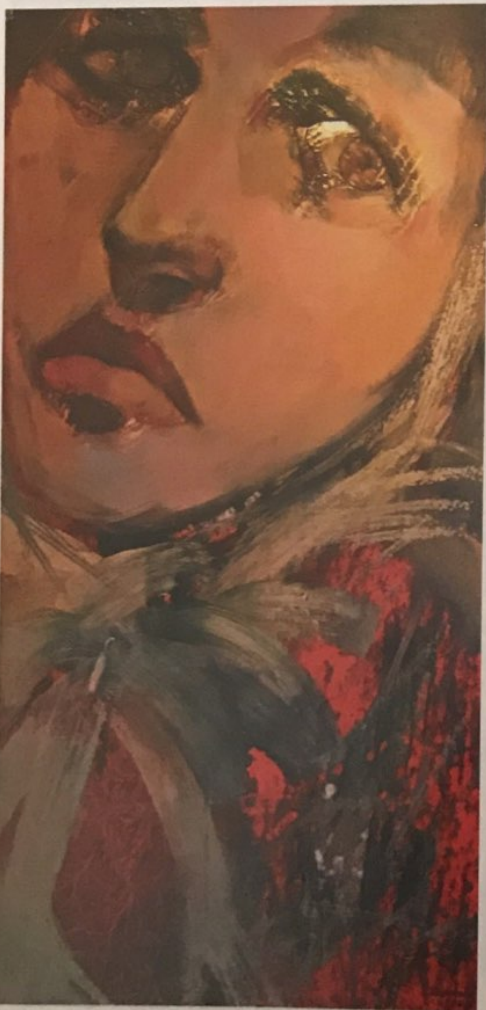


DEBBIE HAGAN

Cuban Art Big in Provincetown

Two paintings inside the door at Galería Cubana grab one's attention. Narrow, but tall—nearly six feet—they offer close-ups of two women's faces. The dark eyes portray deep sadness, coupled by what looks like fear. Edel Bordón, a respected artist and teacher in his home country, painted but did not title them. The meaning is left open to interpretation. Many artists like him want to be mysterious when working under the rules of a communist country.

Michelle A. Wojcik, gallery owner, has been showing the work of Bordón and other contemporary Cuban artists for three years. When Wojcik opened in Provincetown in 2007, she sold a hundred Cuban paintings in just a few months. "People appreciate it for the difference in style and color palette," says the gallery



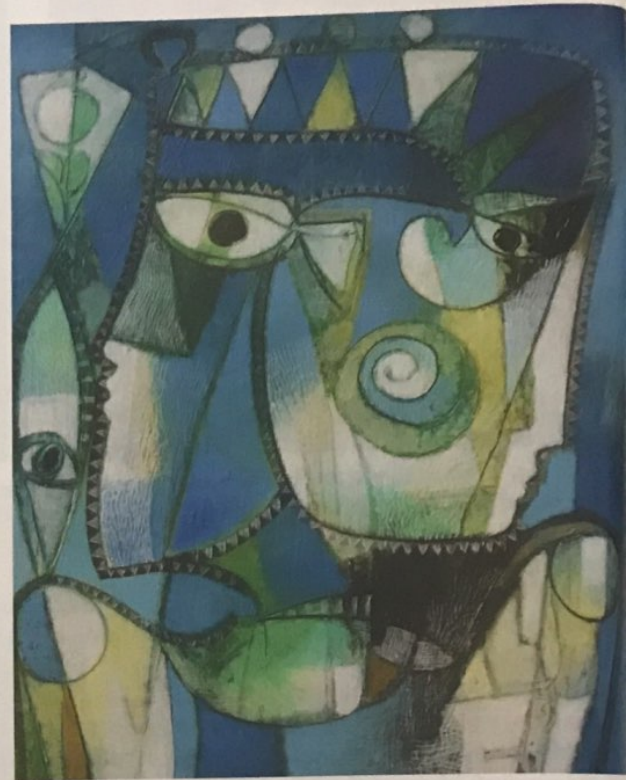
Edel Bordón, *Untitled*, oil & acrylic on canvas, 36 x 70".

owner, whose clients are largely Cuban-American or art lovers attracted to the bold, energetic work with obtuse political messages. She says, "Provincetown attracts an international crowd." Given this gallery's success, Wojcik opened a second gallery in Boston.

