



LAKE FOREST
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An Interview with Madeleine Plonsker, author/collector about

**THE LIGHT IN CUBAN EYES:
Lake Forest College's Madeleine P. Plonsker Collection of Contemporary Cuban
Photography**

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Contact: Susan Weinstein (212) 645-4969

swpubrel@aol.com

Q. Why did you become a collector?

A. My husband's family collected 20th century art. They were passionate about the art they collected and the art of collecting. Their commitment was passed on to us. Our collection of contemporary Cuban photography began with a few known masters of Cuba's emerging generation of "Special Period" photographers. The work I saw in 2002 was exciting and soon I became involved. **THE LIGHT IN CUBAN EYES** is about the journey I began toward a lasting commitment to the Cuban photographic community.

Q. Why did you come to Cuba in 2002 and what was the art scene like?

A. I went with Williams College Museum of Art to look at art in Miami and Cuba. It was the beginning of Bush's terms, and the last moments for cultural exchange travel visas. I wanted to go, because I grew up with my parents' stories about their travels to Batista's Cuba. In 2002, most artists showed out of their home studios. There was no formal gallery scene. You had to know who the artists were in order to make contact with them. No formal guidebook existed then or even now in 2014. When we visited Havana's art institute, they were holding final exams. I spotted an unusual photographic sculpture. It was a hand-built postcard rack hanging from the wall. The 20 black and white photos it held, created out of salt, depicted a baseball game being played on an ancient TV screen. Using a Band-Aid as tape, I wrote a note to the artist with my contact information. That is how I met Harold Vázquez Ley and acquired his first photographic project.

Q. How did Lissette Solórzano's work begin your transition from 20th Century art to Cuban photography?

A. In 2002 I wandered into a makeshift gallery in old Havana, where I saw Lissette's work. It so reminded me of the work by Max Beckmann, the German Expressionist, who we collected, that I stopped to take a second look. I felt the image of people pressed together on a crowded train would work nicely, especially since we had already begun to put photographic images into our mix of twentieth-century masterworks on paper.

Q. Were there links between the photographers' work?

A. The seven photographs I collected on my first trip to Cuba were from six different artists: 4 men and 2 women. What they all had in common was either their incredible ability to catch the average Cuban unawares or to portray themselves in abstracted portraiture, as rare objects of beauty. Also important is the fact that they all began their careers as the Soviets left Cuba and hunger arrived.

Q. What's significant about Cuba's "Special period," 1989-2012?

A. This began in the late 1980's, when the Russians pulled out and left Cuba without backing and resources. The situation drew photographers out in the open. They felt more free to express themselves and capture what their country was experiencing, in personal terms; not just from a prescribed "State" point of view. They had to be resourceful, there were few cameras and only out-of-date film. There was no market for their work, but work they did, year after year, decade after decade. This "special period" has not ended. It is still difficult.

Q. How did the Soviet Union influence Cuba? Are Lisandra Ramírez Bernal's "nesting" boxes a good example?

A. Ramirez's nesting doll book depicts the good Cuban citizen as a friend of the Communist system. She is dressed as a soldier, a diplomat, an official, a cultural hero. The Soviets also left their imprint on the Cuban landscape. Soviet style concrete buildings abruptly arise into the skyline throughout Havana and its environs.

Q. How did you acquire the world-class photographs in THE LIGHT IN CUBAN EYES?

A. After my first trip, I was not able to return for five years. It was during the Bush years, when you had to be on a religious mission to travel to Cuba. In 2007, I reexamined the seven photos from Cuba and got excited. The eye for light and shadow in these photos was so unique that I decided to find a way to go back. My process was hit and miss, I searched out artists and galleries I knew from the last trip. I used an art book for reference. I found an incredible world of talented brilliant young artists. I managed to return with five more photos. I had a start.

Q. How did the Robert Mann Gallery become interested in the work?

A. The Robert Mann Gallery specializes in 20th century masters of photography and an international cadre of emerging and mid-career artists working in photo-based art. When I knew I was writing a book on contemporary Cuban photography, I approached him with the idea of doing an exhibition with the artists in the book. He saw the photographs and thought they were fabulous. Robert Mann and I have been friends for decades, and we were happy to be able to do a collaboration.

Q. How has the Castro government reacted to this publication?

A. Working with the Director of Fototeca de Cuba and his curatorial staff, has been of immeasurable value to me. A meeting with the Ministry of Culture was arranged in the spring

of 2014. There I met with Fernando Rojas, the Vice Minister of Culture who granted me the permission to publish the book to have a press event for the new release in Havana and for the book to be sold in the country's galleries and bookstores. This acceptance is unprecedented.

Q. In what ways do you compare this work to Western photography? Sometimes the photographs seem to echo Robert Frank or Dorothea Lange or reflect classical concerns about architecture, like Jorge Gavilondo's Old Havana.

A. The photography coming out of Cuba is grounded in the history of Western art. Cuba may be an isolated island, but somehow the photography remains parallel, in its integrity and freshness, to the outside world. It is the quality of light in Cuban photographs that grabs the eye and distinguishes it from the photography in other countries. This light may be bold, it may be subtle, but it remains the core of each photograph. There is also the subject matter. For instance, Liudmila + Nelson photo shop the image of Havana's famous Revolutionary Plaza as if it were underwater, near the Eiffel Tower, in the Sahara Desert—many places. It's a whimsical, yet ironic, commentary on Cuba's relationship with the outside world.

Q. Is it true that art is one of the few items exempt from the U.S. trade embargo?

A. There is no duty on art. Both the U.S. Government and the Cuban government have a mutual understanding of the importance of art and encourage the art of collecting it. Cultural exchange is a shared value. Clinton allowed coffee, rum, and cigars, but Bush didn't. Obama has again opened Cuba to cultural groups. And you can buy all the art you want.

Q. Is it inevitable that Cuba will ease restrictions? How will this impact artists?

A. Yes. It already has. Artists have access to foreign currency. As they sell their art, they are able to afford a better way of life. Under Raul Castro's relaxed restrictions, they have been able to buy vintage homes and convert them into airy galleries and comfortable living spaces. While some artists have talked of leaving, I have spoken to many of them about the value of being "a big fish in a little pond." Staying in Cuba and exercising their talent there, while being able to teach and travel abroad is a perfect formula for artistic happiness. And that is happening. If many leave, the world might lose out on their "lens view" of a society in transition

Q. What do you hope to accomplish with THE LIGHT IN CUBAN EYES?

A. It is my hope that travelers to Cuba will read my book and come to realize that the photographic souvenirs they bought are truly important works of art. That the artists they supported with their purchases have been collected by museums, foundations and private collections worldwide. Their photography contributes a unique cultural vision for world art. It should be viewed, as was the art from Japan or China, when those countries first opened to the world.