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Arts

¡Azúcar!: Images of Cuba's Economic Crisis

By **Matthew Harrison Tedford** Wednesday, Sep 2 2015



Tabaquero by Leysis Quesada



El Viaje by Liudmila and Nelson

"The Light in Cuban Eyes," Sept. 10 - Oct. 31; at Jenkins Johnson Gallery, 464 Sutter St.; 415-677-0770 or jenkinsjohnsongallery.com. After the U.S.S.R. collapsed, Cuba, having relied heavily on Soviet imports and exports, went into an economic crisis. Though Cubans suffered from food and petroleum shortages, adaptation by artists, writers, and musicians resulted in a cultural boom. "The Light in Cuban Eyes," at Jenkins Johnson Gallery in San Francisco, presents the work of over a dozen photographers who began their careers during or after this turbulent era.

Many people speak about Cuba as if it were frozen in the Kennedy Administration, when the Castro brothers were still young and rebellious, but Cuba's culture is as contemporary as it is complex. The recent liberalization of U.S. policy has brought attention to Cuba and its place in the 21st century. "The Light in Cuban Eyes" provides a glimpse at the range of photographers working in Cuba, a nation they portray as imaginative and rooted in history, a place defined by bustling cities, rural communities, and the people who inhabit them.

Liudmila & Nelson are a Moscow- and Berlin-born duo who met while studying at Havana's San Alejandro Academy of Fine Art in the early '90s. Their work is often surreal, blending incongruous objects to create unreal scenes. A piece from their *El Viaje* series (2004) depicts an open suitcase set against an ocean background. The silhouette of a human, rendered with an image of the sea, is tucked tightly into the luggage. This ambiguous imagery simultaneously evokes human smuggling and the childlike desire to stow away in another traveler's luggage.

Also engaging with the sea is Ramsés Batista's 2008 *La Tormenta* ("The Storm"), a humorous take on the traditional black-and-white female nude. The model's bare breasts and neck are seen with the ostensible focus on shadow and form that characterize so many nudes. But atop her right breast — a tempestuous wave about to crest — three tiny paper boats precariously float. The otherwise highbrow aesthetic is dominated by the absurdity of these miniature seafarers.

In another unreal but more sober photograph, Reinaldo Echemendía Cid combines metaphor and a nude figure to create a visceral political statement. A naked, muscular Afro-Cuban man stretches between two wheels of an antique-looking train. He acts as a coupling rod, holding together the train's driving wheels, and his power and labor stand in for the engines of the locomotive and of industry. His nakedness evokes his herculean strength, as well as the degradation of backbreaking toil and slave markets. Considered within the context of Cuba as one of the first and last sites of transatlantic slavery and of the importance of the slave-intensive sugar industry, the photograph exudes power.

Nudes and seminudes represent something different for experimental filmmaker and photographer Juan Carlos Alom, whose black-and-white work teeters between intimate and erotic. In one piece, a shirtless man stands casually in front of a woman who bends over a worktable gently pulling her shirt off, her skirt zipper already undone. Clearly posed in front of a photo studio backdrop, the image resembles a still life, doesn't denote voyeurism, and is sensual but not titillating.

The abundance of black-and-white photography is not relegated to metaphorical nudes and seminudes, however. Leysis Quesada's work is grounded in the everyday conditions of her rural childhood hometown Amarillas. Given the subject matter, her photographs are modest and frank. *Tabaquero* (2001) captures an elderly man in front of a weathered, ad hoc building in a rural location. The title identifies him as a tobacco grower, and his crop may be seen in the out-of-focus background — but the photograph focuses on him and his melancholy gaze.

Like Quesada, Pedro Abascal uses black-and-white photography to create a portrait of his hometown in *Dossier Habana*. But Abascal's Havana is unlike Quesada's agrarian Amarillas. In one photograph, an older man with his shirt tucked neatly into his pants walks past a mural of an Egyptian pyramid with a double bass hoisted over his shoulder. Elsewhere in the city, a young girl peers through a window, her palms pressed against the glass while an adult woman delicately holds onto her. A number of conflicting reflections confuse the scene, but it appears to be on a bus. In another, two women stand in a room cluttered with furniture, wood, bikes, and several mannequins. Together, these photographs illustrate a city that is busy and animated, although the bright colors often associated with Havana are by no means absent. Pavel Acosta's colorful photographs from his *Stolen Talent* (2009-10) series, for example, document the DIY culture of automobile repair and modification that arose out of decades of restrictive domestic policy and foreign embargo. If there is a uniquely Cuban aesthetic among all these varied artworks, it is not easily observable. Instead, the lack of uniformity speaks to the vitality and diversity of contemporary Cuban photographers.