Two years ago, the *Wall Street Journal*, in an article titled "The Cuban Art Revolution," predicted a boom in Cuban interest and art sales. Since then, a number of books and shows featuring Cuban art have popped up nationwide, including *Cuba Art and History: From 1868 to Today*. In the past six months, New Englanders have seen two Cuban-based shows: *AJLA-CO: Stirring of the Cuban Soul* at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London, Connecticut; and *Beyond the Embargo: Cuban and American Ceramics* at the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts.

"Cuban art seems to be on the radar for people in Provincetown," says Rob Sequin of West Dennis, Massachusetts, who has been publishing the *Havana Journal* for the past eight years. Thus, he chose Provincetown as the city to host a three-day conference on Cuban travel, culture, and art, titled CubaCon. It will be held June 10–13, 2010.

This conference attracts an increasing number of people interested in how to visit Cuba in light of a US embargo that prevents most Americans from traveling to this island and spending money. Speakers will address travel, humanitarian aid, culture, and art. June 12 is designated Cuban Art Day, which will feature such speakers as Wojcik, Cynthia Griffith, author of *Havana Revisited*; and Sandra Levinson, executive director of the Center for Cuban Studies in New York City and the director of the Center's Cuban Art Space. In 1991, Levinson spearheaded a suc-



Orestes Gaulhiac, *Untitled*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 19 x 19".

cessful lawsuit against the US Treasury Department to legalize the importation and sale of Cuban art to the United States. Now museum and gallery officials, such as Levinson and Wojcik, may obtain a license to travel to Cuba to purchase art. Approximately thirty Americans have this license.

In conjunction with CubaCon, Judy Jalbert will be displaying photographs of her trip to Cuba at Iona Print Studio. A reception will be held on Friday, June 11.

Jalbert sailed to Cuba in February and spent five days roaming and photographing street scenes in Havana. She delighted in the 1950s American cars, still running and as polished as when they were new. She says, "It brings us back to when we were kids."

She also photographed the "white brigade" a group of women who dress head-to-toe in white. In 1999, their husbands were jailed for being counter-revolutionaries, and the women wear white clothes in protest. "They have the

guts to stand up and protest against a government they believe is repressive," says Jalbert.

Another Provincetown photographer who is showing images he captured in Cuba is Tom Johnson, who runs a gallery bearing his name. In 2009, he spent five days in Havana. "I wasn't sure if I'd be allowed to shoot whatever I wanted, particularly with soldiers with machine guns standing on every corner," says Johnson. "I was pleasantly surprised." Because it is a police state, Johnson says, it is the "safest big city you'll ever visit."

What caught Johnson's eye was the gorgeous architecture, deteriorating elegantly in a way that makes one think of Venice. One such building is *Residence in Old Havana*—a slender white structure trimmed up like wedding cake. Though the front doors are painted chartreuse they oddly match the creeping mold over the façade.

"I didn't know if they would sell or not," says Johnson about his photos. "But I see a lot of people who have been fascinated with Cuba and wanted to go but couldn't."

All of these artists and gallery owners hope that restrictions will ease under the Obama administration. In fact, Obama has now allowed Cuban artists to visit the United States. On May 14, Wojcik had her first Cuban art visitor—Orestes Gaulhiac. She hopes Bordón and his wife will also come to Boston in October or November.

But what about easing travel for Americans wishing to visit Cuba? According to Sequin, there's a House of Representatives bill, now in committee hearing, that, if passed, will ease restrictions. But Sequin cautions against celebrating too quickly.

"It's hard to predict," he says. "We've been waiting fifty years." It's possible that travelers to Cuba may have a few more years to wait.

Debbie Hagan is editor-in-chief of *Art New England* and teaches writing at *New Hampshire Institute of Art*.



Tom Johnson, *Residence in Old Havana*, 2009.

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Judy Jalbert, *Dancing for Freedom*, 2010, photograph, pigment-based ink on fine art paper. 9 x 6¾".