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**Walter**

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### TRENDSETTER

An art-filled obsession with Cuba

By Meaghan Agnew, Globe Correspondent | May 28, 2009

[http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/house/articles/2009/05/28/an\\_art\\_filled\\_obsession\\_with\\_cuba/](http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/house/articles/2009/05/28/an_art_filled_obsession_with_cuba/)

Michelle Wojcik knows what it is to be an island. As the owner of Galeria Cubana, the only gallery in New England to deal exclusively in contemporary Cuban art, Wojcik spends her days and nights managing every particular of her business, from hanging artwork to changing light bulbs.

"It's just completely usurped my life over the last two years," said Wojcik, of her retail venture. But hers is hardly a grouching tone. "I had never actually thought, Oh, work could be fun!"

The Lowell native has long been fascinated by Cuba. While studying for her master's degree in applied anthropology at American University, Wojcik got involved in a project with the Instituto Superior de Relaciones Internacionales in Miramar. She deepened her ties to the island nation while an assistant director to the Cuba Project at the World Policy Institute in New York from 2001 to 2004, spending a summer in Havana in 2002.

"That was the point when I really fell in love with the artwork," said Wojcik, 36. "I was taken by the unbelievable creativity of the people."

After a brief stint with the PBS documentary series "Frontline" in 2005 (a job that brought her back to New England), Wojcik sought a new career direction. Her plans crystallized when she took a class in entrepreneurship and was asked by an instructor what she really wanted out of her next job.

"I said sort of snidely, 'Well, if I really did want I wanted to do, I'd go down to Cuba and bring back art,' recalled Wojcik. "And he said, 'Well, maybe that's what you should do.' "

She opened Galeria Cubana in Provincetown in June 2007, featuring work she got on consignment from the Cuban Art Space in New York.

After two successful seasons, the Beacon Hill resident began contemplating a second outpost in Boston, ultimately choosing an airy space in the SoWa district. "There's really great synergy around here," she said of the neighborhood. The latest Galeria Cubana installment debuted in March to packed crowds; Wojcik will spend the coming season managing both galleries (she just moved to a larger space in P-Town) with the help of her assistant, Carlos Escobar.

Her current travel license, one of approximately 30 issued by the Office of Foreign Assets Control to galleries and museums in the US, allows Wojcik multiple Cuba trips a year to purchase art. The voyages are hands-on

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Cuban artists while educating US patrons about the exciting work being produced on there. She points to recent coverage of the Havana Biennial art exhibition as proof that "increasingly, Cuban art is getting recognized internationally, and respected."

What advice do you have for a non-aficionado who is looking to begin collecting art? It depends. It's always a good tactic to go to the art schools if you're looking to get a good price. But I'm a believer in getting what you like. If you want to have it on your wall, you've just got to be in love with it. If I think about what I have in my place, I don't really care whose name is on it.

Where do you go for Cuban food in Boston? El Oriental de Cuba in Jamaica Plain.

Best mojito in town? Masa.

What are the elements of a perfect mojito? Squeezed lime juice and fresh mint.

What's your 4 o'clock pick-me-up snack? I'm eating lunch about then. . . . Though, I'm completely addicted to the kettle corn from Trader Joe's - the perfect sweet and salty mix!

What are some of your local shopping indulgences? Shoes at the Tannery and Mohr & McPherson for eclectic treasures for the home.

What's your work style fashion-wise? What I really like is the '60s Jackie O. sort of thing. I wear more of that in the summer. I know the '80s are in style, but I'm old enough to have done the '80s and look back in horror.

What are some of your favorite Provincetown hangouts? I do like do go to the Muse, I like Edwige for brunch, I like Moda Fina for shopping. I'm not a morning person, but in Provincetown I try to get up early, go to exercise class on my bike. Biking in the morning before the crowds come out is really beautiful.

Any secrets for avoiding Cape traffic? Go in the off hours - or go on the ferry. I go on the ferry a lot.

What's your personal art collection like? Mostly I have Cuban art. I have an Italian piece and I have a Chinese cloth piece from 1880. There are a couple of pieces here [gesturing around the gallery] that I'm really going to have a problem not taking home!

Favorite book about Cuba? I've read a lot of scholarly books, mostly political, so it seems funny to emphatically recommend something. However, I would recommend the book "Art Cuba: The New Generation" by Holly Block to people curious about Cuban art.

What could Bostonians learn from the Cuban lifestyle? Well, this isn't just a Bostonian thing, but just a lot less emphasis on the material. I think we can all learn that. Go to Cuba and you can realize how much you really have when you think you're poor. American culture is very focused on work achievement and conspicuous consumption. If your life wasn't full of that, how much freer would you be?

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