition an event.

The challenges in making the images seem to add to their value. Cañibano works now as a commercial photographer in Cuba, but the ongoing series captures a complex yearning for the countryside of his childhood: "The child in this picture, the son of peasants," he said recently, "was playing just like these children do; in a different way to city children because their playthings are the countryside and everything that surrounds them."

Raúl Cañibano: Chronicles of an Island is on at the Print Sales space of the Photographers' Gallery, London W1, until 17 November •

In Pictures: Cañibano's Cuba

Raúl Cañibano's beguiling portraits of Cuba focus on its people in the post-revolution era and reflect his love for his homeland.

Chronicles of an Island will open at The Photographers' Gallery in London on September 13 2019, with the images available to buy. •



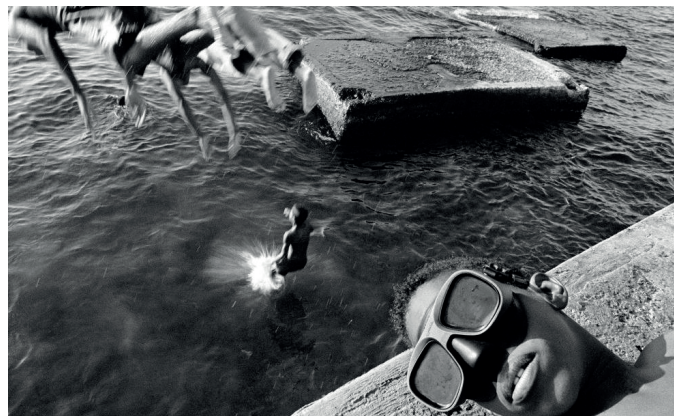
Malecon Habanero, Cuba, 2006 from *Ciudad*



Cienfuegos, Cuba, 1998 from *Tierra Guajira*



Parandas, Camaguani, Cuba, 2007 from *Tierra Guajira*



Malecon Habanero, Cuba, 2011 from *Ciudad*



Malecon Habanero, Cuba, 2010 from *Ciudad*



Vinales, Cuba, 2007 from *Tierra Guajira*

FURTHER READING

MIAMI NEW TIMES, 2013



Cuban Photographer Raul Cañibano Captures Real Life on the Island

CARLOS SUAREZ DE JESUS | MARCH 14, 2013 | 4:00AM

The first time Raúl Cañibano picked up a camera, he was nearly 30 years old.

A welder with a gig at an aviation company, Cañibano was visiting the Fototeca de Cuba art gallery in Havana. He found himself at an exhibit showcasing the work of Cuban photographer Alfredo Sarabia, known for his dreamy, surrealistic photos of the island.

“When I saw Sarabia’s images, I was floored,” Cañibano recalls in an email interview from Havana. “His photos had such an impact on me that within a few days, I gave my notice to my boss and traded the blowtorch for a camera lens. I became determined to learn to be a photographer instead.”

Luckily for the photography world, he succeeded. In fact, Cañibano’s take on Cuban life now rivals Sarabia’s for international acclaim. His first major U.S. retrospective, *The Island Re-Portrayed (1992-2012)*, is now on view at downtown Miami’s Aluna Art Foundation, which features more than 80 large-format black-and-white photos from the past two decades.

“He is definitely one of the most iconic and prolific documentary photographers working in Cuba today,” says William Castellanos, an art historian who researched and co-curated the exhibit along with Adriana Herrera, an *El Nuevo Herald* art critic.

Cañibano was born in Havana in 1961, two years after the Cuban Revolution ended. After abandoning his trade as a welder in 1989, he made a career switch to photography during one of the darkest times in his homeland’s history. It was the beginning of Cuba’s “Special Period” following the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the island’s economy crashed and basic goods became scarce.

“For me, it was always difficult to find photographic materials,” he says. “All those photographic supplies used to come from East Germany, and after the socialist camp crumbled, I had to work with expired materials for many years and encountered the occasional chemical accident where I lost all the images I had taken.”

At first, Cañibano took a job as an apprentice at a commercial studio in Havana. He learned to develop photos and eked out a living by shooting quinceañeras and weddings.

“Initially, I had no background in the arts and was uninformed in general,” he says. “Thanks to Ricardo Santo, a photographer who befriended me... I began to learn.”

