

You think you know Cuba until you see the new show in Washington by seven young artists from the island

By [David Montgomery](#) December 11 at 8:06 PM



Detail of “Upperworld” by Lorena Gutierrez. (Courtesy of the artist.)

The first sign of bold experiments at the Inter-American Development Bank is the window display of crisp white collars and photos of models in sharp suits. Is money so tight for the hemispheric funder of economic development projects that it must open a retail boutique at its headquarters a few blocks from the White House?

The mock merchandising is part of a meditation on white-collar crime and corruption by Havana-based artist Lorena Gutiérrez that she calls “Upperworld.” Her installation continues inside the bank with a suited mannequin; a video in which glamorously robotic actors finger merchandise; and a sexy and menacing soundtrack rap about gift-giving. Printed on the wall are penalties under the Cuban penal code for embezzlement, bribery, forgery and illegal enrichment.

Corruption is universal, of course, but the fact that a Cuban artist is not only tolerated but celebrated for signaling its presence at home — “Upperworld” was included in the prestigious Havana Biennial earlier this year — might surprise viewers with different assumptions about artistic freedom on the island. The goal of independent Havana curator Cristina Vives was to elicit just that sort of surprise at the variety of contemporary artistic responses to Cuban reality when she organized exhibit that opened this week at the [IDB Cultural Center](#), called “Q & A: with Seven Contemporary Cuban Artists.”

“That was my challenge as a curator,” Vives says. “For me and for the artists around me, what are some of the main issues that I think have to be faced? Not the regular [themes] that every tourist perceives when they see Cuba. Let’s go deep. So I went to young [artists]. Why? Because they have nothing to lose....And the very good background they have, of studies in Cuba, of living in Cuba, knowing the reality, but from a new and fresh perspective. Very critical, but very positive.”

The artists range in age from their twenties to their forties. They were all in town for the opening this week. All have accomplished major exhibitions in Cuba, and several have exhibited in the United States and Europe. Deliberately eschewing the familiar tropes of commercial and popular depictions of Cuba — the decaying grandeur of Havana, the exotic landscapes — Vives selected works in which the artists address questions about history and the control of information, about how Cubans see themselves and how they think the world sees them.

“Dancing Bacardi” by Alexandre Arrechea. (Bacardi Collection, Miami)

“Art is a different knowledge,” Vives says. “If we don’t use art for that purpose, what are we doing? We are not helping a real development of our society. We are not helping a real knowledge about our country. We are hiding things. And that’s not good for anybody.”

The artists and Vives acknowledge the existence of a line between art and political activism that they cannot cross without risk of reprisal from Cuban authorities. The night before the opening, during a panel discussion at the Katzen Arts Center at American University, a member of the audience asked about performance artist [Tania Bruguera](#), who was detained a year ago when she planned to stage a free-speech event in Havana’s Plaza of the Revolution. Two of the artists once studied under Bruguera, and Vives has worked with her in the past. The seven visiting artists say that censorship has never curtailed their ability to express themselves artistically.

[Cuban artist pushes boundary between art and politics, and pays a price]

The seven works in the exhibit come in a variety of styles. “In the Spotlight” by Humberto Díaz consists of 21 suspended flashlights creating a pool of light on the gallery floor. To reach the rest of the exhibit, visitors must choose whether to enter the spotlight or skirt it. It suggests the intense focus on Cuba these days, as diplomatic relations with the United States are rekindled. Seen another way, as Díaz writes in the catalogue, the work “presents situations in which the excess of power defines unilaterally what is or is not important, generating an atmosphere of tension, control and vigilance.”

Painter Alejandro Campins is interested in the impermanence of landscapes. His large canvas “Fort Tilden, New York” shows the remains of a U.S. military installation that had surface-to-air missiles during the Cold War but now has become a park. “It is my intent that when people stand in front of one of my landscapes, they do not have a comfortable experience,” he writes.

“1972” from the series “Re-construction, The Gray Five-Year Period,” by Alejandro Gonzalez. (Courtesy of the artist)

Alejandro González recreates moments of Cuban history, sometimes with actors posed in photographs, or, in this case, with cardboard and small lead model figures. The series on display depicts official mass meetings from “the Gray Five-Year Period” (1970-1975) — “a period of dogmatism and bureaucratization,” he says.

Fidel García did his own research into cases of public corruption in the last 25 years. His piece “Collectivization” is a light projection of the information as a kind of flickering graph on the wall.

“The City that Stopped Dancing” is a series by [Alexandre Arrechea](#) in which the artist created large models of monumental Havana buildings and placed them on giant spinning tops. The exhibit includes a piece from that series, “Dancing Bacardi.” The Bacardi building is depicted on its side, as though the top has stopped spinning but is poised to be spun again.

Javier Castro’s video “I’m Not Afraid of Eternity” is video portraits of people in a Havana neighborhood. They freeze, gazing at the viewer as if in a photograph, while the motion of life continues around them. “My videos record a group performance — a social performance — that returns to the characters and to the viewers a mirror [image] of themselves.”

While the cultural arm of the development bank has Cuban art in its collection, this is its first show of Cuban artists, says Trinidad Zaldívar, chief of the cultural, solidarity and creative affairs division.

“There is a [cultural] dialogue that is happening and we wanted to be part of it,” Zaldívar says. “The bank not only builds real bridges but cultural bridges, too.”

Vives, the curator, said the thawing relations between the two nations may not change the lives of Cuban artists too much. They have enjoyed travel privileges for some time, and international collectors and galleries have long been acquiring their work. Indeed, the flood of money and visits from perhaps less sophisticated art fanciers may have a distorting effect on the world’s understanding of Cuban art.

“I’m really concerned that people not familiar with art...will pay attention to some areas of our art and culture that are not exactly real representatives of the best,” Vives says. “When you have more options you have more chances to make a mistake.”

She hopes this show will serve as a sample of what the new visitors should be looking for.

“Q & A: with Seven Contemporary Cuban Artists,” weekdays 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. through mid-March at the Inter-American Development Bank Cultural Center, 1300 New York Ave. NW.



David Montgomery writes general features, profiles and arts stories for the Sunday Magazine and Style, including pieces on the Latino community and Latino arts.

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