

MINNESOTA CUBA COMMITTEE Minneapolis-St. Paul



The Walker Art Center's *Adiós Utopia*: Cold War Miami comes to Minneapolis

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With its newly opened *Adiós Utopia* exhibit, the Walker Art Center has once again demonstrated its failure to understand that the art it displays cannot be divorced from its historical context. This was true of the “scaffold” installation that erupted in controversy earlier this year and it is true of *Adiós Utopia*. The show is a throwback to a time when the first steps toward normalization of relations between the US and Cuba had not yet been taken and people in the US didn't dream of visiting the forbidden island. But times have changed and attitudes toward Cuba have changed with them. This is particularly true in Minnesota where legislators, business people, academics and others have been leaders in calling for an end to the US embargo of Cuba and to the US government's restrictions on travelers to Cuba.

Adiós Utopia is primarily the result of the collaboration between two daughters of Cuban expatriates, Miami art collector [Ella Fontanals-Cisneros](#) and [Olga Viso](#), the Walker's executive director. Both freely admit to having been deeply marked by their parents' loss of homeland when they fled Cuba following the 1959 Revolution.

Their parents were of course not alone in choosing exile. After overthrowing the brutal Batista dictatorship, the Revolution made massive changes in the Cuban social and economic order. These changes that were not always welcomed by the wealthiest layers of society. Under the new government, free and universal health care became available as did free high quality education through the postgraduate level, illiteracy was eliminated, an artistic renaissance flourished and much more. In response, many who feared the loss of their privileged positions left the island.

Despite the undisputed political leanings of Viso and Fontanals-Cisneros, and despite the actual content of the exhibit, the Walker's publicity has been less than straightforward about acknowledging its exile and dissident character. What the Walker does say is that the exhibit is "the most comprehensive and significant presentation of modern and contemporary Cuban art shown in the United States since 1944." (August 7, 2017, [press release](#).) This assertion of inclusiveness is continued in much of the exhibit publicity which showcases early revolutionary poster art and images of Che Guevara, all of which convey the wrong impression of the exhibit.

These ads are belied by the exhibit's fervid anti-Revolution sentiment. The bias is clear in the content of the art as well as in the captioning that accompanies it. Many of the artists illustrate their dissatisfaction in grotesque and distasteful ways that are clearly intended to be metaphors for a failed society. For example, *Luchar, Resistir, Vencer* (Fight, Resist, Win) contains scenes of sexual violence against a woman by a robot. In another piece, artist Tania Bruguera has chosen to depict herself wearing a diaper. Another work, *Faro Tumbado* (Felled Lighthouse), portrays the iconic and historic Morro Castle lighthouse toppled and lying on its side, an image that many Cubans would likely find disrespectful of their heritage.

The exhibit's character is further reflected in the rancor of the captions on most of the pieces. Terms like "abandonment" and "decay," references to the Revolution's "utopian expectations," its "failures" and its "isolation" run throughout. Examples of section titles in the exhibit include "Cult and Deconstruction of the Revolutionary Nation," "The Imposition of the Words: Discourse, Rhetoric, and Media Controls" and "Sea, Borders, Exile." Yet there is only one piece, *Bloqueo*, that refers to the nearly 60-year-old US embargo of Cuba which has wreaked untold damage on the island's people and economy. That piece, however, erroneously suggests that the embargo was created by Cuba.

Confirming the political slant of the exhibit, a November 11 panel that included Fontanals-Cisneros and several of the exhibit's artists made it clear that the exhibit was intentionally created to reflect dissident, expatriate views. One of the co-curators, Gerardo Mosquera, said, in answer to a question from the audience, that the exhibit was never intended to be balanced; that it's a "critique of the revolution." One might ask why this wasn't made clear in the reams of publicity materials that the Walker has distributed.

As a member of the Walker said recently, she thought from the extensive information she's received about the exhibit, with its prominent iconic revolutionary images, that some even-handedness would be achieved. She was disappointed to find that was not the case. Another attendee, a frequent visitor to Cuba and an art collector, said the exhibit was unlike anything she'd ever seen on the island.

It should be noted that despite the antipathy of some of the exhibit's artists to the Cuban Revolution and their claims to be throttled by its restrictions, they seem to have no problem expressing their dissident viewpoints, and they travel freely between Cuba and the rest of the world, exhibiting and selling their art and in many cases maintaining primary or second residences both in and outside of Cuba.

The Walker, of course, has every right to exhibit the artwork of Cuban dissidents but it is not entitled to claim that its show is a representative collection of Cuban art. Not only is this dishonest, but selection of pieces primarily for their political message leads to an exhibit that is stilted and messianic. Its focus on political positions from the 1990s rather than on the recent warming of relationships between Cuba and the US makes it an exhibit "whose time came last year, or maybe even a decade ago." ([Houston Press](#).)

People interested in work that reflects Cuban reality, by artists currently living in Cuba, should visit the Squirrel Haus Art Minneapolis exhibit, [Hecho en Cuba](#), mounted by the New York-based [Center for Cuban Studies](#) (November 18-January 14). The Center's description of the exhibit says,

The work includes photography and posters, folk art, paintings, drawings, prints, small sculpture, ceramics and wearable art, and themes that range from the political to the spiritual to everyday Cuban life, to exploring one's inner angels and demons. ([Center press release](#).)

Unlike *Adiós Utopia*, whose outdated political messaging would doubtless please the dwindling band of elderly Cuban exiles in Miami, *Hecho en Cuba* has "no hard-and-fast political theme" and is a "counter comment" to the Walker exhibit. ([Center press release](#).) Featuring more than 300 works (all of which are for sale), it allows for a more expansive look at not only Cuba's art, but also Cuba's people.

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Links to source materials can be found at the committee website as well
as a link to an earlier [critique](#) of *Adiós Utopia*.