Since then, the self-taught, 51-year-old artist has gone on to earn worldwide recognition. On view at Aluna are four of his award-winning historical photo essays — including *Crónicas de la Ciudad* (Chronicles of the City), *Fe por San Lazaro* (Faith for Saint Lazarus), *Ocaso* (Sunset), and *Tierra Guajira* (Rural Land) — the last of which earned Cañibano first prize in the National Hall of Cuban Photography in 1999.

“What sets him apart from his contemporaries is that Cañibano is documenting Cuba’s national identity at the end of utopia,” Castellanos says. “Cañibano captured the lives of Cuba’s campesinos with a dignity and intimacy that resonates today. Unlike stereotypical images of the heroic worker popularized by socialist realism, he ventured into the most inaccessible interior of the island’s countryside to live with the people for months at a time.”

FURTHER READING

MIAMI NEW TIMES, 2013

MIAMI
New Times

Indeed, fin-tailed jalopies cruising along El Malecón or the decaying façades of Old Havana buildings are absent from Cañibano's work. Instead, his photos are profound psychological studies of the elderly and infirm who have fallen through the cracks of a system that prides itself on free health care.

Then there are the haunting images of the faithful dragging themselves through the streets during the yearly pilgrimage honoring Saint Lazarus and of humble people living in homes with dirt floors, mud walls, and thatched roofs in areas of the country where there is no electricity or running water.



Manatí, Cuba, 1999 from *Tierra Guajira*

Cañibano's unique path into photography gives him a different perspective than most people behind a lens.

"I'm a photographer but have never worked for the press," he says. "I only seek to convey a graphic testimony of my time through a very personal interpretation of my own reality."

His work is also informed by his childhood, spent far from the capital city. "As a child, I lived in Manatí in the province of Las Tunas, located in one of the easternmost areas of Cuba and the most rural part of the island," Cañibano says. "That's why I wanted to return there and document a way of life for people and traditions that I identify with."

One series includes eye-opening images of a farmer emerging from a swamp with a hog-tied caiman slung over his shoulder. In another, a toddler in underwear lies on the dirt floor of his home next to a trio of dead hutias — giant rodents — ready for the cooking pot.

"My intent was to document a way of life that could fade as the years pass and the changes that are taking place as society develops," Cañibano adds. "What I wished to accomplish was to capture the nobility, familiarity, and kindness of the Cuban farmer."

Coincidentally, Aluna is also exhibiting a group show of contemporary Cuban photographers in its project room — including ten images by Alfredo Sarabia, the lensman who inspired Cañibano to swap his welding gear for a Nikon more than two decades ago.

Cañibano says having his work hanging in the same gallery as that of his onetime idol doesn't change his motivation. "I've never thought about fame or money. I only do what I do because of a need for personal expression." •

FURTHER READING

NEW YORK TIMES, 2010

The New York Times



PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO
AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

In the Heart and Soul of Cuba

By Adriana Teresa Jun. 4, 2010



Malecón Habanero, Cuba, 1994 from Ciudad

Adriana Teresa is the cofounder of FotoVisura and the publisher and creative director of Visura Magazine. She curated and produced the FotoVisura Latin American Pavilion at the recent New York Photo Festival, including the show "Baobabs." Though she collaborated with Raul Cañibano Ercilla on the show, she has never met him face to face. All their exchanges occurred by e-mail, over limited Internet access.

Through the eyes of Raul Cañibano Ercilla, one can see life in Cuba from an intimate perspective, with all its complexities, wonders, struggles, humanity, love and sense of integrity.

In his black-and-white photographs, Mr. Cañibano captures Cuba's national identity; one that may very well be threatened by the inevitable thrust of economic development and an international tourist economy.

FURTHER READING

NEW YORK TIMES, 2010

The New York Times

He was born in Havana in 1961, two years after the beginning of the Cuban revolution, and grew up to be a welder working in civil aviation. While on vacation in 1990, Mr. Cañibano visited Cienfuegos — a city in south-central Cuba at the heart of the country's sugar cane, mango, tobacco and coffee production area — where he had lived as a child.

There, he met a photographer who shot birthday parties and social events. This encounter launched his own career as a photographer. Mr. Cañibano began by shooting weddings and quinceañeros. But the 1990s were difficult. The supply of photographic materials that came to Cuba from East Germany was disrupted. As a result, Mr. Cañibano had to work with expired materials as he prepared the chemistry for developing, processing and printing.

