Citizens of the World
Cuba in Queens

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Citizens of the World: Cuba in Queens examines how Cuban visual artists, living both on the island and in diaspora, grapple with the complexities of identity and place. Lo cubano is simultaneously a collective sentiment and a uniquely individual notion that extends beyond geographic and existential boundaries. The exhibition presents varied expressions of spirituality, humor, isolation, and discovery surrounding the intangible connections between where one lives, one’s birthplace, and one’s sense of self.

As the theme suggests, the tone and perspective of the work is widely diverse. Some artists convey a sense of celebration, while others focus on the disconnect between the promises of the Revolution and realities of contemporary life. Depictions of domestic spaces—grand, decimated, imaginary, or real—are prominent. Imagery of boats and rafts represents not only acts of migration but also a longing to return home and hopes for more liberal exchange. Intertwined cultural icons from the island and adopted homelands become emblems of the complexities of the immigrant experience. Through the reinterpretation of historical archetypes, viewers are prompted to question preconceived notions of what it means to be Cuban.

Cultural and national identities originate from a connection to a specific place. Whether it is driven by the desire to find the comforts of home, a necessity to relocate, or by an effort to clear the hurdles of immigration and assimilation, the search for a place that provides a sense of connection is universal. Though explored here in the context of contemporary Cuban art, Citizens of the World: Cuba in Queens pays homage to the vast range of experiences within the Queens community.

This inaugural exhibition celebrates the opening of The Shelley and Donald Rubin Gallery and launches a series of collaborations between the Rubins and the Queens Museum. Together they are committed to growing the audience for art by fostering community involvement. Their collaboration aims to reflect and honor the diversity of Queens, promoting engagement and encouraging cross-cultural dialogue.

—Rachel Perera Weingeist, Curator

Citizens of the World Cuba in Queens artists include:

- Alejandro Aguilera
  Havana, 1963; Atlanta, Georgia
- Ana Lía Amaya
  Matanzas, 1979; Santiago, Chile
- Alexandre Arrechea
  Trinidad, 1963; New York/Madrid
- Abel Barroso
  Havana, 1971; Havana
- María Magdalena Campos-Pons
  Matanzas, 1959; Boston, Massachusetts
- Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas
  Sancti Spíritus, 1962; Union City, New Jersey
- Javier Castro
  Havana, 1984; Havana
- Ángel Delgado
  Havana, 1965; Mexico City
- Roberto Diago
  Havana, 1971; Havana
- Guillermo Estrada-Viera
  Havana, 1963; Havana
- Luis Gárciga
  Havana, 1971; Havana
- Liudmila + Nelson
  Moscow, 1969; Havana
- Armando Mariño
  Santiago de Cuba, 1968; Athens, New York
- Frank Martínez
  Havana, 1971; Havana
- Clara Morera
  Camaguey, 1944; New York
- Bernardo Navarro Tomas
  Havana, 1977; Brooklyn, New York
- Douglas Pérez Castro
  Cienfuegos, 1972; Havana
- Elio Rodríguez
  Havana, 1966; Alicante, Spain
- Lázaro Saavedra
  Havana, 1964; Havana
- Esterio Segura
  Santiago de Cuba, 1970; Havana
- Yoxi Velázquez
  Holguín, 1988; Havana
- Jorge Wellesley
  Havana, 1979; Havana
Guillermo Estrada-Viera
Havana, 1963; Havana

Estrada-Viera’s work depicts the feelings of disillusionment and dire consequences suffered during periods of extreme government rationing. Recalling the scarcity of resources on the island, the artist began by collecting libretas de abstecimiento (ration card booklets), from families for a year. Painting over the cards, he places a starving figure’s chest, illuminated as if by x-ray, exposing his stomach in the shape of an empty pot on a barbed esophagus. Translucent tears of paint drip down his face; a caged halo highlights his head as an iconic image of a saint or martyr. The jagged marks and lines of the composition give a sense of the desperation incited by regulated food allocation and restricted access to basic resources.

María Magdalena Campos-Pons
Matanzas, Cuba, 1959; Boston, Massachusetts

Weaving disparate cultural symbols and traditions, Campos-Pons explores the fluidity of exilic identity, cultural hybridism, and racial politics. A self-portrait, The Flag Color Code Venice 13, features the artist dressed as the imagined composite character FeFa. A play on the word fe (faith), “Fe” stands for familiares en el extranjero, and “Fa” for family abroad. She wears an antique Chinese silk robe that alludes to her Chinese heritage; her skin is painted with cracked chalk paint, recalling her Yorúbán ancestor’s rites of cleansing and spiritual accomplishment. She carries and wears birdcages on her head, employing imagery of containment and freedom. Nine panels, joined in a grid, visualize the unification of the scattered fragments of FeFa’s exilic identity.

Campos-Pons’ performance piece Rosa de los Vientos. Winds Rose, was presented here to celebrate the opening of Citizens of the World and the renovated grand re-opening of the Queens Museum.

