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NEWS

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REVIEW > ALTERNATIVE PRACTICE

Belmont Freeman on the work of emerging Cuban designers on display at Architecture Omi.



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ARMANDO MARIO CALZADO'S EXILE.
COURTESY ARCHITECTURE OMI

Skyline Adrift:
Cuban Art and Architecture
Architecture Omi
1405 County Route 22
Ghent, NY

During times of economic stagnation and underemployment in our field, young architects seek creative outlet in venues alternative to the architectural office, like small-scaled self-built projects, art installations, and paper architecture. In Cuba one might say that this is a chronic condition. Officially, architecture school graduates in Cuba all find, or are assigned, employment in the country's planned economy, but such work is almost exclusively within government agencies and generally consists of the renovation and maintenance of existing facilities with little room for

creative design. In the absence of a functioning private sector and with an acute shortage of building materials there is little opportunity for a young designer to cultivate private clients and generate freelance architectural work of the type that nourishes so much beginning talent in the United States. Two young Cuban architects were recently given the opportunity to stretch their creative imaginations in spectacular fashion thanks to the Vermont Studio Center, which recently initiated a residency program for emerging Cuban designers to create site-specific installations at Architecture Omi. The great Cuban architect Ricardo Porro—based in Paris, but who in recent years has reengaged with the architectural community in Havana—was instrumental in proposing candidates for the program. The fortunate recipients of the pilot grants are Yilena Lourdes Fietó Echarri and Yoandy Rizo Fiallo, and the impressive product of their six weeks of work in Vermont is now on view in the exhibition *Skyline Adrift* at the Omi International Arts Center in Ghent, New York.

Yilena Feitó addresses the idea of skyline quite literally. Her piece, which she calls *Havana in Gray*, consists of a wood-framed cube of black scrim to which she has affixed silhouettes of the city and bay of Havana. The plywood cut-outs are coated in a raked acrylic medium and the effect is of a grim city under

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a hazy polluted sky, darkened by one of the frequent *apagones* (black outs) that plague Havana; elegiac and sinister at the same time. The urban profiles are based on pictures taken by Feitó, who is an accomplished photographer who explores the city of Havana as her subject. The true meaning of her piece is in the armature that holds the pictorial component aloft. Built of sturdy four-by-fours, the structure alludes to the ubiquitous scaffolding that keeps the crumbling buildings of Havana from collapsing (Feitó works in the office of the historian of the city of Havana on the restoration and conversion of historic buildings in Old Havana, so she knows about scaffolding). Her scaffolding is, one realizes on second look, fashioned as human stick figures with their arms raised. She explains that it is not the scaffolding that is holding up Havana, but the people, through their fortitude and collective sacrifice.



YOANDY RIZO FIALLO'S NEST: NINE POINTS OF VIEW.

In contrast, Yoandy Rizo's installation is an exuberant, strikingly beautiful work of pure abstraction. Also working in wood, he has built a monumental open-work sphere of intricately joined timbers with protruding arms or spines—menacing yet at the same time oddly endearing, like a porcupine or a terrestrial sea urchin that has just emerged from the forest at the edge of the meadow (I am reminded of Martin Puryear's zoomorphic sculptures). Enter the structure through an opening at the rear and the piece becomes a protected domicile, a fortified nest—hence the title, *Nest: Points of View*. You can see out but the spikey protrusions keep strangers from getting too close. The craftsmanship, engineering, and mathematical precision of Rizo's piece are extraordinary. During a presentation and discussion held in September at The 8th Floor gallery in Manhattan, Rizo shared early sketches of his piece and photos of its assembly from many hundreds of components, all completed in an impressive six weeks. One of the most satisfying aspects of both Rizo's and Feitó's presentations was their expression of unmitigated joy over being able to work with materials and tools to which they have no access in Cuba.

The installations by Feitó and Rizo share the landscape at Architecture Omi with works by two internationally established Cuban visual artists living outside of Cuba. Armando Mariño Calzado's piece, *Exile*, consists of a half-scaled wood shack held off the ground by a dozen or so pairs of cast acrylic legs. It is visually appealing but the heavy symbolism weighs it down. The themes of exile and loss that preoccupy so many artists of the Cuban diaspora (and I have family who left Cuba unhappily, so the sentiments are not alien to me) are potent but can ultimately be limiting. The sculpture by Alexandre Arrechea (a former member of the celebrated Cuban art collective Los Carpinteros) is more enigmatic. A multi-paned wood and glass door held aloft like a flag on a 20-foot tall steel mast, *Door in the Desert* is a communications device, a semaphore to guide wanderers. Is the door one through which one might pass to a place beyond, or is it a fragment from an abandoned settlement? The works by these two visual artists employ comparatively expensive materials and fabrication techniques, undoubtedly financed by their New York dealers. They make the installations by the two young architects, hand-built by their authors, all the more refreshing and impressive.

Rachel Perera Weingeist, advisor to the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation and the instigator of the project, and David Franck, founding director of Architecture Omi, co-curated *Skyline Adrift*. They express resolve to repeat the collaboration with Vermont Studio Center on the residency program for Cuban architects, and judging from the results of the inaugural venture it is a program well worth

continuing. The life-changing benefit to the individual artists—for Feitó and Rizo, this was the first time either had ever traveled outside of Cuba—is palpable. And a cultural exchange program such as this is a reminder that the arts community can help to reverse the harmful and pointless political and economic estrangement between the United States and Cuba. The constant refrain heard in Cuba is that the problem between our two countries lies with our misguided governments, not with the people. The evidence is at Architecture Omi, remaining on view through May 2013.

At press time I received news that Yilena Fietó had chosen not to return to Cuba and was seeking asylum in Miami, where she went to visit relatives after the opening of the exhibition. It is too early to know the repercussions, but her defection could jeopardize the future of the Vermont Studio Center's residency program for Cuban architects.

Belmont Freeman

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