By the end of the decade, he had begun to grow as a visual artist. In the series “Tierra Guajira,” he explored the theme of life in the countryside; a place he longed for, a place that transported him back to his childhood. And he paid homage to the humanity, kindness and nobility of the Cuban farmer. The series was awarded the grand prize in the 1999 Cuban national photography exhibit.

Other themes he has explored include religion, festivals and everyday life in the country and in the cities. Hispanic Catholicism and African religious practices are of great interest to him, as he says that religion is the reason why different cultures survive.

In his documentation, he feels responsible for providing an accurate portrayal of Cuban life. Today, Mr. Cañibano works as an advertising photographer in Havana. His images have been exhibited and recognized worldwide. It has been an honor to collaborate with him but I'm left wishing for something more: I sincerely hope to meet him in the near future. •



Artemisa, Cuba, 2002 from *Tierra Guajira*

FURTHER READING

CUBA ART NEWS, 2016

Raúl Cañibano Ercilla: On Havana, the Cuban Countryside, and Documentary Photography

"My eyes, all this time, have never been those of a distant voyeur."

By Yanelys Nuñez Leyva - February 2, 2016

What would be the best way to introduce photographer Raúl Cañibano (b. 1961, Havana)? asks Havana curator and critic Yanelys Nuñez Leyva. To say that his work is fresh, contextual, unprecedented, and sensitive would be too inadequate and bland for the aesthetic richness and depth of his documentary work over 20 years. Surely, he would modestly reject these well-deserved designations, but his photography demands nothing less. He is one of the Cubans whose work has been collected by the International Center of Photography in New York, and in 2015 was the subject of a retrospective at the Neg-Pos-Fotoloft in the French city of Nîmes.

Here, Nuñez Leyva talks with Cañibano about his approach to photography, the themes he explores in his photo essays, and the challenges of being a professional photographer in Cuba these days.



Malecón Habanero, Cuba, 2006 from *Ciudad*

In your early years as a photographer, you were surprised by the dismantling of the “socialist camp” and the arrival of the Special Period in the 1990s. As an apprentice photographer, how did you overcome material shortages in the country?

It was difficult. When I left my job as a welder to devote myself full-time to photography, working in a friend’s studio at the beginning of the Special Period, I didn’t know I would also have to leave photography. Part of my early training as a photographer included those birthdays, weddings, and other festivities I caught with my camera, which helped me to support my family. But with the passage of time and as economic problems increased, Cubans stopped having their photos taken. And when I ran out of those expired rolls, I had to return to my old job.

FURTHER READING

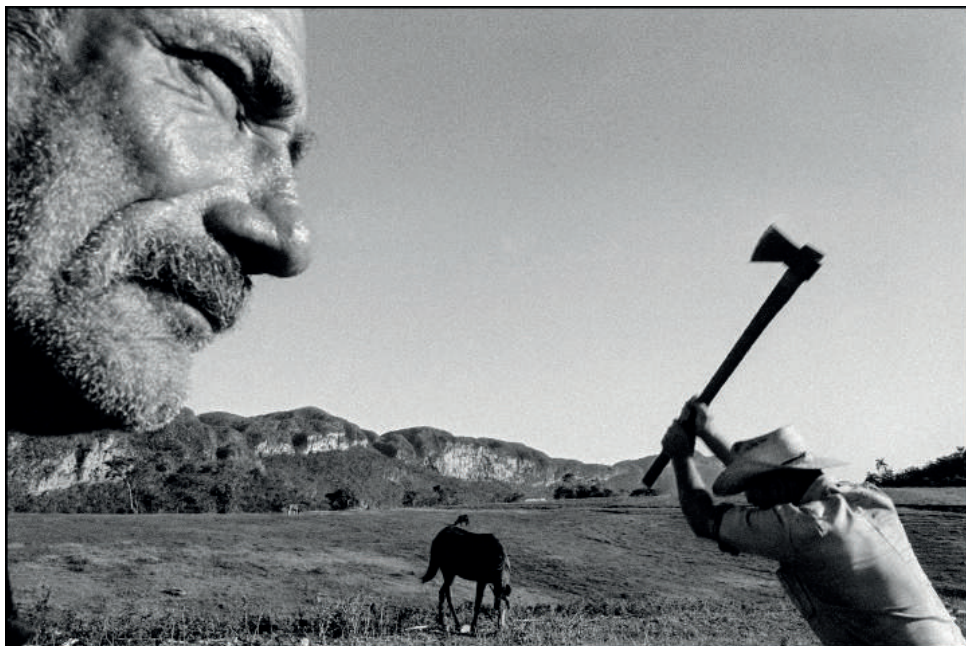
CUBA ART NEWS, 2016

How did you maintain your relationship with art?