Esterio Segura
Santiago de Cuba, 1970; Havana

A man is divided between two imaginary spaces: Balanced on his extended arms, sleek architectural forms emerge from primitive arches into modernist skyscrapers. Springing from his head like hair, ideas radiate outwards creating a bridge between his mind and his visions. Yet the strained separation of the buildings, held awkwardly at a distance, suggest that the dreams they represent are unobtainable. The figure’s chiseled form reflects the artist’s background as a sculptor; the body is robust, his muscles artfully articulated to convey an imposing sense of heaviness and mass. This serene and reflexive composition is a departure from Segura’s earlier work, which used a satirical lens to explore political, historical, and ideological themes.
Abel Barroso
Havana, 1971; Havana

Abel Barroso uses wood veneer shingling to explore dilemmas of globalization and migration. Rudimentary raw wood tiles playfully evoke Cubans’ innovative and creative use of any and all available materials. Emblematic of transience, Casa Mochila exemplifies the symbolic weight people carry as they move from one place to another. Straps on the uprooted house allow the inhabitants to travel with all of their memories, experiences, and possessions in tow. The playful details and careful finishing impart the hopeful sentiment that a sense of self and home are transportable. Rather than being limited to a singular place, the owners can bring their home and identities with them as they pursue opportunities elsewhere.

Ángel Delgado
Havana, 1965; Mexico City

Imprisoned for six months in 1990, artist Ángel Delgado was prisoner number 1242900. Charged with defecating on Cuba’s national newspaper, Granma, during his performance La esperanza es lo ultimo que se está perdiendo (Hope is the last thing to go), he was made an example by the government. The arrest came to symbolize artistic censorship and had a profound impact on the Cuban artistic community, compelling many artists to leave the island in the years that followed. While in prison, Delgado experimented with the limited materials that were available to him. Upon his release, he continued to use discarded and non-traditional art materials. In 124900 a rope cross frames a central self-portrait. Surrounding the portrait, animal bones arranged in the rudimentary shapes of wishbones and crosses, representing hope, contrast with military pins, icons of rank and pride.

Roberto Diago
Havana, 1971; Havana

Responding to the Cuban revolutionary promise of housing for everyone, Ciudad en ascenso evokes the disorganized, crowded, and dilapidated atmosphere of an urban slum. As in much of his work, Diago, who is of African ancestry, uses ubiquitous found materials to explore the relationships between race, socioeconomic status, and identity. Piles of charred, sooty boxes that barely pass for shelter climb the wall, representing marginalized Cuban neighborhoods in which people fight daily for minimal sustenance. The lofty revolutionary language of ascension is reinterpreted here, as the boxes “ascend” to escape the accumulating mass, rising to provide aspiration and hope.
Douglas Pérez Castro
Cienfuegos, Cuba, 1972; Havana

Vedado, literally translated as “no trespassing,” is a neighborhood of Havana where Douglas Pérez now resides. Lying outside of the old city walls, the community grew rapidly during the economic boom of the 1950s and serves as a symbol of that consumerist era, when Cuba’s economy was closely tied to U.S. capitalism. The decade is noted historically as a period of struggle during which standards of living and quality of life for many Cubans drastically declined. In his ongoing multi-part series, Pérez builds on the status-centered imagery of advertising, using exuberant colors and playful graphics to satirize serious questions of poverty, sexuality, and the history of slavery. Examples such as Vedado 16 probe racist stereotypes like the Afro-Cuban market woman. Interspersed with shocking, fanciful sketches of contemporary life—monsters, sex, poverty, death—the work illuminates the tension between the promises of the Revolution and its disillusioning results.

Frank Martínez
Havana, 1971; Havana

Martínez meticulously recreates an iconic photograph of Mao Zedong, taken in the summer of 1966, and presents it as a billboard within Paradisíaco, recalling the propagandistic imagery of Fidel Castro and other Revolutionary leaders around Havana. Although the leader appears healthy in the archival portrait, in reality Chairman Mao had been diagnosed with cancer and was desperately trying to conceal his illness. The manipulation of Mao’s public image mirrors recent Cuban history—as Fidel Castro’s health declined between 2005 and 2006, his last two years as president, he largely removed himself from public life. Martínez explores the irony behind the veracity of a leader’s image through the contrast of 1960s Communist China and contemporary Cuba. Within the billboard, the Chairman’s luxurious setting is juxtaposed with a stark, deserted construction site. The paused development, evidenced by an abandoned tractor, symbolizes the stagnation of the utopian ideals of Cuba’s 1959 Revolution.

Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas
Sancti Spiritus, Cuba, 1962; Union City, New Jersey

Goodyear Triptych focuses—as does much of Cárdenas’s work—on the narrative of journey. Cárdenas draws comparisons between the dreams and realities of migration with a composition that considers the hurdles of immigration, perils of long journeys, and difficulties maintaining a connection to one’s homeland while assimilating into a new culture. The central figure is composed of Goodyear tires, a valuable commodity on the resource-strapped island, often associated with the impoverished rafts used by defectors. To the left of the central figure in the triptych, a ship serves as a symbol of passage. To the right, a more complex and richly colored metropolis based on the artist’s first conceptions of New York represents the hopes of immigration. Interwoven maps of Cuba and the United States demonstrate the integration of Cuban and American identities.