A Cuban artist’s works in diverse media give philosophical insights into societal issues.

BY LENNIE BENNETT | Times Art Critic

Tampa is no substitute for seeing art directly, but most of the time, you can look at the images you printed from a museum exhibition and get a sense of what to expect. Carlos Garaicoa’s “Le emienda que hay en mi” (Making Amends) at University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum is one of the exceptions. Most of the works just don’t translate well in print. And, anyway, it’s such a fine show you really should run.

Here’s an example from this marvelous exhibition by the Cuban artist. Large-scale black-and-white photographs show details of downtown Havana sidewalks, old cars made from tin cans (little chips of metal, a popular surface in the 1950s). As the viewer walks back then, the name of the business—usually a restaurant of bar—was spelled out in contracting terracotta at the entrance.

There are names such as “El Art” and “La Jeta.” They’re generally neutral. But the artist writes on the exterior in black human-like letters, imbruing them with broader meaning. life in Cuba, using blackened threads woven around small silver pushpins. The script are all different and difficult to read even up close, impossible to capture in a photograph. Glued directly to the plate structure, these names augment a new architectural model—or perhaps the old one. With no need of, in Bond, or well-mails in Spanish and English deepens the context of each work.

Garaicoa is a philosophical melancholic, combining the ideals of art, architecture and language in a seamless fusion that gives his both a sense of detachment and thoughtful insights into social and urban issues. He has plenty of material in Cuba, especially Havana, about that every, in his photographs, to have stood. His body-old buildings is now done with assign of cleaned.

In some ways, Garaicoa seems to argue, that is a blessing. He said during a recent interview at USF that Cuban isolation from the rest of the world has saved it from rapid development, while acknowledging that the country anticipates a flood of money coming in from foreign investors as the government seeks to show up its citizen economy. "It brings with it the good and bad" he said, and see a more affluent country as an opportunity to plan carefully in advance what a new Havana would look like, one that would respect its remnants and limit what he calls "rupture buildings" the ones that are exploded identically everywhere as part of post-branding.

He places great store in context. Now that he’s a big name in the international art world, he is committed to create new works for museums that he makes specific to the place. The USF show doesn’t have a great specificity, drawn from previous exhibitions, so we don’t know what he would have made of the Tampa Bay area. But his art has the “think globally, act locally” sensibility that makes it universal in its nuanced layers of meaning.

Two more series of large black-and-white photographs are also shot in Cuba. In The Social Transform, he made dinh-relief billboard frames as his starting point. They were erected in the 1960s throughout the cities and countryside to carry propaganda messages from the Castro government. Today, they are empty, a metaphor Garaicoa would play on with further interventions. Instead, he covers them with photos suggesting new life and repurposing, and in some cases new messages that are antipropaganda.

The third element in the art he has given Garaicoa’s platform to express his belief that art should be more a pretty picture. It has a moral imperative, he says, a pronged design. To him, art is an artist, he doesn’t differ-hammer us with messages. "I would go to End City Hall is a beheading meditation on ups and downs, white tables covered with sheets red paper. Each has a content that Garaicoa has best, "elided and 844 844" into a suggestion that a detail from an architectural model. He then exercises to look at the one-dimensional notion and figure out how he creates a shape that looks differently differ-ently in three dimension. The work is knee jerk charming and designed to delight. Taken as a whole, its larger meaning emerges as a microcosm of a city and all the diverse styles that go into the best over time.

The most famous and glorious work in this show is The Crown Jewels, eight explicit little reproductions of buildings cast in silver. They aren’t the architectural marvels you would expect. They’re replicas of places around the world that have histories of gov-ernment surveillance, repression, even tor-ture. It’s perhaps the least interesting in the exhibition, in message without the subsidy of the other them. It’s also anomalous exhi-its in its execution, giving a pillarsizing zoo to the bombast of the buildings themselves. We understand of the most modest work in the show and a reminder. Seeing using this a space clock, it’s high on a gallery wall. Its ap-parations are modest, too. Numbers circle the face in current order but the hands run mean-derrecognize. It’s willful thinking embodied. Garaicoa’s small sly advantage that we all have a desire to go back in time and perhaps change a future outcome. He and we know the difference between such curiosity and the possibilities of the future.

Images courtesy of USF Contemporary Art Museum.

Byline: Lennie Bennett.


Detail from Bend City Hall, 2008, cardboard, wood, Postcards.

Carlos Garaicoa: La emienda que hay en mi (Making Amends) The exhibition is at University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, 4200 E Fowler Ave., Tampa, through Dec. 15. Hours are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and to 4 p.m. Saturday. Free. (813) 974-3690 or usfartmuseum.edu.

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