I continued reading in order to be informed, as I had no other link with art. In 1990, I was sure I wouldn't go back to photography. By the end of that decade, with the arrival of tourism, I met many foreign photographers; when traveling to another country photographers usually look for their peers. These friends provided me with materials to take up photography again.

In 1999 you received the prize at the National Exhibition of Photography, with five images from one of your most important essays, Tierra Guajira. What was the production process of this series which is now almost 15 years old?

My work tries to have the same structure as journalism: where, who, how, and when. This photo essay has responded to such a structure since I started it, trying to document mores and customs which are constantly changing, as is identity itself. The follow-up I do with all the rural villages I visit has a strong anthropological nuance, because human beings are an inseparable part of my photography. My eyes, all this time, have never been those of a "distant voyeur." I have become like a relative of the *campesinos*: I live with them, take photos on their children's birthdays, and bring them clothes. They work hard in the fields; I just try to pay a heartfelt tribute to their nobility and hospitality.



Viñales, Cuba, 2006 from Tierra Guajira

Why the theme of the Cuban countryside?

I was born in Havana, but at an early age we moved to a small village called Manatí, Las Tunas. A few years later I returned to my hometown, but all my childhood memories lead me again and again to this town.

While working as a welder for civil aviation, during a vacation in Manatí, I discovered photography from a teacher who continually took portraits of his students and had his own studio. Thus, rural areas have always been linked to me. Going back to that place is like repaying a debt to its people, and to myself.

Any stories?

My field trips last approximately 15 days. When I get to a place, I use the technique of approaching a house and asking for water. I'm a shy person and never take photographs the first day; I move around the village trying to gain the confidence of the people, always using the same technique. Once, I drank almost a bucket of water, but I think it was worth it.

Is there any undiscovered area of that Tierra Guajira?

Of course. Right now, the country is changing slowly, and the countryside is no stranger to any of these changes. The whole process must be photographed. What's good about photography is its individuality,

FURTHER READING

CUBA ART NEWS, 2016



as it allows the coexistence of several views of the same subject. I still have much to learn about Cuba, and if I have not explored more roads, it's due to the lack of economic resources.

Other series also help to legitimize your future as a “documentary” photographer: Fe por San Lázaro, developed in the Rincon sanctuary; Ciudad; and more recently, Ocaso, among others. What motivates you to go around those dissimilar areas?

Life itself. I love walking through Havana and taking pictures. Ciudad comes from this experience of this constant unrest. I don't think it's my best work because it's a bit scattered, but some of the results I really like, such as some snapshots in the Malecón, which have a more organic look.

The San Lazaro series began in 2000, and I was not systematic: I rather started it as a photographic exercise, as a workout. This social space provides very good images each year. The devotees of this saint make very extreme and dramatic promises. Capturing the dramatic force of it is a big challenge.

I make several series at the same time; I'm always looking for something appealing. So now I'm approaching the topic of the Pentecostal Church in Cuba, and especially, the theme of old age.

What is this last essay about?

In my house, I have lived with an elderly person for a long time, and I have seen the disorders caused by aging. Sometimes people stay healthy—I've met 90-year-olds who can still swim—but sometimes the degenerative processes are more violent. I want to focus my photography on this duality of situations. I go to old people's homes; I walk the streets; I'm constantly researching because I want to illustrate the entire spectrum of possibilities.

What constitutes a good photo for you?

It should be one that has something to say to you. Sometimes people ask me: “How did you do this work?” And I give the same answer: I don't think much when I'm taking a picture.

But whenever I photograph something, I look for the important points in the scene: culture, history, religion. Then I edit the photos—not with Photoshop, which I hardly use—but by a rigorous selection process. Some colleagues help me a lot, as well as my daughter, who has a great eye.

With the opening in Havana of workshops, courses, schools, there is a great surge of people coming to photography. Is it easy to devote yourself to it? How is the life of a Cuban photographer? What kind of relationship do you have with the market?

To live on the type of photography that I do is becoming difficult, although I'm now at a point in my career which has caught the attention of international collectors, and this has substantially helped my livelihood. But if you live here in Cuba, you should generally have an extra job to subsidize the individual projects. So I do; every time I earn some money, a portion of it is allocated for the necessary expenses of my photography. It's the only way to develop a work of creative authorship. •