



At their closest points, the United States and Cuba are only 90 miles apart. The distance between Provincetown and Boston is 116 miles, to put it into perspective. And yet, our two nations are worlds apart, a division that is a relic of the Cold War, when the United States imposed a strict embargo on Cuba in 1962, not long after Fidel Castro took control of the island nation.

Ever since, most Americans are forbidden to travel to Cuba, no American financial institutions are allowed to do business in the communist country, and there are no diplomatic ties with one of our geographically closest neighbors. While there is a rich Cuban cultural presence in the United States, it is largely in southern Florida. As a result, many Americans have little understanding of the country's culture, outside of a few Cuban-American celebrities and the occasional documentary or traveling ballet or musical group allowed out by the Cuban government and in by the United States.

There is however one exception – art. In 1991, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized the import and sale of Cuban art, cracking a window and allowing in a small fraction of the rich, diverse, and vibrant culture of Cuba.

“It’s one of the few things Cubans can do as a private enterprise,” says Michelle Wojcik, director of Galería Cubana, a gallery featuring Cuban artists with locations in Boston and Provincetown.

Galería Cubana will be one of the focal points of Cuba Con 2010, a weekend long conference with lectures, panel sessions, films, and art openings about Cuba, its culture, politics, and people. As the only communist country in the Western hemisphere, and because of its ongoing frosty relationship with the United States, it is difficult to view anything about Cuba without first politicizing it. But in large part, the art produced in Cuba is free from censorship and government imposed limitations.

“They have much more freedom of expression than you would expect.”

Cuba

ON CANVAS

by Steve Desroches

says Wojcik. “In private, many artists tell me they feel completely unencumbered. Recently, one artist just told me ‘I paint what I want’.”

The American view, commonly, is that Cuba is an isolated pariah. However, most of the world trades, travels to and from, and has robust exchanges with the nation. It’s really the United States that is isolated from Cuban culture, and to some extent vice versa. The result is misperceptions about the land of Castro.

“It’s a very complicated place,” says Wojcik, about Cuba in general. “The Revolution really supports the arts, which is much different than here in the U.S.”

Wojcik founded Galería Cubana in June 2007 and has been studying Cuban culture, politics, and economics for eight years. From 2001 to 2004, she served as Assistant Director for the Cuba Project at the World Policy Institute in New York City. During her time with the WPI, she researched the political and economic developments in U.S.-Cuba relations, and facilitated dialogue among leaders with varying perspectives on U.S.-Cuba policy.

Wojcik’s position afforded her a license to spend substantial time on the Caribbean island. Captivated by Cuban art on her initial trip to Cuba in 1999, her favorite pastime quickly became seeking out artists in markets, galleries, and in private homes and studios. She increasingly felt an overwhelming shift to move more directly into the world of art and design.

Cuban art is well regarded the world over, says Wojcik. There are only a handful of galleries and museums in the United States that deal with Cuban art. At last count there were 30 licenses given by the U.S. government to



Michelle Wojcik, owner of Galería Cubana.

galleries and museums approved to import Cuban art.

"I wanted to introduce Cuban art to a population with limited exposure to life in Cuba," says Wojcik. "This gallery brings together my passion for Cuban artwork and social entrepreneurialism."

It isn't always easy, or simple, but the artwork is her passion, and the benefits to opening a dialogue between the two peoples are a driving force behind Galería Cubana.

"Over the last 15 years things have changed," says Wojcik, adding that the ease or difficulty of being able to work with Cuba as a private American business owner depends largely on who is in the White House and who controls Congress.

Trying to define what is Cuban art is as difficult as it would be describing any artistic heritage of a multicultural and diverse society. Galería Cubana offers an exceptional collection of contemporary Cuban art gathered from artists living on the island of Cuba. Cuba's distinct cultural history has produced extraordinary art varying broadly in styles, methods, and materials. After decades of anonymity, Cuban art has finally been gaining greater exposure and international recognition for its accomplishments.

"There are so many artists doing so many things," says Wojcik. "There are influences from Africa, the Spanish masters, European art. You see influences from Santería. Many artists are well schooled. Cuban artists don't live in a commercialized world, so that element might not be present in their art. These artists are taken very seriously in Cuba and throughout the world."

CubaCon '10: The Cuban Art & Culture Conference happens at multiple venues in Provincetown, June 10 -13. The conference kicks off at Galería Cubana, 357 Commercial St. (508.487.2822) with an opening reception on Thursday, June 10th, from 7 - 9 p.m. The reception is open to conference pass holders and by invitation and is sponsored by Provincetown Magazine. The full conference schedule can be found on page 6.

"Untitled" by Victor Mora (2010, painted collage on handmade paper).

