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## Cuban art shines in the South End

By Jenna Russell

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The Cuban artist Luis Rodriguez Noa has shown his work all over the world. But he had not been to the United States until this month, and last week, on the eve of his first solo show in this country, the 40-year-old painter was nervous.

“It is so important for my career, to come to this country and show my work,” he said, surrounded by his paintings at a South End gallery. “I cannot really express how important it is.”

The artist’s first trip to Boston, and current exhibition at Galeria Cubana on Harrison Avenue, comes at a time of thawing cultural relations between the two countries. A loosening of federal rules by President Obama has opened the door to more visits by artists; changes announced in January are also expected to revitalize study abroad programs and other educational trips to Cuba, which thrived under the Clinton administration but were curtailed in 2004, when President George W. Bush tightened regulations.

Officials at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design are making plans to reinstate separate Cuba trips for students and donors, both of which were popular from 2000 to 2004, said Janna Longacre, a professor. Plans to renew Cuban study are also in the works at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Encouraged by the same rule changes, Galeria Cubana owner Michelle Wojcik said she is considering leading trips to Cuba for Boston art collectors.

Wojcik is one of a handful of American dealers with a federal license to import art from Cuba. She runs two galleries specializing in contemporary Cuban art, a four-year-old seasonal space in Provincetown and the two-year-old South End location. Her invitation to Noa marks the third time she has sponsored visits by Cuban artists, allowing them to secure visas to travel to the United States.

“People want to see who’s behind the work, where the inspiration comes from,” said Wojcik. “People are so curious about Cuban art.”

It has been 49 years since President John F. Kennedy imposed a permanent embargo on trade with Cuba, after Fidel Castro seized power and moved to a communist government. The ban on travel, trade, and diplomatic dealings froze Cuba in time, keeping out modern goods and technologies, while also nurturing for many Americans a lasting fascination with the island nation.

Partly as a result of its isolation, and partly in spite of it, the arts have thrived in Cuba, Noa said. “Arts and culture are highly appreciated by a majority of people, whether it’s literature, paintings, dance, or music,” he said. “If you go to an art opening in Cuba, it will be packed . . . People fill the lack of material things with spiritual things.”

Since 1991, when the Center for Cuban Studies, a nonprofit group in New York City, successfully sued the US Treasury Department, art and other “informational materials” including films and books have been exempt from embargo spending limits.

The ruling, combined with President Clinton’s easing of travel restrictions, sparked interest in

Cuban art and spurred more trips by collectors, until 2004, when the trend reversed under Bush.

For years, Noa said, he turned down invitations to the US without trying for a visa, “because it didn’t seem possible, and I didn’t want the ‘no’ in my passport.” The atmosphere has changed since Obama took office, he said, and more artists have won permission to visit.

“There was a different feeling, and I had at least the hope that there would be a ‘yes,’” he said.

Obama, who lifted travel restrictions for those with family members in Cuba before increasing access for religious, academic and cultural groups, has been criticized by Cuban-American members of Congress who support the embargo and say the changes benefit the Cuban government.

Other Boston institutions are also expanding relationships with Cuba. Berklee College of Music professor Neil Leonard worked with Cuban musicians for years before bringing students there for the first time in December, a spokesman said. The Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra recently received a government license for a weeklong concert tour in Cuba this spring; the students will collaborate with the National Chorus of Cuba to perform Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

At Galeria Cubana, Noa’s work will be shown until mid-April. The artist has a 30-day visa, and plans to visit Provincetown and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City — the subject of his playfully titled painting “My Long and Winding Road to MoMA.”

Noa, who speaks near-perfect English, describes his art as ironic but rarely political. “Politics is one part of the whole, and I prefer the whole,” he says. His most whimsical works depict cows floating on bananas; more abstract pieces feature word fragments and dark, hieroglyphic-like marks against cloudy, gray-washed backgrounds.

In the watery “Ocean Boundary,” Cuba’s geography is the subject. “Even without politics,” he says, “it’s isolated.”

The biggest problem for artists in Cuba is the lack of materials, said Noa. When he travels abroad, he packs an empty suitcase and takes it home stuffed with canvases and brushes. Because the embargo restricts shipping, he had to hand-carry all 43 of the pieces for his Boston show with him.

David Davison, a senior faculty member at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and an organizer of past trips to Cuba, said the difficult conditions fuel “discipline and ingenuity” among Cuban artists.

“It gets rid of social status, and creates a kind of humanity, an earnestness and naturalness,” he said. “In many cases, we’re the impoverished ones, not them.”

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