



Adiós Utopia: Dreams and Deceptions in Cuban Art Since 1950 ***A Critique***

The title of the Cuban art exhibit opening on November 11 at the Walker Art Center elicits some perplexing questions that the exhibit never really answers. Which dreams? What deceptions? Who is bidding farewell to Utopia?

Ever since the triumph of their Revolution in 1959, Cubans have indeed been proud of their dream that "*un mejor mundo es posible*" — "a better world is possible." This dream began to take shape in the first moments of the new era, when brigades of young people spread throughout the island to bring basic reading and writing skills to millions of illiterate Cubans. The dream was further developed by Che Guevara in his concepts of international solidarity and "*el hombre nuevo*" — "the new man." He believed that "[attitudes in Cuba towards race, women, individualism and manual labor were the product of the island's outdated past and urged all individuals to view each other as equals . . .](#)"

In this period, art and expression blossomed in Cuba and political solidarity spread across what came to be known as the third world, reflecting itself in organizations like the [Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America](#) (OSPAAAL), founded in Havana in 1966, and known for its innovative use of poster art as shown in the exhibit's display of 50 pieces from that period.

The Cubans never claimed, however, that Utopia had been achieved, or would ever be possible, in a world dominated by ruthless colonial empires intent on destruction of any vision contrary to their own *conquistador* mentality. In fact, the punishing [economic blockade of Cuba](#) by the United States, estimated to have cost the Cubans billions of dollars, has been firmly in place since 1962, and is a prime example of the obstacles to achieving, not Utopia, but simply "a better world." And next month, on November 1, in a [vote](#) that has taken place annually for 25 years, the member countries of the United Nations will overwhelmingly show their opposition to the U.S. blockade (or "embargo") of Cuba.

Given this reality, it is startling to see the Walker's glaring misstatement, in a description of the November 16 [screening](#) of *Tania Libre*, that "former President Obama lifted the embargo against Cuba" in 2014. Although some moves toward normalization of relations were made, he most emphatically did not end the embargo, nor, needless to say, has President Trump. Our government's punishment of Cuba for its revolutionary audacity continues nearly unabated. This kind of error undermines the credibility of the exhibit.

Also perplexing is the use of the word "deception" in the exhibit's title which seems to be intended more for its negative effect than its actual representation in the exhibit. The words "deception" and "disillusionment" seem to be used interchangeably even though they have entirely different meanings. The Walker's [press release](#) states as a basic premise that "Cuba's revolutionary aspirations for social utopia—and subsequent disillusionment—shaped nearly 60 years of Cuban art." However, illustrations of "deception" in the exhibit seem absent.

In any case, the choice to frame the exhibit around disillusionment leads to, as one [review](#) puts it, a "one dimensional and simplified Cuban history" and further,

"It is clear that *Adiós Utopia* has a thesis that is overtly represented but not explicitly stated: each room seemed to continue the arc of the show towards a demonstration of the Cuban Revolution as a failed experiment. The title itself reads as an obituary for the passing of the revolutionary attempts. Ultimately, how could a U.S.-centered exhibition of Cuban art not be political on levels beyond the political art contained within the exhibition itself?"

The exhibit presumes that viewers will agree with its implicit assumption that Cuba's ideals are, and have always been, an illusion.

This assumption of disillusionment continues with the exhibit's decision to prominently feature the works of [U.S.-based](#) Cuban expatriate artist Tania Bruguera. Her role as an authentic voice to express the supposed failures of the Revolution is undermined, however, by the likelihood that much of her notoriety has been achieved, not through support by the Cuban people who "[did not show up](#)" at her performance in Cuba, but [from the coffers](#) of the U.S. Treasury. This is all part of the U.S. government's [continuing campaign](#) to undermine the Cuban government by promoting phony dissidence.

In order to understand the essential hostility of the exhibit towards the Cuban Revolution, it is useful to take into account the background of its principal sponsor [Ella Fontanal-Cisneros](#), [described as](#) a Miami socialite, philanthropist and art collector whose family fled Cuba for Venezuela just after the Revolution, where she married a media and Pepsi Cola tycoon.

Add to that the story of Olga Viso, the Walker's executive director, and a principal adviser to the exhibit. She [describes herself](#) as the daughter of Cuban exiles and makes it clear where her sympathies lie in her [comments](#) on the Walker website where she describes watching Tania Bruguera perform as an "experience that is suffused by my own personal history and heightened sensibility as a child of Cuban émigré parents who left the island in the wake of the 1959 revolution."

Viso is reported to [have said](#) last year that the exhibit will bring a "perspective [that] has largely been absent in U.S. galleries and museums, which because of icy relations and trade restrictions have been more likely to feature works from Cuban émigrés than artists who stayed." This is a surprising statement, since it appears that much of the exhibit in fact features the work of Cubans who are disaffected with the Cuban Revolution, many of them Cuban exiles who no longer live on the island and are exactly the artists that the exhibit claims **not** to be featuring.

The exhibit is also unclear about whether it can claim any authoritative links to Cuban art institutions. The Cisneros Art Foundation [says](#) two of the three curators hold positions at Cuba's *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* and the *Instituto Superior de Arte*, whereas the Walker [describes them](#) as "independent curators."

Adiós Utopia will undoubtedly be a compelling exhibit, but it is one that has been tarnished by its essential bias against the Cuban Revolution. In a period of deteriorating U.S.-Cuba relations, where the Trump administration has expelled Cuban diplomats and discouraged travel by U.S. citizens because of unsubstantiated "sonic attacks," it is especially important that objective information be made available to the public.

We recommend that visitors to the Walker exhibit temper what they see there with a visit to *Made in Cuba: Recycling Memory and Culture, Part II*, an exhibit by the [Center for Cuban Studies](#), which has been deeply involved with and supportive of Cuban art since 1972. It will be open from November 18 through January 14 at [Squirrel Haus Arts](#) in Minneapolis. For those who wish to read more about art in Cuba, we suggest, as a starting point, the book by Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, *To Defend the Revolution Is to Defend Culture: The Cultural Policy of the Cuban Revolution*.

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Links to source materials can be found at the website.