

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Photographs of Cuba

Elisa Leonelli · Sunday, September 10th, 2017

While Hurricane Irma hit Cuba on its way to Florida, after laying waste to other Caribbean islands, and US victims in Houston are still suffering from the devastation of Hurricane Harvey, I paid homage to the vibrant culture of this unique country by visiting the photo exhibit [CUBA IS](#) at the Annenberg Space for Photography in Century City (September 9, 2017 to March 4, 2018).



Man with Crocodile (c) 2006 Raúl Cañibano

The work of several photographers is featured, and the accompanying video documentaries are as usual very informative. There is even a 4 minute walk through the streets of Havana shot in 360 degrees VR (Virtual Reality), where local people dance and play musical instruments. And, *dulcis in fundo*, the sweet treats from [Porto's](#), the Cuban bakery, set up inside the museum as a pop up.

On the large video screens we see these photographers videotaped while documenting life in Cuba today. During the upcoming weeks you may meet some of them in person at lectures at Skylight Studios, or watch videos of their talks online if sold out.

[Raúl Cañibano](#) is Cuban, he lived in the countryside as a child and identifies with the life of the farmers (*campesinos*). He photographs people in Baracoa, a beach town 600 miles from Havana, threatened by a cyclone (typhoon or hurricane).



Mia, Avril and Denise © 2014 Leysis Quesada Vera

[Leysis Quesada Vera](#), also Cuban, photographs young dancers, including her two daughters. You may see her present her work on September 13.



Santeria Celebration (c) 2015 Elliott Erwitt

[Elliott Erwitt](#), a Magnum photographer, went to Cuba in 1964, photographed Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. He went back during the past couple of year, still shooting B&W film. His talk is September 14 (sold out).



Beauty Salon (c) 1993 Tria Giovan

[Tria Giovan](#) documents the “livelier, younger energy” of dancers in a studio that used to be a prison. Her lecture is November 16.



Olivia with Chicken © Anna Mia Davidson

[Michael Dweck](#) from Brooklyn photographs the privileged creative class in Cuba. A second documentary, shown on the small screen in the hallway, examines clothes designers, furniture makers and hotel entrepreneurs, that are currently flourishing in Cuba.

[Anna Mia Davidson](#) documents the sustainable farming movement in Cuba’s Northwest. Her lecture is October 5 (sold out).



Frikis, photo (c) Michael Brown

[Michael Christopher Brown](#) photographs the underground youth culture called Frikis (freaks) that developed from the late 80s into the 2015 modern version. Young people with their bodies covered in colorful tattoos, getting high on alcohol and amphetamines. His lecture is October 12 (sold out)

[Greg Kahn](#) focuses his lens on the young people born in Cuba after 1989, when the Soviet Union stopped supporting the country. His lecture is November 12.



Transgender by Claudia Gonzales

Some of the many prints displayed on the walls illustrate less savory aspects of Cuba’s repressive government. How in the 1970s and 80s Castro jailed 35,000 political prisoners, and the long history of persecution of gays. Recently however LGBT rights have been established and since 2008 Transgender people may obtain gender confirmation surgery and hormone treatment.



Havana, Cuba. Old American car

I have a special affection for Cuba, because in September 1969, while writing my thesis on French novelist and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet at the University of Bologna, I attended a presentation of Cuban cinema in Tirrenia, and I met filmmakers like [Pastor Vega](#). It was a revelation, first to discover that Spanish was completely understandable to us Italians, with no need for a translator, the two languages being very similar; secondly to hear first-hand reports on how the 1959 revolution had changed the life of Cubans. We were fascinated by this experiment, because at that time we were engaged in creating a counterculture against the system. These Cubans explained how their society functioned without money, with the state providing citizens with food, clothing and housing, free education and healthcare. They described it as a utopia.

In the 1950s the dictatorship of Fulgenzio Batista was corrupt and profited from the casino gambling, prostitution and drug trafficking controlled by US organized. When the idealistic revolutionaries lead by Fidel Castro took over the government on New Year’s Day 1959, they promised agrarian reform and workers profit participation. Read “[Cuba Before the Revolution](#)“



Casablanca, Cuba (c) Elisa Leonelli 1984

I wanted very much to go and see all of this for myself, but it was not until December 1984 that I finally traveled to Cuba, as a photo-journalist, to cover the Havana Film Festival that was celebrating 25 years of Cuban Revolution with a retrospective of Cuban Cinema. I conducted a lengthy interview (in Spanish) with Pastor Vega, director of the festival. He explained how the [festival was founded in December 1979](#) to showcase the work of new Latin American filmmakers, how all Latin American countries shared a common enemy, United States imperialism.



Havana, Cuba. Policeman, old American car

As it had happened when [I traveled to China](#) with a group of photographers in 1981, and heard horror stories about Mao's Cultural Revolution, that we had so admired as Italian leftists in the late 60s, I was disheartened by the poverty I witnessed in Cuba in 1984. The government blamed the US blockade for everything, but it seemed that everyone who had the means to leave the country had left, and only the poorest had remained. I wrote an article about my experience for the newsletter of ASMP, American Society of Magazine Photographers, and some reflections for my [travel photos website in 2008](#). You may read those texts and see my photo essay about [Cuba at this link](#), included in the collection [Elisa Leonelli, Photojournalist](#) at the Claremont Colleges Digital Library.

It was great news last year when Obama initiated a thawing of the adversarial relationship between the US and Cuba, where [Raúl Castro](#), Fidel's brother, has been President since 2008. The people of Cuba deserve a better life, after being isolated for so long, and more economic opportunity. Trump, however, is already reviewing those policies to please the right-wing Cuban-Americans who supported him; and he continues to deny the science of climate crisis that causes worsening hurricanes.

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